Building Collaborative Leaders:
Teaching and Learning Dialogue on College Campuses
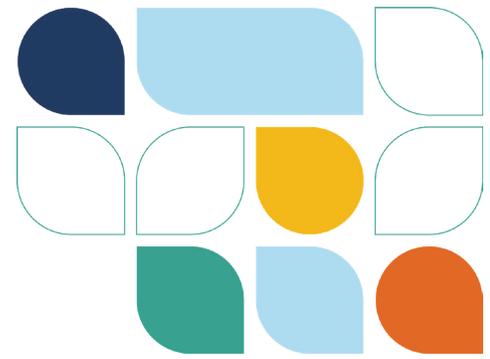
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Applied Research Center for Civility

UC San Diego

NCRC NATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION CENTER

Building Collaborative Leaders:
Teaching and Learning Dialogue
on College Campuses

ABOUT THE APPLIED RESEARCH CENTER FOR CIVILITY

Co-Chairs: Elizabeth Simmons, Executive Vice Chancellor, UC San Diego and Steven P. Dinkin, President, National Conflict Resolution Center

The Applied Research Center for Civility (ARCC) is a joint initiative of the University of California San Diego and the National Conflict Resolution Center. ARCC conducts cutting-edge research into the dynamics of society's most pressing issues and creates comprehensive models for national distribution and discussion. For more information visit https://evc.ucsd.edu/about/ARCC.html and https://ncrconline.com/center-for-civility/.

ABOUT THE NATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION CENTER

The National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) works with thousands of individuals across the globe to help resolve conflicts at all levels of society, through its unique and effective culture, communication, and conflict resolution training programs. NCRC provides the resources, training, and expertise to help people, organizations, and communities manage and solve conflicts, with civility. For more information, visit NCRConline.com.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR RESEARCH AND EVALUATION

The University of California San Diego's Center for Research and Evaluation (CR+E) is part of the Division of Extended Studies, which connects UC San Diego to the broader community by making education and research more accessible. CR+E conducts applied research and evaluations that support community advancement and well-being. For more information, visit https://extendedstudies.ucsd.edu/community-ty-and-research/center-for-research-and-evaluation. Contact CR+E at cre@ucsd.edu.

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Introduction

The University of California San Diego Center for Research and Evaluation (CR+E) partnered with the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) to understand the broad landscape of civil discourse programs on college campuses across the country, from speaker series and classroom activities to intensive multi-year programs and much in between. The research project began in July 2023 and included interviews with campus officials, third-party organization representatives, and students who participated in civil discourse programming. This was accompanied by a nationwide student survey and culminated in a presentation of findings at a conference held in October 2025. This executive summary provides an overview of best practices that higher education communities can use to build or strengthen opportunities for students to learn how to dialogue constructively with others. We present a holistic approach to teaching dialogue skills and inculcating the capacities, habits, and sensitivities that are key for the next generation of leaders. Our hope is that readers will be able to understand the current landscape of which their efforts are a part and use this information to help fill in the gaps and take steps towards creating a stronger culture and practice of civil discourse on their campus.

Defining and Operationalizing Civil Discourse Programs

To understand how campuses prepare the next generation of leaders in a civil, engaged, and thoughtful manner, we cast a wide net understanding that each program will define civil discourse based on their particular context. As such, we included programs that teach discourse, deliberation, facilitation, dialogue, and civic engagement. We interviewed 53 representatives from 41 undergraduate campuses along with 16 individuals from 14 third-party organizations that work closely with campuses to either aid them with their own programming or provide them with resources that can be implemented on their campus. Finally, we surveyed 125 undergraduate students from 29 universities and conducted eight follow-up interviews to understand how students have applied the skills they learned in these programs.

This work is organized around five key themes that are part of the decision-making process for civil discourse programming in higher education. The process of developing civil discourse programming is ongoing – there is no official start and end point; the process is iterative, and each component is of equal importance. For each of these themes, we discuss the specific practices, challenges, and strategies that the people we interviewed shared with us.
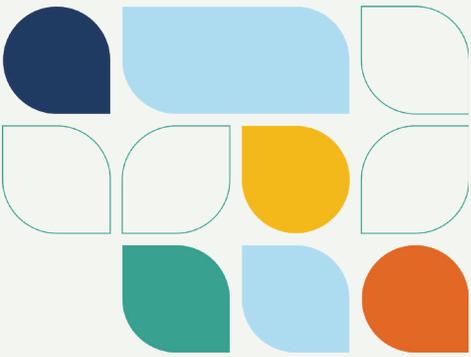
THESE THEMES INCLUDE:

1. **Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse**
2. **Knowing Your Context**
3. **Choosing the Right Program Format**
4. **Partnering with Third-Party Organizations**
5. **Anticipating Challenges**

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse

- Personal Growth & Awareness
- Interpersonal Communication Skills
- Applied Professional Skills
- Community Orientation
- Leadership Skills

Anticipating Challenges

- Quantifying Success
- Getting Students to Participate
- Obtaining Campus Buy-In
- Securing Appropriate Staffing
- Financing Programs
- Political Context

Knowing Your Context

- Leadership Support
- Placement
- Staffing Students
- Attracting Students
- Campus Partnerships

Partnering with Third-Party Organizations

- The Advantages of Third-Party Organizations
- Decide If it is Necessary
- Implementation with Outcomes
- Connecting with Organizations

Choosing the Right Program Format

- Cohort Model
- Course-Based Model
- Embedded Courses
- Campus-Wide Events
- Faculty Fellows

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse

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Choosing the Right Program Format
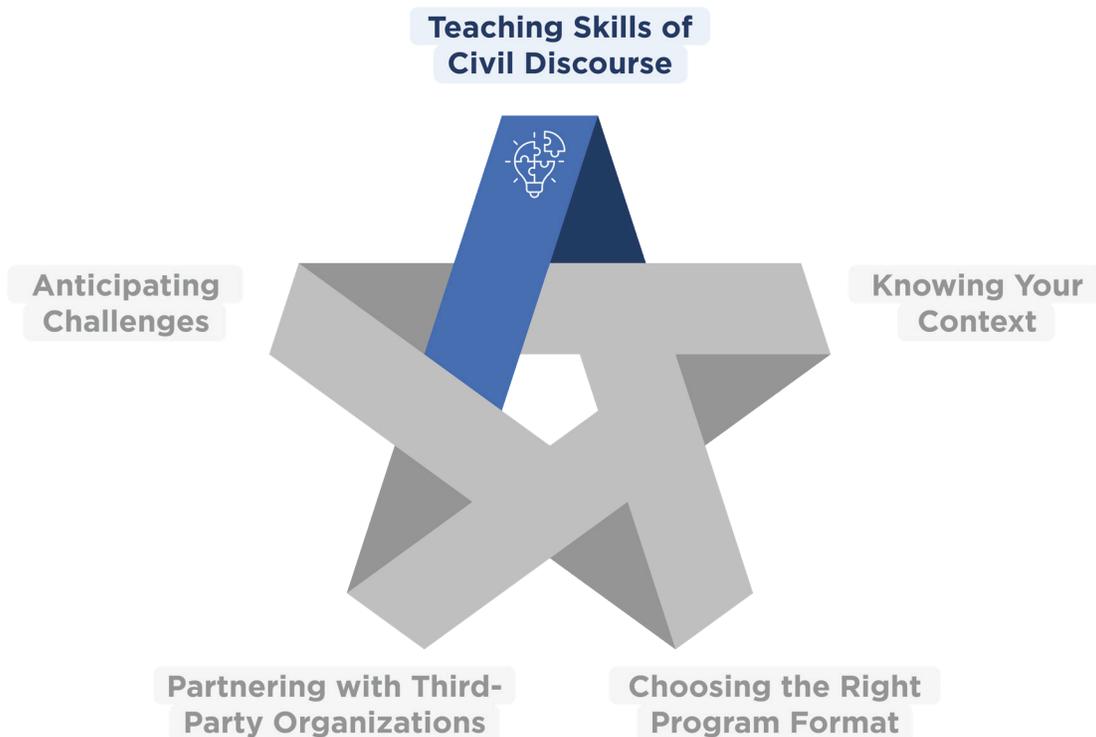
Before designing formats, choosing partners, or tailoring programs to campus contexts, university administrators should first consider which skills they would like to focus on with their programming. This acts as the anchor for intentional program design and ensures the work maintains a focus on transferable skills. While the content of discussions varies, the underlying goals of civil discourse programs often center on building students' capacities to communicate effectively, reflect on their own beliefs and behaviors, and take thoughtful, leadership-oriented action in professional and community life. Based on our interviews, the student learning outcomes of these programs can be grouped into five broad categories.

Personal Growth and Self Awareness

Civil discourse programs cultivate deep personal growth by encouraging students to examine their values, identities, and lived experiences. Through guided reflection, storytelling, and repeated opportunities to think critically about their assumptions, students develop greater self-awareness and confidence. These programs also foster key dispositions such as humility, empathy, curiosity, and optimism that shape how students engage with others.

Interpersonal Communication

Students in campus civil discourse programs develop strong interpersonal communication skills rooted in active listening, empathetic questioning, and understanding the "why" behind others' beliefs. They also learn to recognize emotional cues - both in themselves and others - that can derail conversations, and practice strategies for managing anger, tension, and conflict. Program leaders often model and teach the subtle communication norms that underpin civility, helping students navigate difficult conversations with impartiality and intention. Together, these skills enable students to adapt their communication across differences and engage constructively even in politically or socially charged situations.

Applied Professional Skills

Civil discourse programs equip students with applied professional skills that translate directly into a wide range of professional environments. Through hands-on projects, students gain experience in project management, stakeholder communication, debriefing, and synthesizing information - skills that mirror real organizational workflows. These programs also emphasize collaboration, teaching students how to work across differences, build partnerships, convene groups, and navigate power dynamics. Students frequently leverage these competencies in job interviews and career transitions, as employers prize abilities like negotiation, coalition-building, and managing complex issues. Program structures often simulate workplace environments, giving students opportunities to practice leadership, networking, public advocacy, and event or conference management.

Community Orientation

Civil discourse programs often include community-based experiences that allow students to practice facilitation and dialogue skills in real-world, unstructured environments. Through these engagements, students gain a more grounded understanding of how dialogue unfolds outside campus settings. By stepping beyond their usual circles, students encounter new perspectives, recognize community members as experts in their own issues, and develop an asset-based mindset rooted in curiosity rather than assumptions. These experiences also help students clarify their professional interests by exposing them to the realities of community-facing work.

Leadership Skills

Civil discourse programs serve as strong incubators for leadership development by teaching students to navigate difficult conversations with inclusivity, collaboration, and emotional awareness. Rather than focusing on formal titles, these programs cultivate skills such as coalition-building, facilitation, stakeholder engagement, and conflict navigation through student-led projects and real-world advocacy work. Students gain experience initiating campus conversations, developing community-based initiatives, and learning from role models who demonstrate diverse forms of leadership. Across campuses, program directors emphasize that these competencies translate to any profession, helping students "show up" with empathy, strategic thinking, and confidence in complex environments.
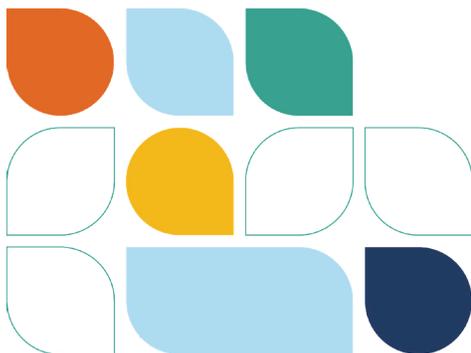
Knowing Your Context
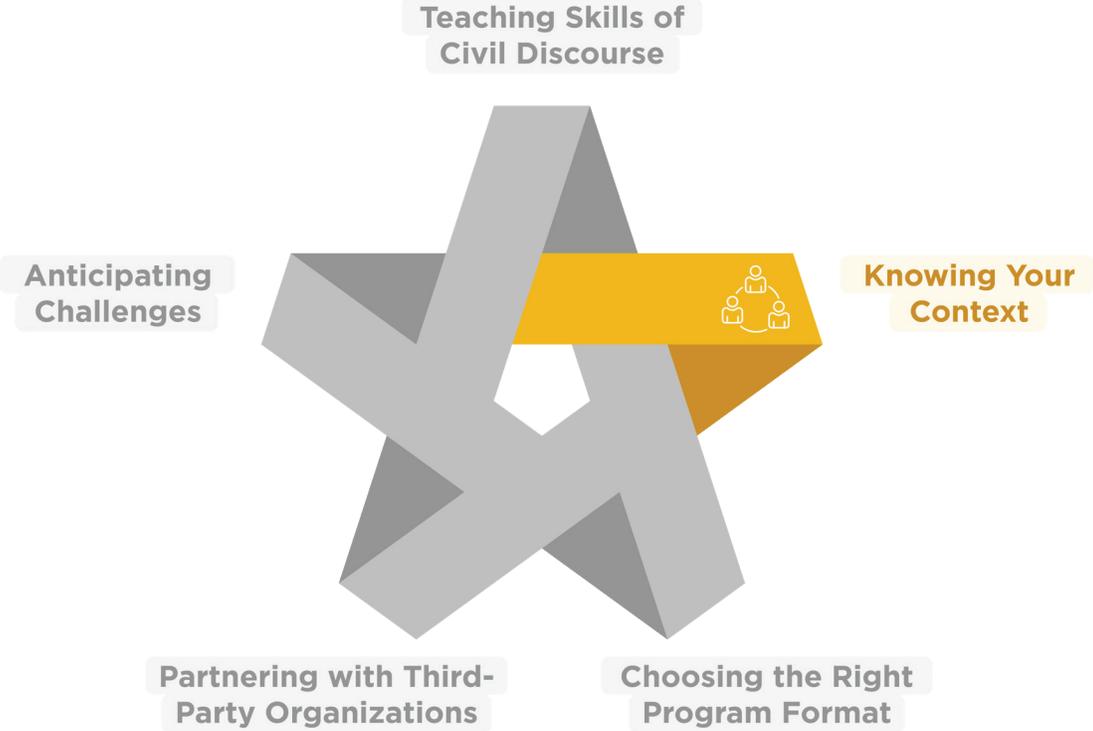
It is essential to assess your campus context to gauge the feasibility of civil discourse programs, including interest in various types of programming and where it can and should be placed on campus. Many factors impact the approach a particular campus may take, including its size, mission, type (e.g., community college, four-year residential), student body diversity, political environment, leadership interests, and relationship to the local community. We discuss several key factors to consider when developing or expanding civil discourse programming.

Leadership Support

Campus leaders play a crucial role in advancing civil discourse initiatives by offering legitimacy, resources, and protection when programs garner critical attention, making it far easier for these efforts to gain traction and campus-wide buy-in. Programs that clearly align with a university's mission or strategic plan are more likely to receive strong executive support, which can elevate and scale their work. Leadership backing also facilitates smoother partnerships with third-party organizations, enabling campuses to adopt and implement external dialogue programming more effectively.

Placement

Civil discourse programs are housed in a variety of locations across universities, and their placement often shapes their style, reach, and access to resources. Programs based in academic departments - often in communications or political science - tend to emphasize theoretical foundations of dialogue and deliberation and sometimes draw on third-party frameworks and tools. Centrally housed programs, located in provost or student affairs offices, typically have broader visibility and reach, making it easier for students to discover and engage with them while also signaling institutional commitment. Standalone centers operate independently of academic units and administration, allowing for greater flexibility and fostering trust among students who may feel alienated from institutional structures.

Program Staffing and Support

Successful civil discourse programs often depend on identifying a "campus champion" who already engages in this work and can integrate it into their existing role rather than treating it as an add-on responsibility. Faculty members can embed dialogue into their teaching or service portfolios, while staff members often provide the consistency needed to manage logistics, events, and stakeholder coordination. Interviewees emphasized that the strongest programs are co-led by both faculty and staff, combining faculty expertise with staff capacity and campus-wide reach. This balanced staffing model expands program visibility, sustainability, and impact across the institution.
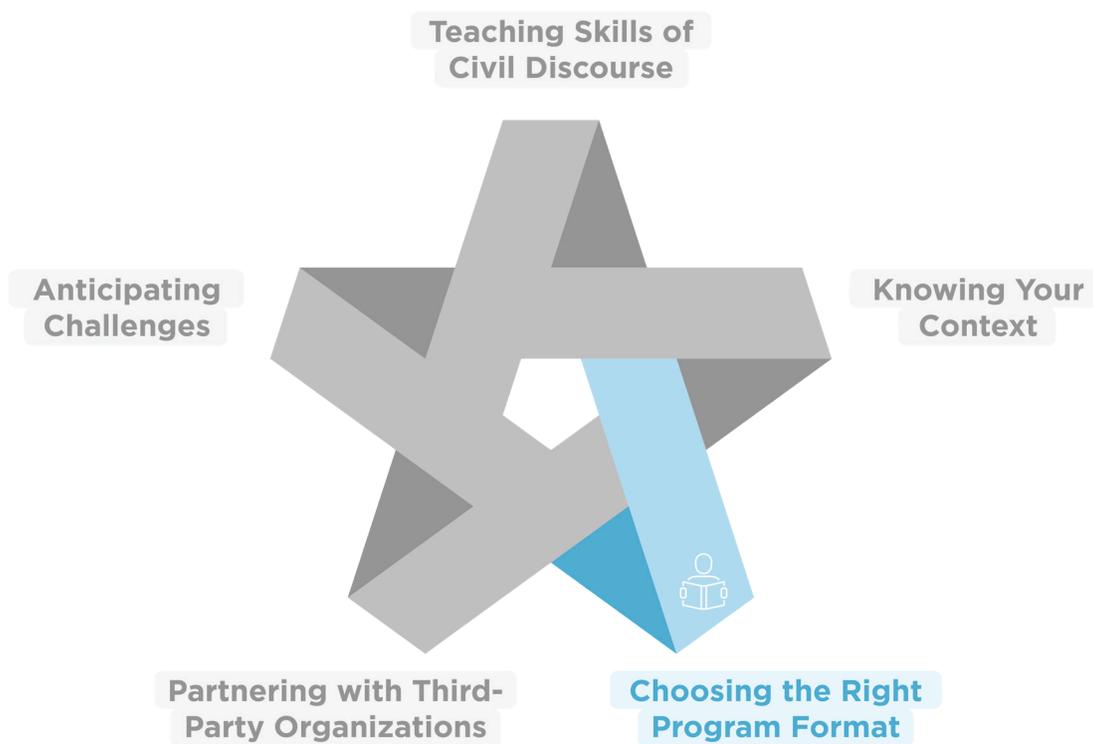
Attracting Students

Programs attract students by tailoring their outreach to different disciplines and aligning programming with students' academic and professional interests. Many programs draw students by emphasizing how civil discourse skills connect to career paths - whether in civic engagement, medicine, public policy, or other fields - and by offering incentives such as certificates, micro-credentials, or LinkedIn badges. They may also strategically recruit student leaders whose participation creates a ripple effect, as these students model constructive dialogue and organically spread awareness within their networks.

Campus Partnerships

Program directors rely on strategic campus partnerships to broaden their reach, strengthen program sustainability, and align their work with the missions of diverse campus units. By collaborating with academic departments, student affairs offices, teaching centers, and other institutional partners, programs can integrate civil discourse content into courses, promote events, and tap into existing student networks. These partnerships also build trust – particularly when engaging politically diverse groups – and help programs meet different campus constituencies where they are. External partnerships, such as cross-campus consortia or collaborations with local colleges, further amplify programming, expand student exposure, and enhance long-term engagement.

Choosing the Right Program Format

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse

Anticipating Challenges

Knowing Your Context

Partnering with Third-Party Organizations

Choosing the Right Program Format

Civil discourse programs take many different forms, from multi-year cohort-based programs to in-class activities and guest speakers, and they incorporate different elements such as community engagement and leadership. Programs can be both curricular and co-curricular and together can reach the campus community at multiple points from the classroom to the dorm room. Different approaches will have different outcomes – and how campuses incorporate these different formats depends on many factors including staffing capacity, leadership buy-in, and resources. Ideally, though, schools will take coordinated campuswide efforts to build dialogue skills through a variety of formats that emphasize different approaches and outcomes.

Cohort Model

Cohort-based civil discourse programs bring together students from diverse disciplines and backgrounds who share a commitment to dialogue, creating an environment where they can challenge one another and engage more deeply than in traditional courses. These cohorts foster trust, vulnerability, and community - often becoming "brave spaces" where students feel supported and able to practice dialogue skills safely. Some programs extend this model through living–learning communities, which strengthen relationships and provide ongoing affirmation as students explore and navigate difficult conversations. Because cohorts meet over long periods, they function as sustained communities of practice that help students build lasting friendships and partnerships beyond the program. However, cohort models are resource-intensive and typically serve fewer students, making them more feasible at smaller institutions or as one component of a broader dialogue ecosystem.

Course-Based Model

Course-based dialogue programs embed deliberation and facilitation training into the academic curriculum, giving students sustained, structured opportunities to practice and refine these skills. Typically housed in communication departments, these courses often emphasize the rhetorical foundations and long-standing traditions of democratic discourse. Multi-term courses allow students to develop progressively - from gaining self-awareness to practicing and applying their skills in the classroom and beyond, including community settings. Small seminar formats strengthen reflection and relationship-building, while the academic framing lends legitimacy that enhances both student engagement and community trust.

Embedded Courses

Embedded courses integrate dialogue-focused content into disciplinary coursework while remaining affiliated with a central campus center, allowing faculty to weave deliberation, civic engagement, and dialogue theory into fields ranging from biology to engineering to communications. Centers typically support faculty by providing funding, resources, and communities of practice, enabling sustainable integration of dialogue pedagogy. This model broadens reach across the university and often serves as an entry point for students to engage more deeply with dialogue-focused centers and programs.
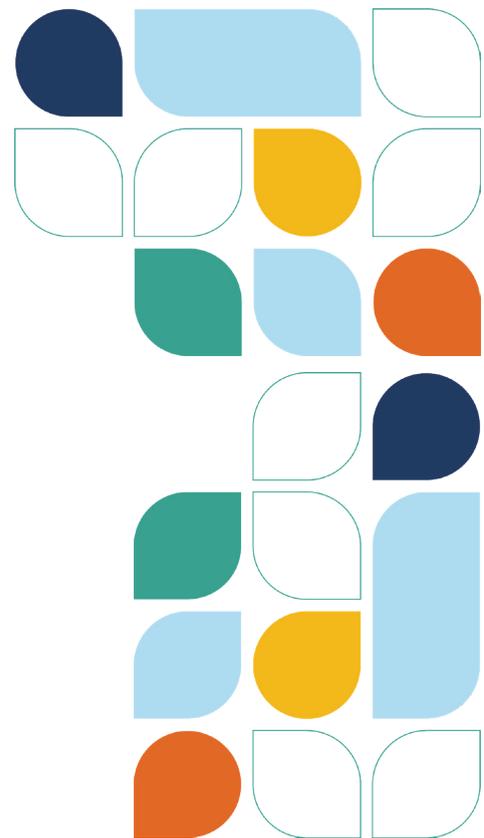Campus-Wide Programs and Events
Centers often host campus-wide events - such as public lectures, dialogue forums, and interactive programs - that expose large numbers of students to civil discourse and create opportunities for them to practice engaging across differences. Many centers use these broad events as an entry point, following up with attendees to funnel interested students into certificates, fellowships, or more intensive dialogue experiences. To maximize participation, programs strategically consider logistics such as timing, food, and event format, often incorporating active or creative
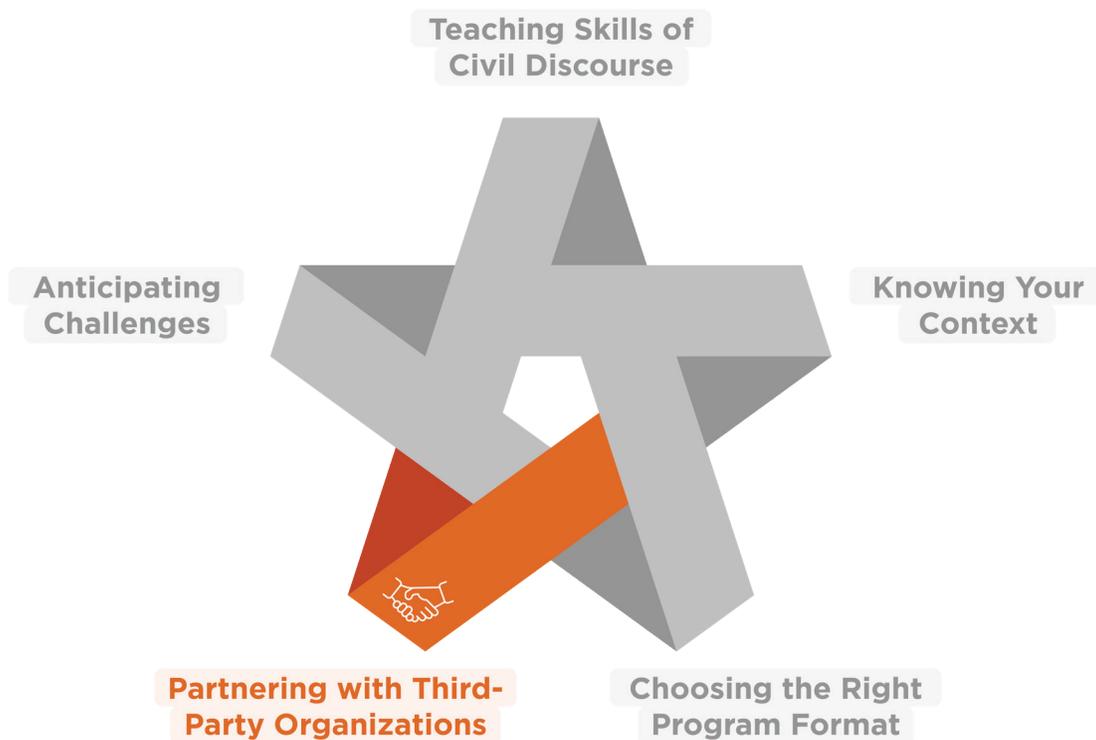
elements like political speed dating or dialogue walls to make engagement accessible and appealing. Together, these approaches create a welcoming on-ramp to deeper involvement while fostering a campus culture that values dialogue, curiosity, and community-wide engagement.

Faculty Fellows

Faculty fellowship programs embed dialogue into the academic core by equipping instructors across disciplines with the skills and tools to integrate civil discourse into their teaching. Faculty often share resources and participate in structured peer learning to advance dialogue across difference in classrooms. As these programs scale, they create a ripple effect that shifts campus culture by making dialogue a routine part of students' educational experiences.

Partnering with Third-Party Organizations

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse

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Partnering with Third-Party Organizations

Choosing the Right Program Format

Colleges and universities across the country are increasingly turning to third-party organizations to support and scale their civil discourse efforts. These partnerships offer a wide range of benefits – from ready-made resources and professional facilitation training to institutional capacity-building and cultural transformation. As campuses explore how to incorporate dialogue programming into their specific contexts, external organizations can provide not only content expertise but also infrastructure, legitimacy, and ongoing support.

The Advantages of Third-Party Organizations

Third-party organizations offer campuses significant advantages by providing ready-made dialogue materials, training, and adaptable curricula that save faculty and staff time while ensuring high-quality programming. Groups often customize their approaches to meet each campus' context, helping institutions build the infrastructure needed to embed dialogue across courses, co-curricular programs, and campus culture. These organizations may bring evidence of effectiveness and access to national networks, which can lend legitimacy, offer peer support, and strengthen campus-wide commitment to civil discourse. However, campuses must navigate a crowded landscape of providers and assess whether partnerships align with institutional goals and values, as not all external models will fit with every context. When thoughtfully chosen, third-party partnerships can expand capacity, deepen engagement, and drive sustainable culture change.
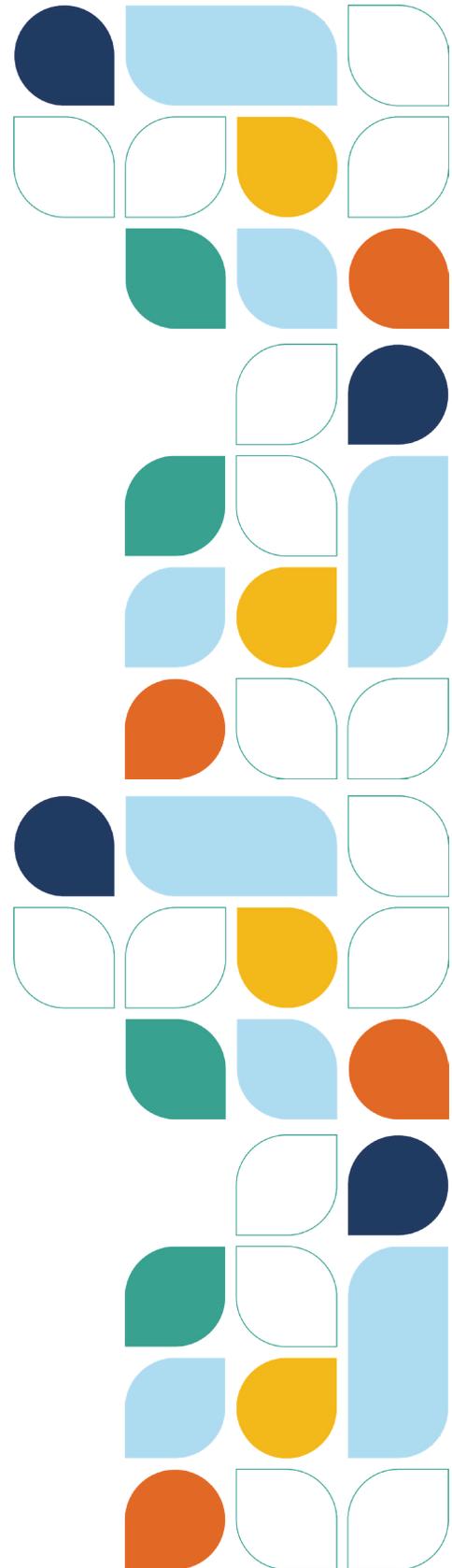
Implementation Outcomes

Implementation of third-party civil discourse programs varies widely based on campus context, student motivation, leadership support, and how much structure partners provide. While some organizations offer tiered support and adaptable models, many struggle to maintain consistent quality and engagement across decentralized chapters. Ultimately, effectiveness depends less on the external program itself and more on how well it is integrated into each campus' existing culture, leadership, and capacity.
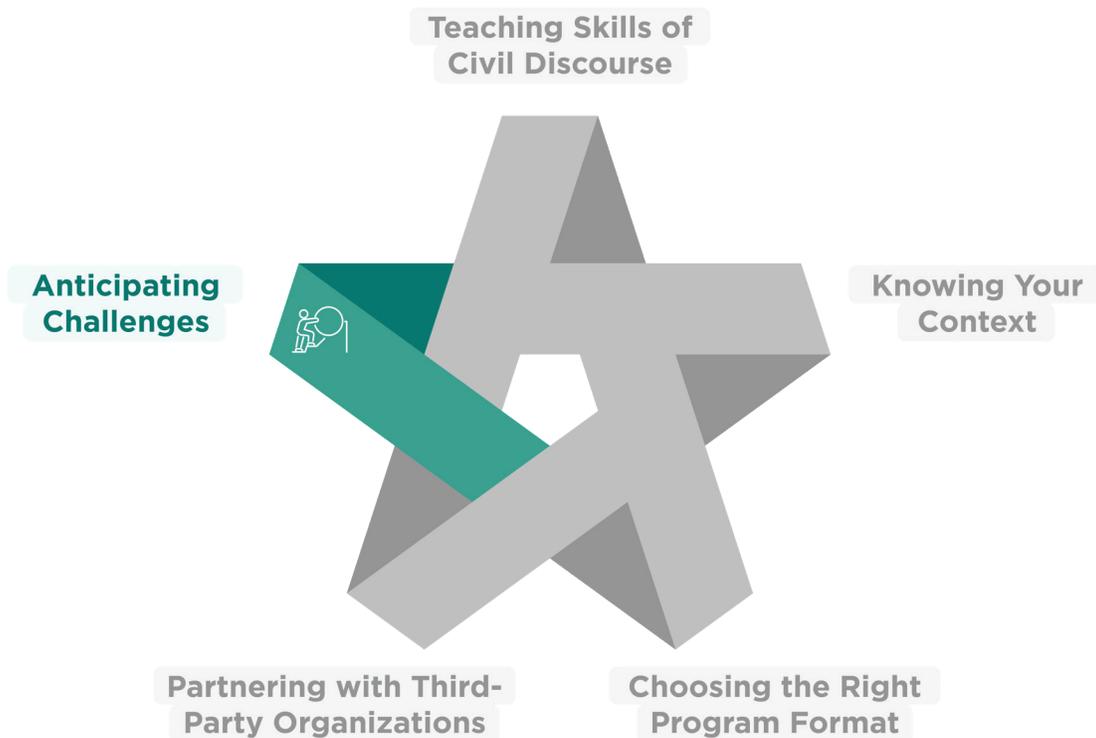
Connecting with Organizations

Third-party civil discourse organizations connect with campuses through both student-driven outreach and institution-level relationship building. Some groups grow organically via social media, direct student engagement, and online discovery, while others target faculty, administrators, and national conferences to establish formal partnerships. Together, these strategies show that effective outreach adapts to campus culture by combining grassroots interest with structured, top-down engagement.

Funding Models

Third-party civil discourse organizations use diverse funding models, ranging from grants and donations to sliding-scale institutional fees and membership dues. These financial structures influence how organizations scale their programs, structure campus partnerships, and provide equitable access to support.

Anticipating Challenges

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Choosing the Right Program Format

Civil discourse programs hold great promise for fostering meaningful dialogue and personal growth on college campuses, but they are not without their challenges. From logistical and financial constraints to political sensitivities and questions of long-term impact, program leaders should anticipate challenges. Yet despite these hurdles, many remain deeply committed to the work, finding creative solutions, building supportive networks, and adapting to their campus contexts in ways that continue to move the field forward.

Measuring Success

Measuring the success of civil discourse programs remains challenging because the most meaningful outcomes - such as empathy, perspective-taking, and willingness to continue difficult conversations - are often intangible and hard to quantify. Many programs rely on a mix of pre and post surveys, student testimonials, and long-term anecdotes, though these methods make systematic comparison difficult. At the same time, organizations are moving toward more standardized and iterative evaluation tools to better capture changes in skills and attitudes. This tension between measurable data and deeply personal forms of growth continues to shape how the field approaches assessment.sustainable culture change.

Getting Students to Participate

Attracting student participation is a major challenge for civil discourse programs due to competing academic, work, and social commitments. Many students actively avoid dialogue spaces, seeing them as uncomfortable or irrelevant, especially when faced with digital overload and school and work pressures. Programs respond with incentives and strategies such as free food, convenient scheduling, creative activities, and online dialogue tools to lower barriers to entry. Even so, participation remains uneven across disciplines, pushing programs to partner with faculty and embed dialogue content into courses to broaden their reach.

Obtaining Campus Buy-In

Securing campus buy-in is a major barrier to sustaining civil discourse programs, as strong student outcomes do not always translate into institutional funding or long-term support. Program leaders often struggle with misaligned priorities, where administrators want quick, visible results despite the reality that dialogue work requires sustained time, trust, and process. Political sensitivity, leadership turnover, and a focus on easily quantifiable outcomes can further limit institutional commitment and discourage deeper, risk-taking work. Even when faculty interest exists, inconsistent top-level and cross-campus support makes it difficult for programs to achieve stable footing.

Securing Appropriate Staffing

Staffing civil discourse programs is a persistent challenge, as the work is often underfunded and layered on top of already full faculty and staff workloads. Many programs rely heavily on individual champions to keep them alive, making them vulnerable when those leaders change roles or leave their institutions. Campuses with intentional investments in staffing and infrastructure are better positioned to scale and sustain their work, while most others operate with limited resources and uncertain stability. Without long-term staffing plans and protected time for this work, programs remain fragile and dependent on personal dedication rather than institutional support.

Financing Programs

Civil discourse programs face chronic financial instability, often operating on minimal budgets and relying on in-kind support, co-sponsorships, or short-term grants. Even successful programs struggle to secure long-term, stable funding, which limits their ability to scale and become institutionalized. Without sustained investment from universities or philanthropic partners, many programs remain trapped in funding situations that constrain their growth and durability.

Political Context

Civil discourse programs operate in a highly politicized environment where even the language of "civility" or "dialogue" can be perceived as partisan or exclusionary. This context makes it difficult to select topics, frame events, and attract participants who may fear reputational or ideological risk. Programs often adapt by carefully rebranding their work – using terms like "productive discourse," "character development," or "leadership skills" – to reduce resistance and navigate local political pressures. As a result, civil discourse programming involves managing perception and language as carefully as facilitating the conversations themselves.