



Onward Beyond 2026: The UATX-FSC Essay Contest

Intro: The University of Austin (UATX), in partnership with the Free Society Coalition (FSC), is pleased to announce a Student Essay Competition in honor of the 250th Anniversary (“Semiquincentennial”) of the Declaration of Independence.

Context: July 4, 2026 will mark the 250th Birthday of American Freedom, which makes it a fitting occasion, not only to celebrate, but to reflect on America’s history and on how the ideals of 1776 can carry our nation forward into the future.

In keeping with UATX’s mission of intellectual excellence and free inquiry, UATX and FSC want to spark a renewed discussion of, and appreciation for, America’s greatest contribution to the world: the Declaration of Independence and the moral and political principles it enshrines. These principles include a view of (human) nature which affords all equal rights to all citizens and an emphasis on the necessity of freedom and moral virtue for human flourishing.

Essay Prompt: Considering the readings below, what are the universal principles outlined in the Declaration of Independence, and how can they help us chart a future course for our nation? Pay special attention to the Declaration’s Preamble (first two paragraphs) and Concluding Appeal (final paragraph). What moral and political ideals can help us navigate increasing diversity, growing polarization, and widening religious and political views? In particular, what *practical* steps would you suggest we take in order to refound our country on its original principles?

Prizes: A committee of UATX faculty will select up to four essays based on excellence in argumentation and rhetoric. Winners will each receive a \$2,500 scholarship toward the UATX Summer Fellowship program.

Requirements: Open to all those applying to the UATX summer fellowship. Your essay, responding to the prompt above, should be between 1,000-1,250 words and should be submitted along with your UATX summer fellowship application. All submissions will be reviewed by a select panel of UATX faculty members and winners will be announced at the UATX summer fellowship.

Readings for you to Consider:

1. The Declaration of Independence. <https://tinyurl.com/y8k5att9>
2. Thomas Jefferson’s Letter to Henry Lee from (1825). <https://tinyurl.com/3jyht55t>
3. Thomas Jefferson’s Letter to William Johnson (1823). <https://tinyurl.com/mubee2df>
4. Lawrence Reed, “America’s Republic: How the Great Experiment Came About (and How We Keep It).” <https://tinyurl.com/49584rr2>
5. Roger Pilon, On the Moral Foundations of America. <https://tinyurl.com/8sdc9mds>
6. Kerry McDonald, “Why You Should Read ‘What to the Slave is the Fourth of July?’ to Your Kids.” <https://tinyurl.com/mrxfw86d>
7. Frederick Douglass, “Letter to His Former Master.” <https://tinyurl.com/bdfstp89>
8. Barry Brownstein, “What Thomas Jefferson Meant by ‘The Pursuit of Happiness.’” <https://tinyurl.com/4crncx98>
9. Lawrence Reed, “Yes, America’s Birthday Deserves to be Celebrated.” <https://tinyurl.com/26yjk7v>

Together, let’s work to make America’s founding ideals last another 250 years!