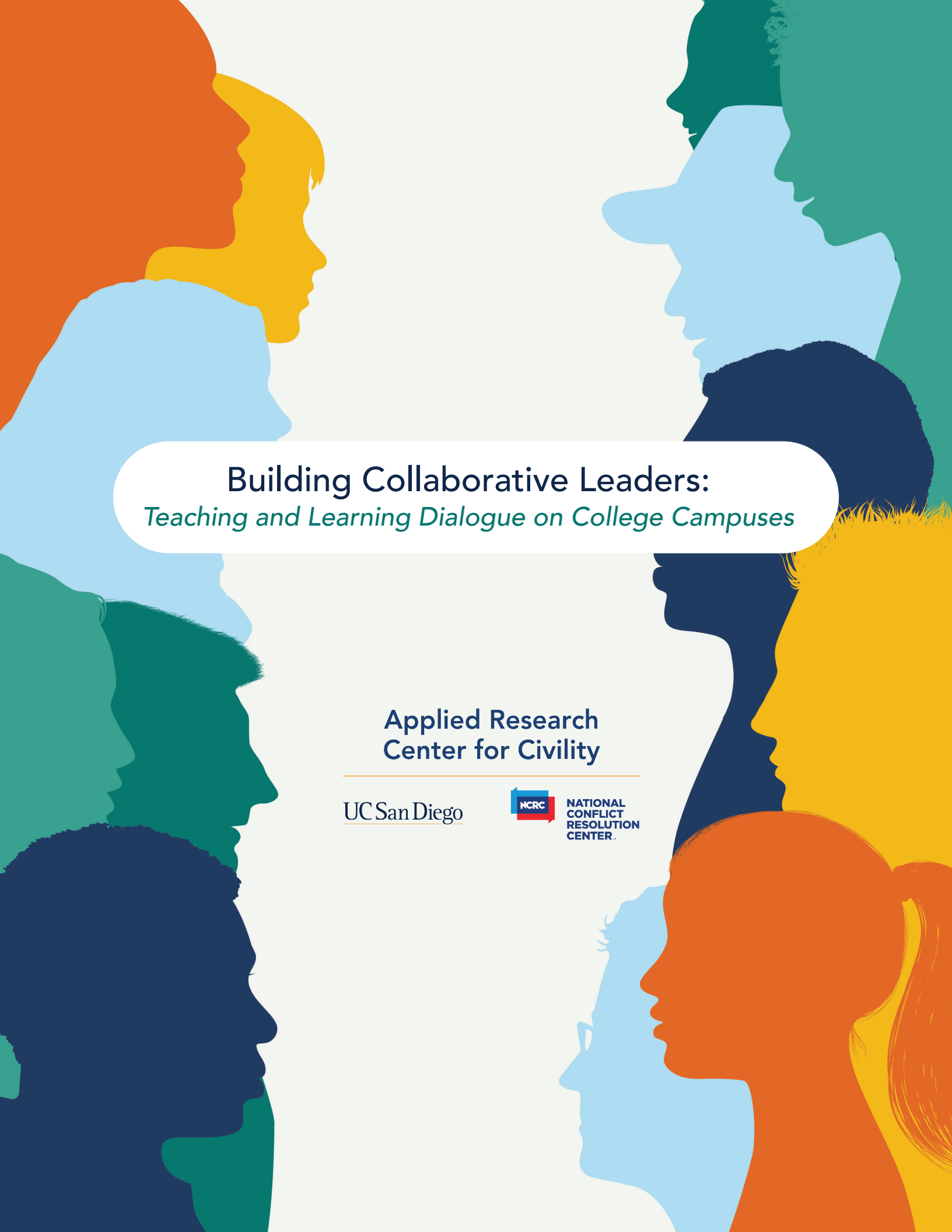

Building Collaborative Leaders:

Teaching and Learning Dialogue on College Campuses

Applied Research Center for Civility

UC San Diego

NCRC NATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION CENTER

Building Collaborative Leaders:
Teaching and Learning Dialogue on College Campuses

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

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank Elaine Galinson and Herb Solomon whose generous funding supported this project. We would also like to thank our faculty advisory committee – Ken Stern, Kristine Hoover, Becky Petitt, and Amy Binder, whose ongoing support helped to share the direction and scope of this project. Finally, we would like to express our gratitude to the dozens of faculty, staff, practitioners, and students who shared their insights with us about civil discourse programming.

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Introduction

Colleges and universities offer students the opportunity to learn and practice productively listening and talking with others, especially when they disagree or see the world differently. Higher education is uniquely positioned to teach young adults how to hold intentional conversations and dialogue across differences. These are skills and sensibilities they will take with them after graduation as they become leaders in their communities and workplaces. Expanding and deepening these efforts across higher education is therefore critical as we confront increasingly difficult challenges of communication and cooperation that strain social cohesion.

To this end, the Applied Research Center for Civility at UC San Diego has sought 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. Out of this landscape, we have compiled a guide 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. Whether through formal programs or ad hoc efforts, most campuses across the country are offering some form of training or experience in discourse, dialogue, or facilitation. Our hope is that readers will be able to take this report, understand the current landscape of which their efforts are a part, and use this guide to help fill in the gaps and take steps towards creating a stronger culture and practice of civil discourse on their campus.

Teaching Civil Discourse Skills in Higher Education

Higher education is singularly positioned to prepare individuals to engage others through constructive dialogue. No other institution places free inquiry and the expression of ideas at the core of its mission. As Maia Ferdman, Deputy Director of the UCLA Bedari Kindness Institute put it, colleges and universities are supposed to "help people think critically, engage with challenging ideas, [and] navigate what it means to be in a pluralistic democracy." Students need the skills to confront and navigate differences in interaction with others, and developing these skills takes time, expertise, and opportunity to observe and practice. These are resources that higher education is uniquely capable of providing to young people. According to Carl Luna from the University of San Diego, "If it's not universities and public schools, it's not going to be your local credit union, it's not going to be Walmart, it's not going to be your private sector employers."

Higher education is an extraordinary opportunity to be in community with individuals who come from different backgrounds, experiences, perspectives, and viewpoints. Speaking from his perspective at a small liberal arts college, James Thompson, Director of the James A. Garfield Center for Public Leadership at Hiram College, shared how his campus is genuinely politically diverse and "because of that, Hiram has an ethos of tolerance that is really something special" which makes it a "natural seedbed for the civility agenda." Not only does higher education provide opportunities for students to be exposed to others, it also provides them with the institutional infrastructure and support necessary to process the difficult and necessary emotions and experiences that are required to be transformed through experiences of civil discourse. "The basic idea is to enlarge your mentality, to let your mind go wandering, to learn to think from as many perspectives as you can and be self-critical," said Roger Berkowitz, Academic Director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities. Given the enormous potential for higher education to provide students

with skills to engage thoughtfully with others, the existence and proliferation of civil discourse programs is more important now than ever before.

Civil Discourse in Contentious Times

We began this project in July 2023 and by the time we conducted our first interview in March 2024, the context in which everyone was working toward civil discourse had shifted following the October 7, 2023, attack on Israel and the subsequent Israeli assault on Gaza. For many faculty, staff, and administrators, the focus was on responding to the need for dialogue around Israel and Palestine. Colleges and universities invited speakers who could model respectful conversations about the conflict and created opportunities for students to talk with one another in a safe and supportive environment. Despite the attention given to protests and encampments on campuses around the country, there was also tremendous work done to bring communities together in productive dialogue using the tools and resources that higher education is uniquely positioned to provide. As we neared the end of our research, the presidential election in November 2024 and inauguration of President Trump in January 2025 had again shifted the ground of teaching and engaging in productive dialogue. Many colleges and universities once again created opportunities for campus communities to talk across political differences and reinforce their commitments to civil discourse.

Researching civil discourse at moments of heightened social conflict and political tension reveals two important lessons. One is that responding to current issues is easier with established and well-developed dialogue programs and culture of dialogue already in place. These programs can be mobilized to address events more organically and less reactionary. When campuses respond from a place of existing, highly visible commitments, they may be more likely to garner buy-in from a divided and sensitive community. As Nick Longo, Co-Director of the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab at Providence College put it, "If we're being proactive, if we have a culture, then we don't have the crisis."

The other lesson is that civility is not a replacement for politics. Civil discourse programs cannot and should not replace political conflict, contestation, or activism. They are complementary and additive to other forms of civic engagement, ideally making that engagement more productive. In other words, civil discourse is the foundation of appropriate and productive engagement with others. As Carl Luna at the University of San Diego explained,

> *Civility is not about being polite; you have to speak truth to power. Civility comes from the Latin and basically means the process of turning the many into the community. That which brings us together is civility which, in turn, creates a civilization. That which divides us, that which excludes people from our community is, by definition, uncivil.*

In this spirit, we offer this guide as a practical and principled resource for fostering a campus environment where disagreement can coexist with respect, and where the habits of civil discourse are cultivated as essential tools for life in a democratic society.

Data and Methods

To understand how campuses prepare the next generation of leaders to engage with others in a civil, engaged, and thoughtful manner, we interviewed 53 representatives from 41 undergraduate campuses. 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, facilitation, dialogue, and civic engagement. We also interviewed 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. The survey was sent by willing program representatives to their current and former students. The list of organizations we included in our research is not exhaustive, and there are exemplary programs that we either could not reach or did not have time to learn about before the project ended. For a full list of organizations and programs we spoke to, as well as others that were not included in our research but are important to the field, see Appendix A. Finally, we held a conference in October 2025 at the University of California San Diego to share our findings and learn from key figures in the field. Insights from that conference can be found in Appendix C.

Report Outline

This report is organized around five key themes that impact civil discourse programming in higher education. For each of these themes, we discuss the specific practices, challenges, and strategies that the people we interviewed shared with us. Throughout, we provide examples of effective programs and data on students' experiences. At the end of each section, we share a list of key takeaways. Finally, we offer some brief concluding thoughts about the significance and future of civil discourse programming in American higher education.

For readers who want to build a new program or rethink their programming from the ground up, the report will guide them from the initial phase of deciding which skills they want to develop in their students, knowing their context and understanding how that will shape the decisions to come through choosing the right program format or formats, and whether they could use the support of a third-party organization. Lastly, the report includes a range of challenges that others have faced and some of the approaches they have taken to overcome them.

We also hope that this holistic approach to program development will be useful for readers who want to learn more about what their peers are doing or would like ideas for how to improve their existing programs. Ultimately, we hope that this guide will contribute to colleges and universities that make dialogue central to every aspect of the institution from student life to teaching and learning, research, and community engagement.

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

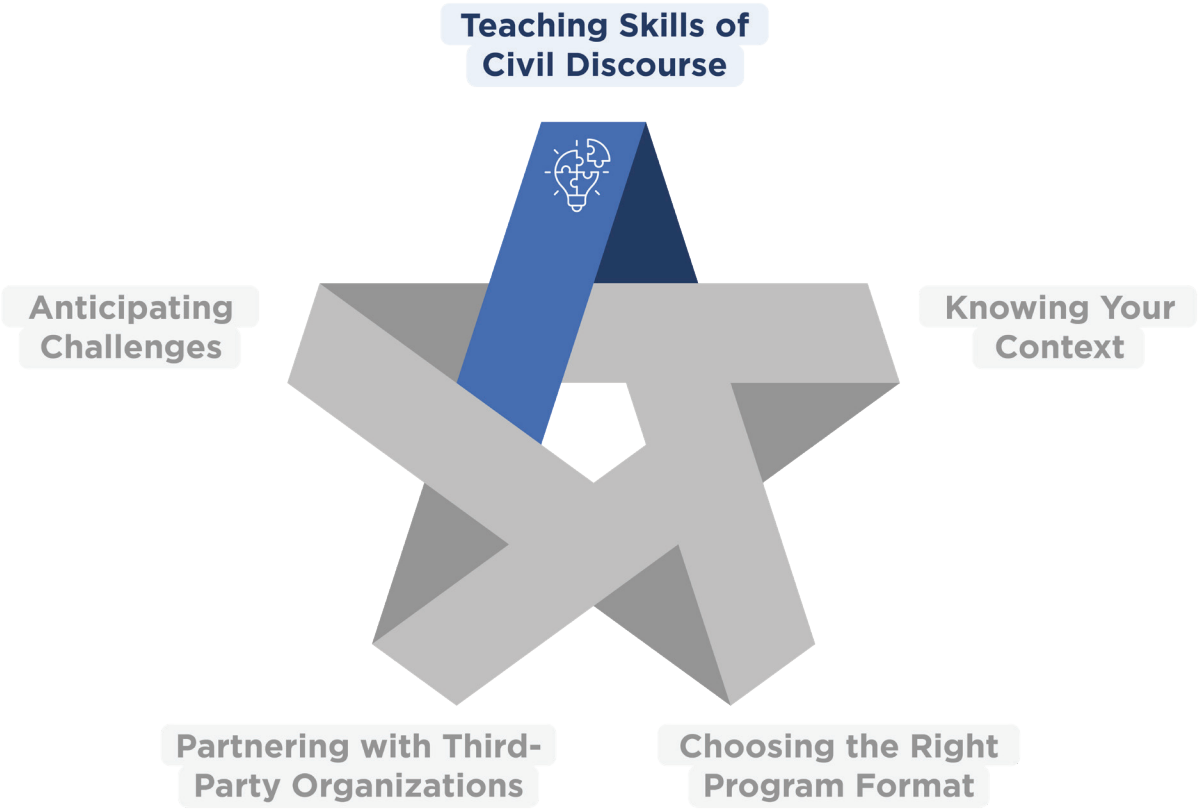
- Leadership Support
- Placement
- Staffing Students
- Attracting Students
- Campus Partnerships

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

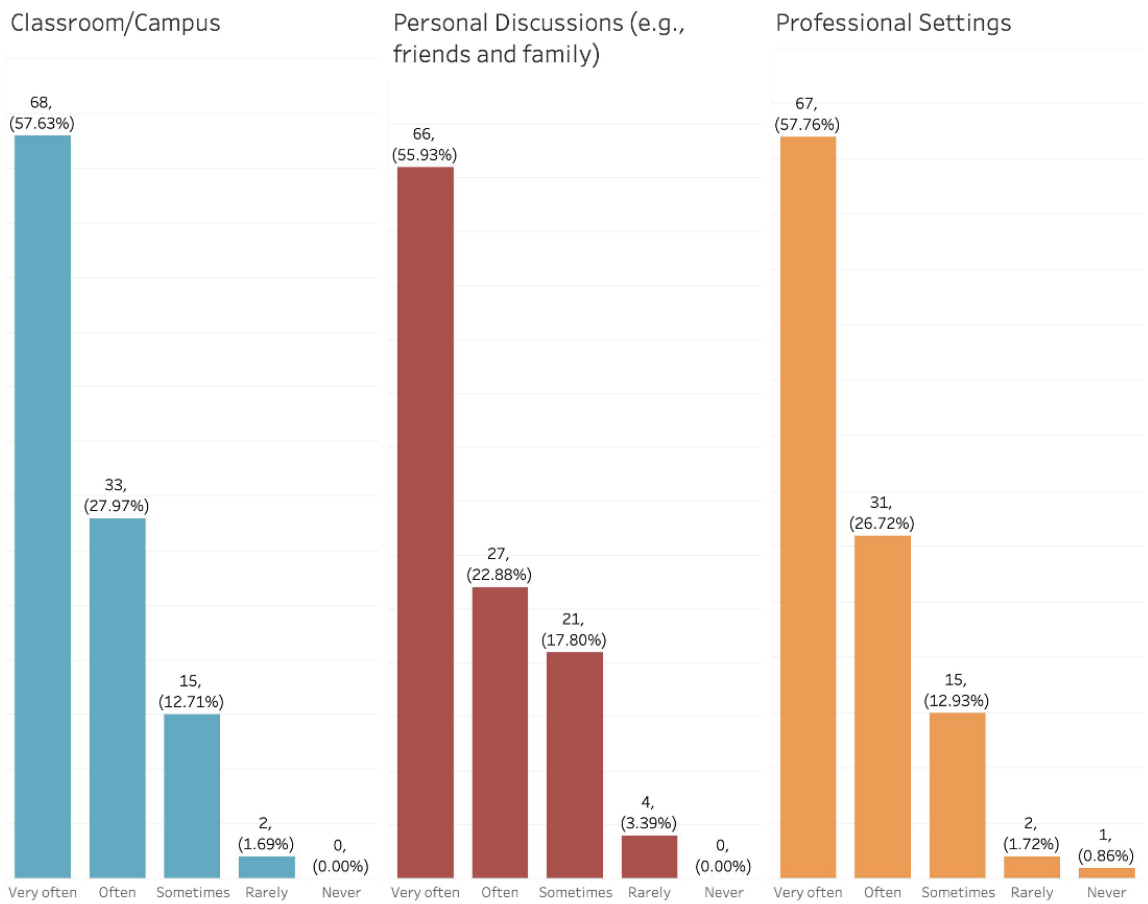


Before designing formats, choosing partners, or tailoring programs to campus contexts, university administrators should first consider which skills they would like to focus on with their programming. This acts as the anchor for intentional program design and ensures the work maintains a focus on transferable skills. Program directors think diligently about the real-life application of these skills, and as Pamela Conners from Gustavus Adolphus College noted, we want to "give them practice at those skills. It's not a hypothetical context. Because they're talking about real and important issues." Students also apply these skills frequently across contexts including on campus, with family and friends, and in professional settings (Figure 1).

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 skills: how students come to understand themselves and their role in diverse spaces.
- Interpersonal communication skills: how students talk, listen, and relate to others.
- Applied professional skills: the applied knowledge that students carry into their careers and communities.
- Community orientation skills: how students engage with their local community.
- Leadership skills: how these experiences prepare students for leadership roles.

Figure 1. How often student survey respondents apply civil discourse techniques across settings. (N = 125)



Personal Growth and Self Awareness

Participation in civil discourse programs fosters deep intrapersonal growth by encouraging students to reflect on their values, identities, and assumptions. Many programs intentionally guide students through self-reflection exercises that ask them not just to articulate opinions, but to understand where those opinions come from. As Becca Kearl of Living Room Conversations explained, "We're really asking people to go beyond their talking points…what in your background has brought you to where you are?" Instead of relying on statistics, Becca redirects participants to lived experience and asks: "That's really interesting - where have you seen that show up in your life?"

Donovan E.C. Bethea recently graduated from North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University and has used this approach to understand others. He said that before getting into "big, dark, daunting topics" he would ask about siblings, pets, and things that generally connect people. That way, even if they disagree, they at least understand that person and their background better. This introspective approach enables students to reconnect with their personal histories and develop a more grounded understanding of themselves and others. At MSU Denver, Christina Foust builds these principles into her curriculum by encouraging students to be reflexive about their intersecting social identities and to adapt their communication accordingly.

Reflection is more than a one-time practice – it's baked into the structure of many civil discourse programs as a continuous learning tool. At Gustavus Adolphus College, students complete multiple rounds of written and in-person reflections to track their growth as facilitators and deepen their understanding of deliberation. Through repeated opportunities to think critically about their own experiences, students not only clarify their values but also cultivate confidence and adaptability. Renee Heath at the University of New Hampshire noted that students leave with a new sense of confidence in their ability to speak, organize, and lead, all of which are skills they attribute directly to their training. Donovan from North Carolina A&T confirmed this. "Now I feel like there's a certain level of confidence that I'm able to go into spaces and not be as nervous to challenge things."

> *"I learned how to engage respectfully while still having meaningful and important conversations. It also improved my public speaking and gave me confidence in my ability to lead discussions."*
>
> **STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.**

Students also develop key personal dispositions such as humility, empathy, and optimism – qualities that can shift their entire approach to interpersonal and civic life. Leah Seppanen Anderson from the University of Pennsylvania said her program's values center "humility, curiosity, and community," supporting students to become intentional in how they engage across difference. Baylor University's Kevin Villegas echoed this, describing how their learning structure is designed to instill intellectual virtues like humility, justice, and wisdom, especially for student leaders. This disposition-building work is evident in students like Asma Rasheed of BridgeUSA, who shared that she not only communicates more tolerantly but also applies a more critical lens to those she agrees with. Finally, these programs can leave students with renewed hope. "Students who come to the certificate often have a rather jaded perspective on civic and political discourse," said Colene Lind at Kansas State University, "and they leave with an optimism that there is an alternative and there can be a better way."

Together, these programs illustrate that civil discourse education is as much about internal transformation as external dialogue. By cultivating habits of reflection, fostering humility and empathy, and helping students connect with both their own stories and those of others, campuses are preparing students to grow into more grounded, intentional, and self-aware individuals. This personal development becomes a critical foundation for the next stage of applying these skills when engaging with others.

Interpersonal Communication

Students engaged in campus civil discourse programs consistently develop a set of interpersonal communication skills that help them navigate conversations with nuance and empathy. At its core, these students are taught essential listening skills. Karla, a student who participated in Narrative 4, said "a lot of people or friends tell me, 'you're a really good listener. We like to talk to you because we feel [heard].' And I think a lot of it comes from this practice of facilitating." As our interviewees emphasized repeatedly, the purpose of dialogue is not to win an argument; rather, as Christina Foust from Metropolitan State University of Denver explained, it's to "listen for empathy, listen for understanding, asking questions that are generative of conversation." To do so, Leila Brammer from the University of Chicago says students are taught how to "ask questions of others and open up those conversations so that they can gather information...and have the analysis skills to be able to say something about what they've learned." The goal of this approach, according to Jake Fay from the Constructive Dialogue Institute is to "try to understand not just what someone else believes, but why they believe it, and where that belief came from, and how it's shaped that person." In this sense, students use their listening skills to disentangle what they hear from the individual who shares their opinion. This enables them to approach conversations from an engaged standpoint.

> *"The thing that really struck me as important was learning how to listen. It's such a skill that I glanced over in life. I was like, Yeah, I know how to listen. And then we started doing the lesson on it, and I was like, no, actually, I have no idea how to listen, and I've been doing it for the past 20 years of my life."*
>
> **STUDENT INTERVIEW.**

As dialogue can veer into divisive territory, these programs also equip students with the skills to recognize the emotional cues that can derail conversations and the skills to manage them. Prior to the 2024 election, Jason Schreiber from California State University San Marcos mentioned that students will soon begin to engage with family and friends on topics where they may not be aligned politically. He said that giving students conflict resolution skills will enable them to engage thoughtfully rather than avoiding sensitive topics. Amanda Clark from the University of Texas Dallas teaches her students to recognize how, when, and why anger starts to emerge for them during difficult conversations. She then helps students think through strategies for how to quell these symptoms in themselves and also manage elevating tensions with others. New tools are also being developed that can support interpersonal dialogue by creating platforms for students to engage with one another and receive feedback throughout the process. Online tools like Sway and Cortico scaffold conversations between students from opposing viewpoints and encourage them to phrase their thoughts in respectful and productive ways.

"I used skills learned in this program in another organization I belong to during a time where I had to manage conflict between myself and another leader who was equal to me. We had different understandings of what ethical conduct as leaders of the organization should look like, and I used active listening and intentional questions to understand their point of view in order to approach the problem from a more objective standpoint."

STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.

"We learned about LARA (listen, affirm, respond, add) as a method of communication to facilitate kind and mutually-beneficial/learning conversations with others who disagree with us. I've been able to practice this with my parents, who have very different political beliefs from myself, to help us better understand each other and keep allowing for positive relationship-building despite the emotional nature of today's political climate."

STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.

Even in tense situations, students are able to manage dynamics from a position of impartiality. Chris Anderson from Wabash College said his students are "ready to have the difficult conversation[s], and they're not going to shy away from it." Knowing how to manage conflict is a skill that program leaders teach by example. James Thompson from Hiram College is deliberate during class discussions to call out conversations that veer into incivility. He tells students to "take the exclamation marks out of sentences." He believes that "you can't simply say it in class that I want you all to behave this way...you have to train them, essentially."

"Our discussion about potentially offensive comments was helpful for me to transfer the strategies to a classroom setting as a teacher. I feel better equipped to be patient in this scenario instead of filling with panic."

STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.

Finally, these interpersonal skills give students the ability to speak with others who may not share their same background or opinions. Asma Rasheed, former Chapter Development Manager at BridgeUSA, is pursuing a career in healthcare and recognizes that people, "may look at me differently for the things I wear, the way I act, or anything like that, but it's my role to know how to be adaptable and...know what ways to speak, what ways to kind of manipulate the situation, to make people hear me." This adaptability in communication reflects a deep awareness not just of content, but of context, audience, and the subtle cues that shape how one is perceived and understood.

Through campus civil discourse programs, students gain a powerful toolkit of interpersonal and emotional regulation skills that help them engage constructively across lines of difference. These programs don't just teach students how to speak - they teach them how to listen, manage conflict, and build understanding.

Applied Professional Skills

Civility in professional spaces is critical for both employees and employers. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), which administers the SHRM Civility Index survey, incivility in the workplace costs U.S. organizations $2.7 billion per day in reduced productivity and absenteeism. The largest driver of incivility is political differences, and nearly three-quarters of U.S. workers who completed the survey believe that managers and supervisors can do more to prevent incivility. In other words, civil discourse skills are highly valuable in American workplaces.

Civil discourse programs across college campuses equip students with a host of applied, real-world skills that translate directly into their professional and civic lives. From project management to stakeholder communication, students gain practical experience through hands-on initiatives. Renee Heath, along with her colleague Jennifer Borda at the University of New Hampshire, have done extensive research on the skills students come away with from their programming at the Civil Discourse Lab. She noted how "the work stuff... surprised us, like how much they were getting out of project management stuff, like stakeholder viewpoints." Specifically, students noted the most helpful part of their programming was the debriefing aspect, which they could also apply in a professional setting. Similarly, Chris Anderson from Wabash College emphasized how students are trained to "report information out to others and condense it," treating student-run conversations like professional deliverables.

These programs often prioritize collaboration. Josiah Wink, a student at Shepherd University, credited his certificate program with teaching him to "work with others and advocate for their needs," skills that are critical in team-based environments. Similarly, Danika Brown from Rice highlighted students' ability to form effective partnerships with community organizations and navigate "diverse perspectives" to co-create meaningful projects. Sadie Bryant, a student at Baylor University, shared how being part of her university's fellows program has influenced her to pursue work that has a "more meaningful impact." She plans on going into sales, but said, "if I'm selling something, I want it to be a product I fully believe in and believe will benefit society, and not just a consumerism product." Convening is also an essential skill that is emphasized across programs, with Colene Lind at Kansas State describing how students learn to "intentionally bring people together" while acknowledging and navigating existing power dynamics.

Students also gain skills that set them apart during job interviews and professional transitions. Asma Rasheed, a former student leader, former Chapter Development Manager at BridgeUSA, shared how she "milked it in [her] applications and interviews" for optometry school, noting how much schools "love to hear that you know how to talk to someone." These programs foster competencies that many employers now prioritize, such as public speaking, negotiation, coalition building, and collaborative problem solving. Martín Carcasson at Colorado State University pointed out that these skills are exactly what employers are looking for: "the ability to make tough decisions on complex issues that require engaging across differences." Others, like Alannah Glickman at Washington University in St. Louis, outlined how their programming at the Gephardt Institute provides fine-tuned expertise in advocacy and lobbying, while also preparing students for voter engagement and coalition-building work. These tangible competencies not only improve job prospects but also prepare students to contribute to complex societal systems and policy conversations.

Beyond the technical, students develop a range of professional soft skills that are just as critical. These include giving and receiving feedback – Dareen Basma from Carnegie Mellon University trains students to "provide feedback with your name attached to it," reflecting real-world expectations. Networking is another vital outcome. At Hiram College, Valori Vaught noted how students become adept at engaging with professionals in their desired fields during post-seminar dinners, developing confidence in professional settings.

Program directors will frequently structure their programming to mimic a workplace setting, giving students a chance to practice what they may experience outside of higher education. For instance, Graham Bullock from Davidson College shared how the Deliberative Citizenship Initiative gives students an opportunity to advance in the program from fellows to senior fellows, emulating a promotion process. Paula Lustbader from Seattle University has her students host and present at a conference, because as she noted, "every profession has conferences and so let's practice those skills." Whether students are managing events, starting nonprofits, engaging in public advocacy, or simply learning how to lead in diverse environments, civil discourse programs offer a robust foundation for navigating today's workplaces and public life.

Community Orientation

Many civil discourse programs contain a community-oriented component where students get to practice their skills of discourse and facilitation in real-life settings. One of the main reasons campuses have students work on their skills in community settings is to gain a realistic understanding of what it means to do dialogue outside of higher education. Unlike structured programs on campuses, students get a chance to learn that doing community work is not a neat and tidy process. Sarah Nash is the Community Engagement Manager at Washington University in St. Louis (WashU) and she organizes the Engage STL programming. She wanted students to know that "community engagement is really messy, and there's no one right way to do it." She seeks to help her students massage that muscle of "I don't have to run from this. I can lean into it and have those hard conversations." As a result, students may see their communities in a new light.

Christine Cusick from Seton Hill University takes her nursing students to a residential care facility where they have a story exchange with the goal of "understand[ing] their patients in a new way." Program directors want students to leave their "little bubble," as Dareen Basma from Carnegie Mellon University phrased it, and "enter the community that is more politically engaged, more politically active." As an example, Colene Lind from Kansas State University cited a forum her students helped to facilitate in eastern Kansas to gather feedback from small, urban, and minority-owned farmers. Her students were surprised to hear about the forum participants' focus on getting loans and technical assistance. "It was just the kinds of issues that they raised as being important to them that were nowhere on the radar screen for me or the tabletop moderators. So, in that sense, we learned from people in the community." Because they intentionally leave the campus and embed themselves in communities, students apply their skills and think more practically about how to do this work beyond higher education.

> *"I recently had to travel to a remote town for work, and as a junior team member and someone who is Black, a woman, etc., I was very nervous about engaging with community members in this town. But I utilized my toolkit of reserving judgement & truly showing up authentically that resulted in a truly wonderful experience."*
>
> **STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.**

Because of the intentional curiosity required to do this work, program directors express that students develop a capacity- and asset-building mindset when going into communities. Erica Yamamura from LEAD California, a coalition of colleges and universities working to advance civic and community engagement, said we need to move away from the traditional "charity and unidirectional model." She said that true community engagement is based on community strengths. Chris Nayve from the University of San Diego expanded on this point by saying this approach is more "learning-based" as opposed to a deficit mindset. One student survey respondent stated that the most important aspect of their program that prepared them for life beyond campus was "learning about the importance of trust and also going into communities more intentionally without preconceived notions." By having students identify their own values and their own positionality vis-a-vis the community, they are better placed to "understand the community members...as the experts in their issues," according to Danika Brown from Rice.

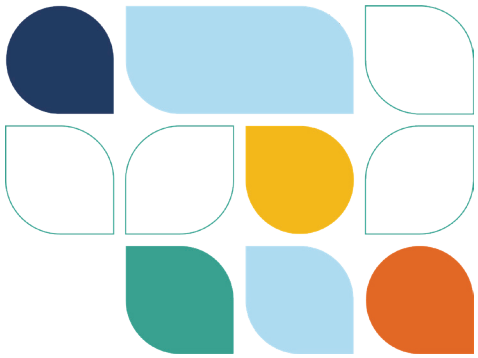
> *"The required service hours and social activities component taught me that the deeper my connection is to my community, the better."*
>
> **STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.**

Finally, getting out into communities has the added benefit of helping students hone their professional path. Sarah Nash from WashU had a student who expressed a desire to become a music therapist, and after doing similar work through the St. Louis Fellows program, said that is precisely what they do not want to do. "And for us, that's a success, right? Like, you got that clarity." By leaving campus and gaining a deeper understanding for how civil discourse work operates in practice, students get a chance to hone their skills, understand their communities better, and become better prepared for real-life scenarios they will encounter after graduating.

Leadership Skills

Civil discourse programs are proving to be powerful incubators for student leadership development. As Jennifer Waller of Omicron Delta Kappa explained, "Being a good leader means being able to engage in a dialogue that is uncomfortable," highlighting how leadership in today's world is deeply tied to navigating challenging conversations. This approach is echoed by Paula Lustbader at Seattle University, who emphasized that "civility leadership" is rooted in inclusive, collaborative practices that ensure diverse voices are genuinely heard and integrated. Such programs often develop leadership not through traditional titles, but by nurturing students' ability to build coalitions, facilitate engagement, and respond thoughtfully to conflict – skills applicable whether a student leads a student organization, manages a department, or participates in global advocacy.

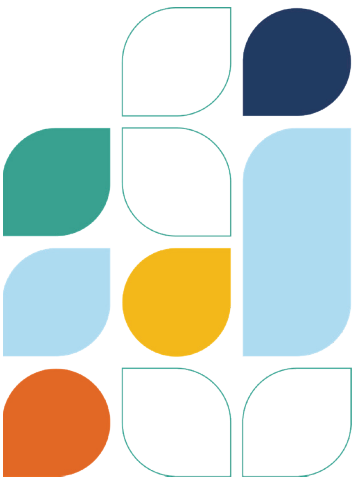
> *"I was able to develop perspectives of a leader who is mindful of everyone's voices and skills to facilitate meaningful conversations that lead to problem solving and more compassion toward people experiencing injustice."*
>
> **STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.**



Many campuses intentionally embed leadership skill building in their civil discourse curricula through student-led projects and real-world advocacy training. At Shepherd University, Ashley Horst described a hands-on certificate program where students develop community-based initiatives rooted in their lived experiences and present them to decision-makers. This model teaches everything from messaging and stakeholder engagement to working through complex advocacy channels. Similarly, Becca Kearl of Living Room Conversations praised the leadership development that occurs when students "take the lead on... what conversations we're avoiding on campus," empowering them to shape campus culture while gaining experience in initiative-taking. These programs also expose students to visible role models. Cassandra Veney at Howard University noted that bringing in speakers in leadership positions "gives female students a visual of what it takes to be a leader," providing tangible pathways for aspiration and emulation.

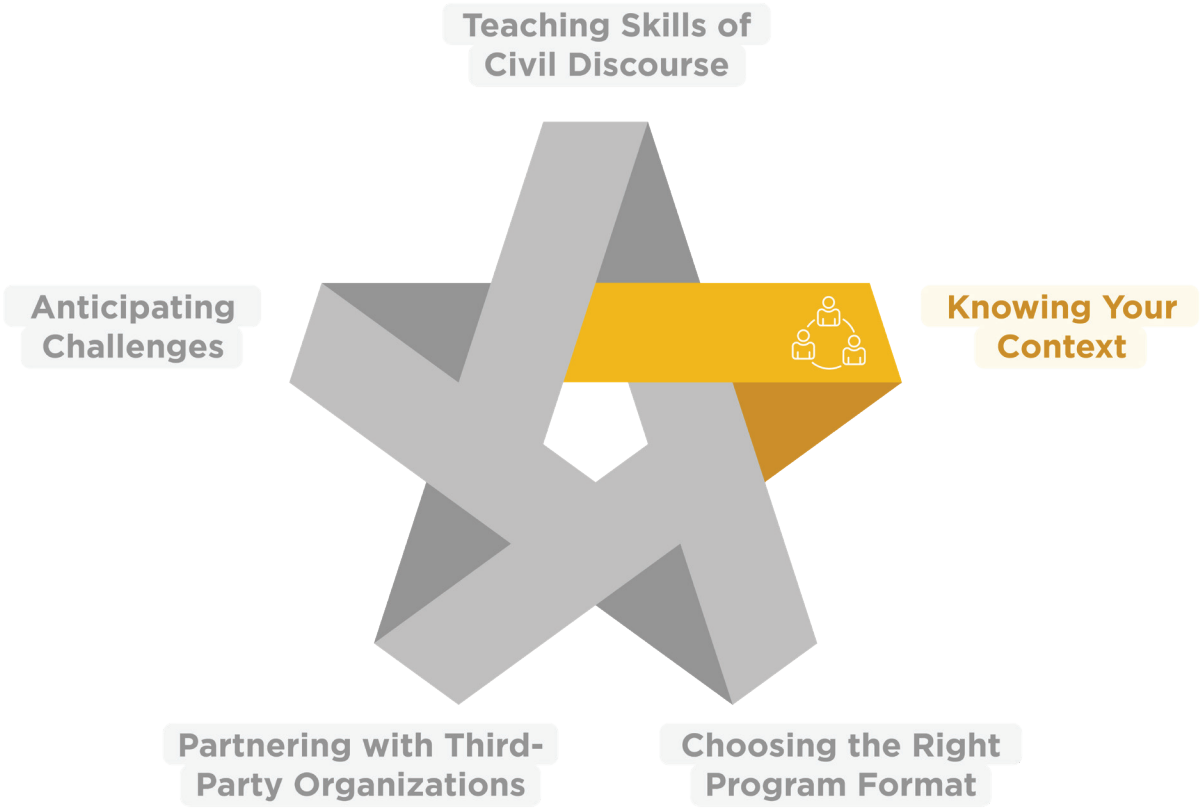
> *"The aspect of the program that was most useful in preparing me for real world situations was learning about my leadership style. Through the LEAD Scholars Program I was able to learn that my leadership style was affiliative leadership, which means I put extra focus into the relationship and bonds I form within my group. Knowing my leadership style before I fully progress into my professional career is helpful because I can begin developing ways to perfect my leadership style so I can appropriately and effectively lead and collaborate on teams in the near future."*
>
> **STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.**

Importantly, leadership skills cultivated through civil discourse are recognized as valuable across industries and professions. Chris Anderson of Wabash College underscored that "those leadership skills are going to be invaluable regardless of what they do," from medicine to statistics. This leadership development is holistic, strategic, and often deeply personal. As Dareen Basma of Carnegie Mellon University put it, "leadership isn't just about leading efforts, it's about "showing up in a certain way," caring for community members, and learning to navigate difference. These programs may start as a means of building resume-ready competencies, but they often cultivate leadership habits that ripple far beyond the classroom. Ultimately, civil discourse initiatives are shaping the next generation of leaders who are collaborative, reflective, and prepared to guide others through complexity and change.



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Clear student learning goals can help programming reflect a holistic skill development framework.
- Ongoing reflection activities built into programs can help students develop self-awareness, clarify values, and cultivate empathy and humility.
- Direct instruction and repeated practice in key interpersonal skills, in addition to creating space for students to reflect on their communication habits and receive targeted feedback, can strengthen students' growth.
- Programs that simulate professional contexts may provide students with experiences and skills that transfer across career paths.
- Opportunities to apply dialogue and facilitation skills in community-based settings can emphasize asset-based engagement and critical reflection on positionality, complexity, and power dynamics.
- Leadership development can be scaffolded by giving students increasing levels of responsibility, helping them identify their leadership style, and offering visible role models and advocacy opportunities to build capacity for inclusive, collaborative leadership.



After specifying which skills to focus on, it is important to assess your local campus context to gauge feasibility, interest, and placement. 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. Below, we discuss critical contextual factors to consider that will help guide your approach, whether you are at the beginning stages or are seeking to redefine or revise your program.

Leadership Support

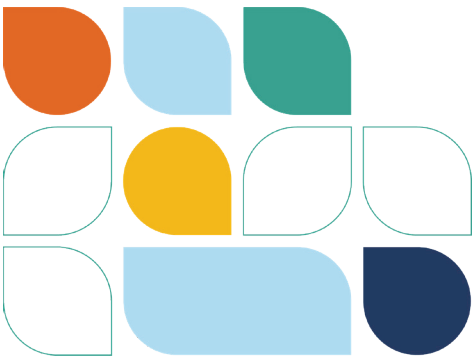
Campus leaders can provide support for and voice their belief in the importance of civil discourse programming. By having a champion at the leadership level, these initiatives tend to progress more smoothly, elicit broader campus buy-in, and have access to greater financial resources. Put simply by Erica Yamamura, Executive Director at LEAD California, "If you don't have executive support, it's not going to go anywhere." Buy-in from campus leadership "makes it easier to open other doors. It bestows legitimacy and resources on the issue. It also broadens your reach," said Carl Luna who oversees the Institute for Civil Civic Engagement at the University of San Diego. Dr. Luna convened a San Diego-wide consortium of college leaders to discuss civility programs and issues. By engaging the leadership directly, he was able to reach students across different campuses and cross promote events. Support from leadership can also be invaluable when dialogue programming attracts critical attention, whether from members of the campus community or the broader public. As Roger Berkowitz at Bard College's Hannah Arendt Center explained when discussing negative reactions to hosting controversial speakers, "the biggest part is…the president of Bard… [Leon] Botstein has defended me every step of the way…a lot of this comes down to leadership."

To appeal to leadership, it is helpful when programs are aligned with university missions and strategic plans. Some interviewees told us that they structured their programs to appeal to the goals of the university. Ashley Horst from Shepherd University's Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications shared how her center receives strong support from the university. "[Our president] believes in what we do. The mission of the university is really to create the leaders of tomorrow. So, we clearly dovetail nicely into that." Similarly, Kevin Villegas, Dean of Intercultural Engagement and Division of Student Life Initiatives at Baylor University, discussed how his university recently went through a strategic planning process, in which one of the four imperatives was civil discourse. Because of that, he expects more resources to flow to his work, elevating and scaling ongoing initiatives.

When campus leadership is on board, it is easier to bring in third-party partners to help jump start or strengthen initiatives. Jackie Li, Director of Program Implementation at the Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI), facilitates the implementation of CDI's programming on campuses nationwide. When asked about the role of campus leadership in helping or hindering CDI's work, she replied, "if the President, VP of Student Affairs, or another senior leader on campus is bought into this and is making time and giving resources to their team to implement, that leads to a smoother and more successful implementation." She contrasted this with staff and/or faculty led efforts, absent of leadership support, that would have a more difficult time getting buy-in for their third-party programming across campus.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: CIVILITY LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE AT HIRAM COLLEGE

James Thompson, Director of the James A. Garfield Center for Public Leadership at Hiram College, was seeking to create a partnership with the Civility Leadership Institute (CLI). The CLI is part of Renew America Together, a third-party organization started by General Wesley Clark dedicated to reducing partisan division. The CLI had never been implemented on a college campus and Dr. Thompson credits the organization's willingness to partner with them because of the close relationship between the Garfield Center and Hiram College's leadership. "Our bureaucracy is me calling the president. That's how things work. If we ever want to get something done, I just email the president, I text him." Because of Dr. Thompson's proximity to and support from college leadership, the CLI was successfully launched at Hiram College with an initial cohort of 30 students and is now being woven into the undergraduate curriculum for all students.



Placement

Civil discourse programs are housed across a wide range of places and spaces within their universities, which often translates to program style, reach, and availability of resources. Some programs are housed within an academic unit while others are placed in a central location like a student affairs building or within the provost's office. Some programs operate as standalone centers.

DEPARTMENT-BASED PROGRAMS

Of the programs housed in academic units, we most frequently saw them in communications or political science departments. Programs housed within academic departments tended to have more theoretical or philosophical underpinnings. For example, Chris Anderson, Visiting Professor of Rhetoric at Wabash College and director of the college's Democracy and Public Discourse initiative, shared how his program is grounded in a small group communication school of thought that argues for a smaller, more intimate approach to running deliberations. Alice Siu, Associate Director of the Deliberative Democracy Lab at Stanford University, provides her students with the theoretical foundation of what it means to do deliberation in democratic societies where they "talk at a very high level about the democratic values of equality and fairness and related democratic values and explain why we emphasize deliberation in a democracy." These theories are generally taught in courses and students are given opportunities to either practice these skills in class or in more applied settings.

Faculty who run programs out of academic departments will sometimes draw upon third-party materials to help frame their work and provide a foundation for practicing these skills. Colene Lind, Director of the Institute for Civic Discourse at Kansas State University, utilizes materials from the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation. "NCDD has a list of public ground rules for discussion, and we'll often just walk through those and talk about literally what those are." Others, like Christina Foust in the Communication Studies department at MSU Denver, note that their colleagues have traveled to other universities to learn about their established approaches to replicate in their home university environment. The founders of MSU Denver Dialogues went to the University of Michigan to attend their intergroup dialogue institute training, and she said their material "becomes a really handy planning tool." Being able to draw upon existing materials and incorporate them into their courses provides faculty members with a readily accessible format for teaching these skills to their students.

Instructors can also incorporate AI-based tools, like Sway, which scaffolds discussions between pairs of students who disagree over a topic chosen by an instructor. According to Sway, an AI "guide" provides discussion guidance to help de-escalate tense moments and promote equal representation of opinions. Sway also scaffolds conversations by having students clarify vague or incomplete arguments, pinpointing tensions and sharing factual information when appropriate. If the conversation veers into hostile or unconstructive territory, Sway says the tool will offer "charitable rephrasing" as a better way for a student to make their point. The tool is free for instructors in higher education and can potentially serve as an entry point to deeper and more meaningful dialogue in classrooms.

One potential drawback of running this style of programming out of an academic department is its limited reach across campus. Students with limited or no contact with the department where a program is located are less likely to learn about it. That said, programs that run out of academic units can recruit students extensively within their departments and make the programmatic components related to major requirements, which can be significantly appealing to students.

ADMINISTRATION-BASED PROGRAMS

Programs connected to college or university administration, such as those housed within chancellor's or provost's offices or within student affairs units, tend to be more centrally located. These programs may have greater reach and are able to send a message of their priority to the campus community. Leah Seppanen Anderson,

Executive Director of the SNF Paideia Program at the University of Pennsylvania, shared how her program is housed within the provost's office. As the University of Pennsylvania is quite decentralized, the program's placement communicates the centrality of this program to the whole campus. While this may not be generally noticeable to students, it does make the program easily recognizable and accessible to students across campus.

When programs are centrally housed, their physical location also makes it so that students can easily find - or even stumble across - these offices and learn more and get involved. For example, the University of Alabama's Crossroads Civic Engagement Center is in the middle of the student union. Lane McLelland, the Executive Director, describes being located in the same building as the Student Government Association, the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life, and other key Division of Student Life departments. She says this location is critical because it enables you to build relationships with staff and student organizations who are often seeking resources to promote better skills for productive dialogue in their constituencies. Similarly, Leah Seppanen Anderson said that her office is in College Hall, the central building on the University of Pennsylvania's campus. Being housed in such a central location is a "physical marker that that the program's work is at the heart of campus." Students who have busy schedules may find it challenging to go to spaces on campus that are outside of their daily regimen. Housing programs in physical spaces that are more heavily trafficked on a regular basis helps to convey the importance of this programming and market it to students.

The style of programming for more centrally located centers ranges as coordinators decide on academic, third-party, or iterative approaches to their work. For instance, the Bridgebuilding Fellows program at Baylor University is grounded in academic approaches to intercultural maturity and student development. These are intended to teach students how to "accept challenges from others, and at the same time build interdependent relationships with different people from other backgrounds," according to Kevin Villegas, Dean of Intercultural Engagement and Division of Student Life Initiatives. Conversely, others will incorporate third-party materials that can be readily implemented, allowing program leaders to focus more on logistics. Ashley Biser from Ohio Wesleyan University worked with the Constructive Dialogue Institute to embed their Perspectives program on their campus. The benefit to this partnership was that "they didn't have to develop their materials from scratch, and they were able to get up and running more quickly." And as will be expanded on further in the "Partnering with Third-Party Organizations" section, chancellors and provosts appreciate the recognizability of third parties, which can make it easier to incorporate their materials in campus-wide programming.

While academic or third-party materials may provide well-developed frameworks for this programming, some program leaders decide it is best to take an iterative approach to this work. This is especially common for newer programs that are still trying to determine the best style of programming for their particular campus

CENTER-BASED PROGRAMS

Finally, there are standalone programs that are independent of academic departments and provost's offices. As independent units, these centers tend to be less beholden to the administration while still maintaining broader campus reach. Maia Ferdman, Staff Director for the Dialogue Across Difference Initiative at UCLA, runs her programming out of the Bedari Kindness Institute. They are supported by the administration but remain independent of them. "If we want to build trust on our campus with anyone, even those who are most alienated from the institution, we need to be independent from the administration."

When considering placement for your program, important factors to consider are reach, degree of independence, style of programming, and affiliation to the institution. Institutions should carefully consider how these factors align with their campus culture, leadership structure, and long-term goals for engagement and impact.

Program Staffing and Support

When identifying who will do or support this work on your campus, it is essential to find an individual who already does this work in some fashion, "because they're going to be your best ambassadors," according to Erica Yamamura from LEAD California. Laura Weaver from Campus Compact emphasized the importance of identifying a "campus champion" to act as the liaison for communications and implementation. In addition, Nick Longo from Providence College recommended that those who take on this work find a way to embed their work in their existing employment setup, as opposed to adding it to their regular job duties. He explained, "What is your job description on the campus, and how can you build dialogue into that? Don't make it an add on, make it something that makes the work you're doing better." For instance, if you are a faculty member, try to find a way to get credit for the work that you are doing as part of your service or teaching portfolio.

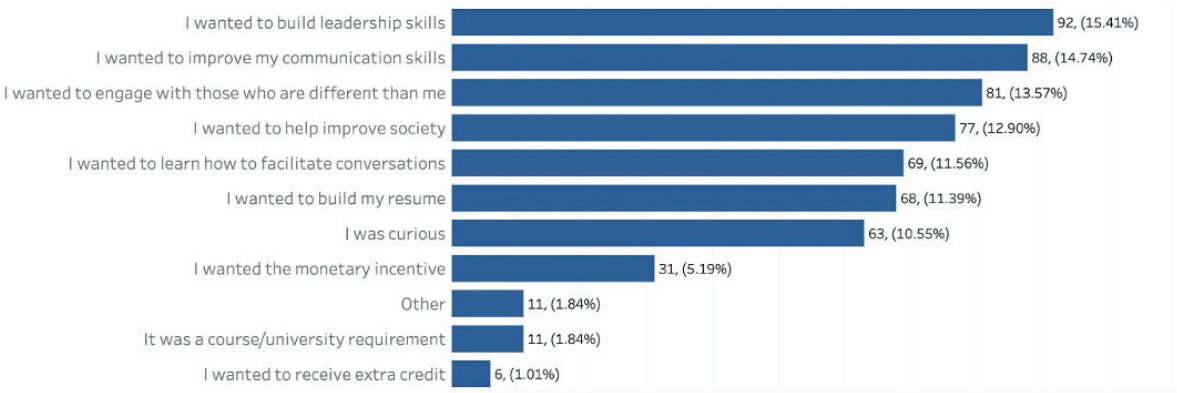
While academic programs tend to be organized by faculty members, programs that are more centrally housed are often coordinated by university staff members. When asked what the ideal staffing setup is, interviewees consistently replied that programs should be coordinated by both a faculty member and a staff member. Kara Piccirilli, the former Senior Academic Program Coordinator for SNF Agora at Johns Hopkins University, cited myriad benefits of this approach. "Part of it is that faculty have so much on their plate... and so to keep any one initiative [or] program effort going, you really kind of need somebody who has the constancy that is more allowed for staff." Renee Heath from the Civil Discourse Lab at the University of New Hampshire expanded on this further, "I think the best practice is having a model where you can have the directors partnering with faculty, because both of them don't have time to do both...[the university] want[s] me teaching. They want me doing research, right? So, we don't have the time to do the great work that directors do in organizing, getting the events going, the stakeholder work, all of that." Having a balanced approach not only makes it easier for individuals to juggle their respective responsibilities but also expands the reach and scope of these programs as they can attract a broader swath of the campus community. Faculty members can work to recruit within their academic disciplines, while staff members may have a broader reach through their connections with other academic disciplines.

Attracting Students

Program directors believe strongly that their programming is applicable and necessary for students across campus. To accomplish this, they need to strategize how they market and engage students across disciplines, considering all of their respective goals. Kara Piccirilli spoke about the challenges and opportunities of being at Johns Hopkins University, a university known for its STEM majors. Since they wanted to engage students across campus, they chose a curricular approach by offering a course called AI and Democracy, which is cross listed with computer science. They engaged their student workers who "know what's going on, who are very savvy, who are very aware of and can influence on campus, and who can speak to our programming, who can just kind of super rep on social media, but also IRL [in real life], what the institute is doing and what we're about is really helpful." Being strategic and knowing what would appeal to different members of the campus community is critical in sharing opportunities for how to engage.

Figure 2 below provides a breakdown of reasons from our student survey for why students chose to participate in this style of programming. According to the survey results, out of 125 respondents, 92 (74%) reported that they wanted to participate in civil discourse programming to build leadership skills and 88 (70%) said they wanted to improve their communication skills. The least cited responses were students who signed up because of course/university requirements or for extra credit (8% and 4%, respectively).

Figure 2. Student Reasons for Engaging in Civil Discourse Initiatives (N = 125)



Programs can think about the end goal of programming and attracting students based on how that intersects with students' professional goals. For instance, the Democracy and Public Discourse Initiative at Wabash College looks primarily to recruit students who are interested in doing civic engagement work. In addition to recruiting across disciplines, they also want students who are interested in being out in community and doing this work after graduation. Case in point, 60% of our survey respondents indicated that the reason they chose to participate in civil discourse programming is because they wanted to help improve society. At Hiram College, they attract students who understand that deliberation and dialogue are required in many professional capacities. James Thompson, Director of the Garfield Center for Public Leadership, said they attract "a lot of pre-med majors, people who understand that medicine is always political, and they need to understand public policymaking and public policy making advocacy." By appealing to students' professional orientation, programs can detail the benefits and applicability of their programming to a students' postbaccalaureate aims.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: NARRATIVE MEDICINE AT SETON HILL UNIVERSITY

At Seton Hill University, their Narrative 4 programming speaks directly to the university's pre-professional programs. For instance, to distinguish Seton Hill's nursing and physician assistant programs from other universities, they not only boast small class sizes and student-centered learning, but they offer narrative medicine models. Narrative medicine is an opportunity for students to take the Narrative 4 practice and embed it into medical training as a way to better understand and care for patients. How does this look in practice? For the Doctor of Physical Therapy students who are going to be traveling abroad for international clinical training, they plan to do story exchanges with them before they travel to prepare them to work across cultural differences. The added benefit of this approach is that the administrative leadership sees this programming as something that can distinguish their approach from larger institutions that may have more resources.

Programs will also offer incentives that align with students' professional goals. MSU Denver is developing an intergroup dialogue certificate and a dialogue facilitator micro-credential. The hope is that students who have been trained in the facilitator model are able to go out and help facilitate on campus. The micro-credential can be achieved through a combination of coursework and experience. Other programs will offer LinkedIn badges that students can use to market professional skills publicly. For example, Ashley Biser from Ohio Wesleyan University described how they have worked with the Constructive Dialogue Institute to create a LinkedIn badge for students who complete their online programming.

While programs will market to a wide range of students, they tend to attract student leaders. As Chris Anderson from Wabash College explains, his program has been "unofficially viewed by students as a great way to be a leader on campus broadly and in student government specifically." While Wabash College does not directly market to student leaders, the University of Alabama has leaned into this approach by intentionally recruiting student leaders for their programming. The system works because, as Lane McLelland says, "those students then influence hundreds of others when they model positive civic discourse. They also say to their upcoming leadership, 'oh, you should do this,' creating a pipeline and invaluable credibility for sustaining participation by new leadership, as it comes in annually for student groups." Others, like Leila Brammer from the University of Chicago, rely on the ripple effect of student leader participation. She said that she would ideally be reaching all students, but "you get to the students who are leading organizations, and they will reach all students." Whether it is targeting student leaders, student workers, or other campus representatives, these individuals can help to champion efforts and organically market programs to their campus peers.

Ultimately, the goal is to get students in the door. We heard repeatedly that participation begets participation. Once students get a taste for this programming, they usually crave the opportunity to learn more and want to come back. It is important, however, to assess how your programming could appeal to different students, their varied goals, and how you can approach marketing through strategic efforts, such as through student leaders.

Campus Partnerships

To effectively market programs to students, program directors need to strategically develop and leverage campus partnerships. As Maia Ferdman from UCLA noted, "this is all of our job...everyone needs to feel like an equal stakeholder, and that they have something real to contribute." In fact, she tied the sustainability of her program to the strength of campus partnerships, ranging from student affairs and teaching centers to the Office of Inclusive Excellence and alumni affairs. Different campus units have unique constituencies and goals, and it is important to align programming with different missions to receive collective buy-in and support for one's program.

For programs housed more centrally within the university, such as the University of Pennsylvania's SNF Paideia Program, program directors will strategically partner with academic programs. SNF Paideia has designated courses that align with the program mission and are rostered through a variety of academic departments across the university. Leah Seppanen Anderson, the program's Executive Director, has found that

> *Collaborating with other campus groups is an effective way to build momentum and increase engagement. Program-aligned courses are a great way to reach students because they are central to the campus experience and they have built-in expectations and incentives that foster meaningful engagement over an entire semester.*

California State University San Marcos runs a Civility Dialogues and Café Series, and they depend on partnerships with courses to get students to attend. In particular, they target business school faculty who assign group projects because they know that the skills taught in the café series will directly aid them in their coursework. Even if program directors don't directly partner with faculty, they will alert faculty members that students of theirs have participated in this style of programming. For example, Kevin Villegas from Baylor University will notify faculty members that a student in their course was a bridge building fellow in the hopes that they can leverage the students' experiences into the course content. As many campuses can be siloed, these efforts can help amplify programmatic efforts and spread the word about initiatives.

Establishing partnerships can build trust among different partners on campus. Kevin Marinelli from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill partnered with the university's Center for Faculty Excellence to bring discourse into the classroom and, as he said, "having partnerships with people who can complement your work and bring in new voices, audiences, and perspectives, I think that goes a long way in building trust." Trust was especially important when developing programming around political groups prior to the 2024 election. Colene Lind from KSU said that they sought to engage both the Republican and Democratic student groups because "those labels matter...if you're going to build the trust of people and get them in the room, you've got to have cross-partisan and cross-ideological support for any event or programming that you do."

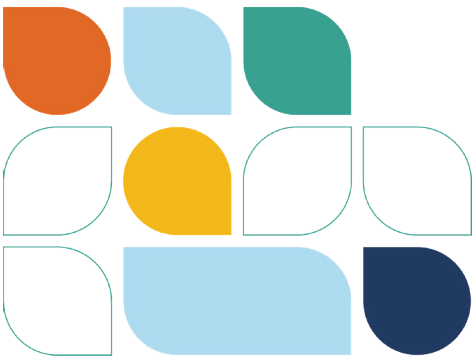
Building trust also means you need to meet people where they are at. Ashley Horst from Shepherd University has partnered with the English department, social work department, and lifelong learning to promote her program. She said that effort "helped us to get a strong base on our campus... you can't be an island, and you have to...figure out what's interesting to those departments and other groups on campus." This groundwork does not happen overnight – programs need to evaluate their campus environment, identify who potential partners are, and think carefully about how programs can be mutually beneficial.

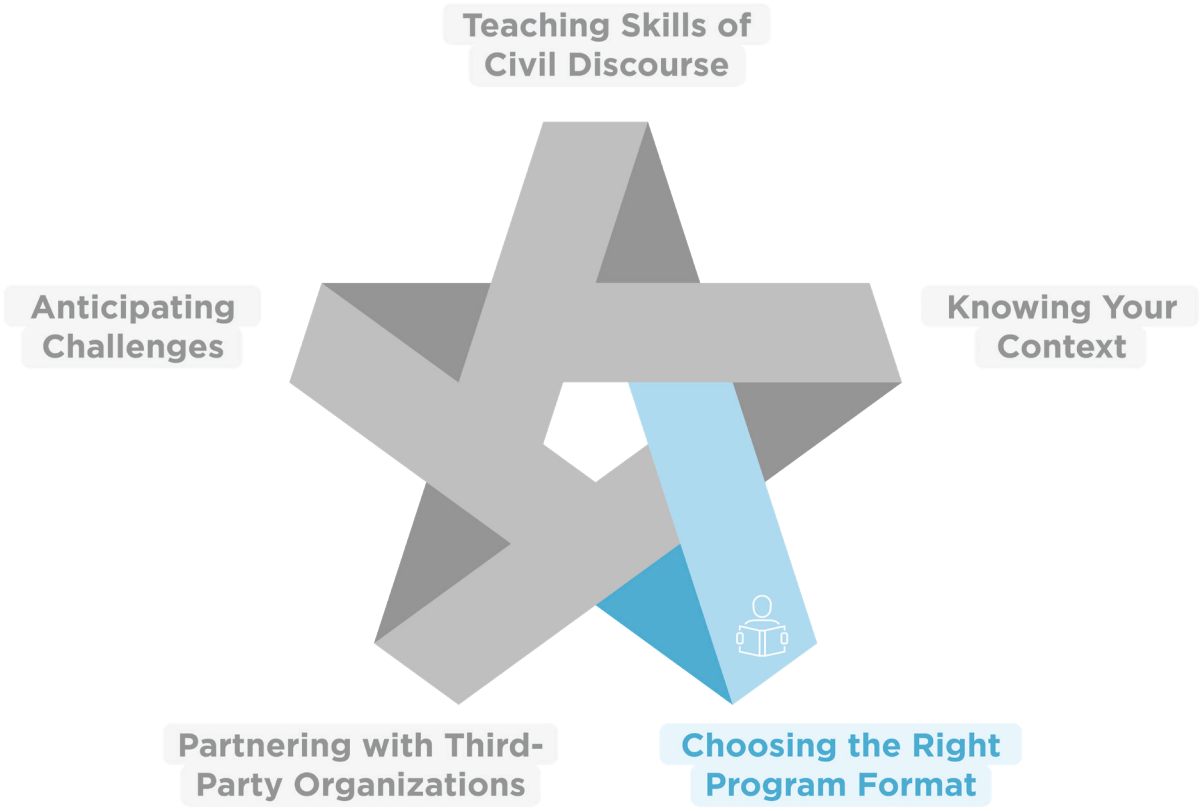
Finally, partnerships can extend beyond campus. As mentioned earlier, Carl Luna used to organize a San Diego-wide consortium of campus college leaders who convened to discuss civility programs and issues. These college leaders would share what was happening on other campuses and cross-share events. This increased program participation and further strengthened the network. James Thompson from Hiram College partnered with a local community college that would bring students to their events and post events in conjunction with Hiram College. As he said, "It's a wonderful relationship because a lot of their students never think of the small liberal arts college as an option for them." The added benefit of cross-promoting events is not only to share programmatic information, but students can also be exposed to new campuses, students, and opportunities.

Whether your partnerships are internal or external, expanding the reach of your center beyond its direct participants can make marketing efforts easier, support the sustainability of your center, and complement existing work on campus.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

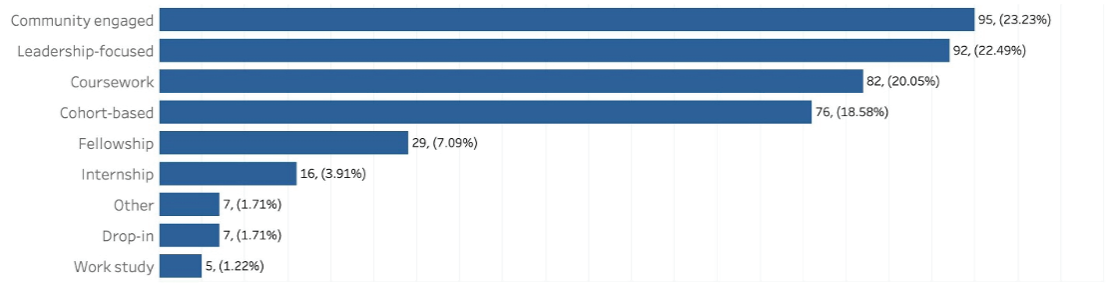
- **Visible and sustained support from campus leadership often develops when civil discourse initiatives are aligned with institutional goals, when leaders are invited into public-facing events, and when long-term relationships are built to legitimize and scale programming.**
- **Program placement – whether in an academic unit, a central office, or a standalone center – can be shaped by campus culture and goals. Balancing visibility, reach, and autonomy can maximize student engagement and program impact.**
- **Staffing models that pair a dedicated staff member with a faculty champion can help co-lead civil discourse programs, ensuring the work is embedded in existing roles and sustained through shared responsibility.**
- **Programs often gain broader reach when marketed to students across disciplines and professional pathways, with student leaders playing a valuable role in extending visibility and engagement.**
- **Campus partnerships can expand the reach of your program, help to reach a diverse audience, and can be the foundation of mutually beneficial partnerships.**





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. The students we surveyed participated in programs that were coursework-based (20%), cohort-based (19%), community engaged (23%), and leadership-focused (23%) among other formats (see Figure 3). 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. In this section, we highlight the most common approaches that the colleges and universities we studied are taking and why they approach civil discourse in these ways.

Figure 3. Program Models and Structures (N = 125)



Cohort Models

Teaching dialogue through a cohort model can be an effective way to infuse these skills into a relatively small group of students over a concentrated or extended period. Cohort models tend to attract students across academic, demographic, cultural, and political identities. This contrasts with course-based models (see below), which generally attract students from the same major. The benefit of a cohort model is that the students share an extended experience and tend to be organized around share interests related to the programming itself, even if the group itself is quite diverse. For example, Leah Seppanen Anderson from the University of Pennsylvania shared how the SNF Paideia cohort program attracts majors across disciplines such as nursing, engineering, and business in addition to the social sciences and humanities. Because of the university's decentralized system, it can be challenging for students to interact with people from different disciplines. But what brings these individuals together is their shared commitment to dialogue and exploring how their education might serve others.

"The peer-bonding aspects were the most useful. In particular, we did an exercise called our "Hero's Journey" where we opened up to the group about the most vulnerable parts of our individual life's journeys. After doing this, I felt much more comfortable speaking authentically to people in the cohort, and beyond because it helped me understand that everyone possesses vulnerabilities, even if they do not present as such."

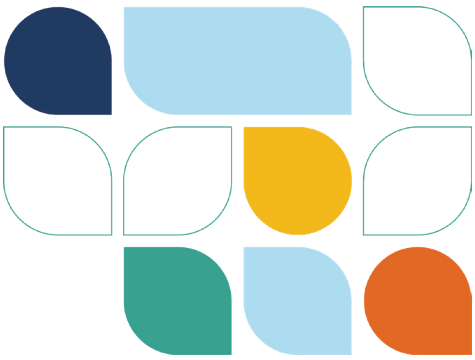
STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.

Because of these shared values, students are "able to challenge each other...they're able to push conversations to levels that they might not be able to do in their classrooms," explained Kevin Marinelli from UNC Chapel Hill. This is especially true for the Alfie Scholars program at Seattle University that specifically engages students from underrepresented groups. Paula Lustbader, Executive Director, said the group "becomes a family. They now have a group of people who have their backs, who know their stories, who know what they're here to do." Given that these underrepresented students may not have as many spaces to feel safe and accepted on campus, this cohort environment gives them an opportunity to practice these skills in a safe and accepting environment. These sentiments were aptly summarized in our interview with Sadie Bryant, a student from Baylor University:

> *I loved the fact that you were with a cohort, because to go through the bridge building fellow training, you ended up putting yourself in a lot of situations where you were very vulnerable. And it wasn't creating a safe space, it was creating a brave space, and being able to do that with a concrete group of people that you got to see week in and week out, as well as around campus, really made those conversations a lot easier and humanized them.*

Some programs take the extra step of providing a "living and learning" component for their participants. The safe space needed for practicing these skills does not materialize out of thin air – it must be cultivated over time, and having students live together creates a strong sense of community for participants. Cynthia Neal Spence from Spelman College leads the Social Justice Fellows program, a living and learning community designed to provide co-curricular support for students who wish to merge their intellectual interests with their social justice concerns. She described how students "need that constant affirmation that the questions [they're] asking about society, about issues of justice and equity and fairness are not passé." They feel connected to the other participants and a greater commitment towards working on these skills and sensibilities.

Interviewees noted that to really cement these skills, they needed to be practiced continuously over time. Leah Seppanen Anderson from the University of Pennsylvania says the cohort approach encourages students to build a "community of practice." Their cohort program lasts three years and she described the experience as a journey. "By the end, if they have chosen to be engaged, and connecting outside the classroom, these are people that they know and that are friends, and we're hoping...that they become people they can be reaching out to even after graduation." Cohorts are not just a space to really hone dialogue skills, but to also develop partnerships and friendships that extend beyond the lifespan of the program.



"The most helpful parts of this program came from the open conversations we had inside of our cohort about political events on campus. These conversations were not intended to teach us about a specific technical skill; I would say the benefits I received from them were not based on the program but on the intellect and talent of the other fellows in my cohort."

STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.

Cohort models, however, are resource intensive. They typically require extra funding (as some students receive stipends), extended time commitment, and staff members who are focused on supporting the cohort. Maia Ferdman from the UCLA Dialogue Across Difference Initiative attempted a cohort program with 13 students and, while Maia Ferdman described the experience as transformative and valuable, she also mentioned that it was a "large investment of time for staff members who had other full-time jobs." They have since paused their cohort program and have chosen other programming options that garner participation from more members of the campus community.

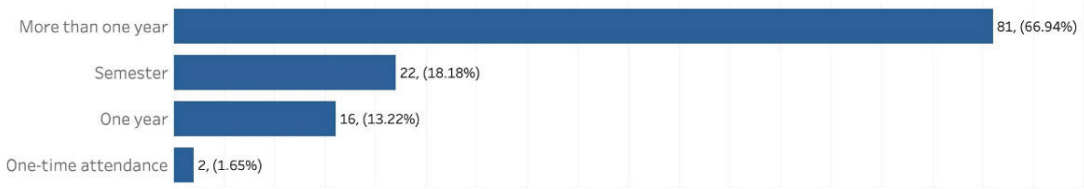
When seeking to teach students skills of dialogue, deliberation, and facilitation, the key is practice and commitment. As this new mode of thinking and communicating may be uncomfortable at first, cohorts can be an effective mechanism for students to practice in a safe environment with peers. The tradeoff is the smaller number of students who can benefit from this type of programming.

Course-Based Models

A course-based model offers a uniquely effective structure for dialogue programs by embedding deliberative practice into the rhythms of academic learning, providing both sustained engagement and curricular legitimacy. Courses allow students to build facilitation and dialogue skills through structured progression, peer-based learning, and repeated practice. In our sample, these programs are most commonly housed within communications departments, frequently taught by rhetoricians who emphasize the productive role of argument, thinking about audience and context, and how such practices date back thousands of years.

From our sample, the minimum length of time for a course-based program was either a semester or quarter. However, course-based programs often take place over the course of at least two terms. In our student survey, 67% of respondents (n=81) reported that their programs lasted more than one year (Figure 4). At Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, the Public Deliberation and Dialogue program is taught on a semesterly basis. After introducing students to facilitation and deliberation, they jump right into a buddy program (where students who previously participated in the program are paired up with new students) and they host weekly deliberations outside of class. The class meets twice weekly. At times, class meetings focus on the deliberation itself. At other times, students debrief on their deliberation experience and discuss challenges and strategies to overcome them.

Figure 4. Length of Program (N = 125)



While students at Gustavus come back to participate in an informal capacity, Martín Carcasson at Colorado State University intentionally structured his program into a two-semester system. "To train facilitators," he said, "it takes at least a semester, right? If it's just a semester course, by the time they know what they're doing, they're done." Once his students are trained, they go into the community and facilitate deliberations for community-based organizations. This setup provided sufficient time for the students to actually receive more hours of training than most professional facilitators. The resulting quality of the student facilitators helped build the program's strong reputation in the community.

Programs like the University of Central Florida's Lead Scholars Academy and Hiram College's civility curriculum demonstrate how multi-semester models allow for developmental learning and growth, from self-awareness to civic action. The Lead Scholars Academy, a four-semester course series, has students self-reflect, followed by a lesson in group theory, then they do a deep dive into a social justice issue that speaks to them, and then they compile all the lessons learned in the final semester through a mosaic project.

Small class sizes and seminar formats foster strong relationships and reflective discussion, critical to dialogue work. Moreover, when framed as academic offerings rather than extracurricular clubs, as Martín Carcasson emphasized, dialogue programs gain credibility with students and community partners alike. Ultimately, the course-based model not only equips students with practical and interpersonal skills but also models the very deliberative practices it seeks to teach, creating learning environments that mirror the democratic ideals they aim to promote.

Embedded Courses

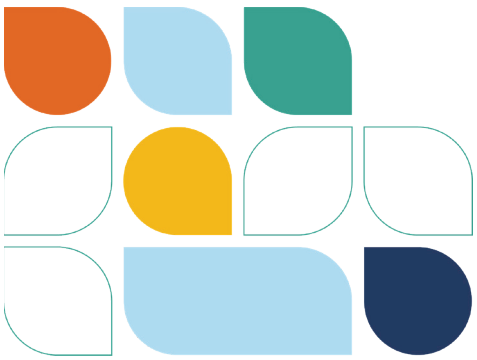
Like course-based models, embedded courses are housed within departments or disciplines but are also affiliated with a particular center. Embedded courses are a way to have faculty embed dialogue-style programming and theories into their course material. For example, taking a community-engaged scholarship approach, George Washington University's Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service has 90 courses throughout the university that are tagged as community affiliated.

At the University of Pennsylvania, there are about 50 Paideia-designated courses offered every year, across all four undergraduate schools, and they are open to all undergraduate students. According to Leah Seppanen Anderson,

> *They are designed to integrate learning from dialogue, about dialogue, and how to dialogue with the disciplinary and thematic focus of the course. How that is done varies depending on the topic and the instructor. We have courses in biology on biology and society, courses in engineering that are looking at technology and society... then there are more traditional communications courses on the history and theory of the freedom of expression.*

To support faculty members, they offer funding, dialogue resources, and a community of practice for instructors.

Embedded course models expand the reach of dialogue and civic engagement programs by integrating them into diverse disciplines and connecting with a broader student body. By collaborating with faculty and providing institutional support, these models foster sustainable, university-wide cultures of dialogue and public service. Moreover, some programs hope that seeing a course affiliated with a particular center may pique students' interest in learning more about the center and their other offerings.



Campus-Wide Programs and Events

In addition to programming geared towards academic courses, centers will often create programs and host events that are open to the broader campus community related to dialogue, civil discourse, and civic engagement. The Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities at Bard College, led by Academic Director Roger Berkowitz, has created and hosted many different events for the campus community. In addition to hosting conversations with public figures across the political spectrum, Roger and the Hannah Arendt Center developed what they called Plurality Forums where small groups of students with different political views are joined by experts who "model for them how to have a difficult conversation about difficult topics." As Roger explained, it is not "just about people disagreeing with each other but actually challenging their own perspectives and thinking about it." Out of this program grew the Plurality Labs, which aims to create these conversations at colleges and universities around the country, connecting more conservative and more liberal campuses. By developing programs for the whole campus, and even multiple campuses, centers like the Hannah Arendt Center can be very intentional about bringing together students with different positions on challenging topics.

Another model of campus-wide programming is the SNF Ithaca Initiative at the University of Delaware. Led by Tim Shaffer, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation (SNF) Chair of Civil Discourse and Director of SNF Ithaca, the initiative includes a Citizenship and Democracy Certificate open to all University of Delaware students; courses such as Citizens, Civility, and Change and Leadership for the Common Good; and the SNF Ithaca Student Leaders program, which involves a cohort of students who help organize the SNF Ithaca National Student Dialogue that brings students from across the country together to engage in productive dialogue. In addition to programs aimed specifically at students, SNF Ithaca hosts speakers and faculty fellows from other colleges and universities as well as convening a Leadership Summit for faculty and staff doing civil discourse work on their campuses. While initiatives like SNF Ithaca can reach a very large audience at many different levels, from cohorts to public lectures, they require a great deal of resources. As Tim pointed out, the "fiscal situation enables a lot." Yet this investment has made a big impact and demonstrates what can be accomplished with enough funding and organizational capacity. When asked why they do so many different things, Assistant Director Jane Case explained, "the truth of the matter is, there's a lot that needs to be done in order for us to move the lever toward where we want to be," and they can be a model for others of how to get there.

While many programs are open to the public, the hope is that students who participate in these events will be exposed to a center's programming and will want to participate in more specialized experiences. Ashley Horst from Shepherd University discussed this approach through a funnel metaphor. Once they have students attend a campus-wide event, they "take that opportunity to market our community leadership and civil advocacy certificate to those students...That's the big funnel then we can filter students down to, 'you know, we've seen this student several times, maybe they'd be interested in getting involved more with us.'" This approach is also part of the formal marketing strategy at the Gephardt Institute at Washington University in Saint Louis (WashU). After a student attends a general event, they will receive a follow-up email several days later sharing more ways to engage with the center.

Attracting students to campus-wide events is a challenge. First, the time of day makes a difference for who can attend. During the day, students are generally on campus and focused on their studies and extracurricular activities, making it an easier lift for them to attend an event around their coursework. In addition, for those students who leave classes to go to work, offering events during the day when students can fit it around their class schedules can maximize participation. Second, offering food at events is a major incentive for student participation. As Christina Foust at MSU Denver mentioned, making sure students

are well fed not only incentivizes participation, it also extends the purpose of these events beyond being part of the broader community, especially since college students are increasingly facing food insecurity.

And finally, campus-wide events can take a more participatory and dialogic approach. Leah Seppanen Anderson at the University of Pennsylvania explained how they aim to incorporate an "active dialogic component" in their guest speaker events and prioritize recurring gatherings or event series, which offer the possibility of building community and trust as a foundation for dialogue. Kevin Marinelli at UNC Chapel Hill arranges a political speed dating event. "Instead of sharing about yourself to make a romantic connection, you're sharing a hot take about your politics. And the question is, do I want to continue a conversation with this person afterwards? And students really enjoyed that, keeping it fresh and playing around with different models."

An approach that encourages participation from students when it is most convenient for them and serves as a draw for additional programming is the dialogue wall at Providence College. As Nick Longo, Co-Director of the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab at Providence College explained, the dialogue wall is an opportunity for the campus community to respond to challenging topics and to each other to "co-create knowledge and ultimately to solve problems." To overcome concerns about harmful anonymous comments, the wall was strategically placed outside Nick's office. And, as Nick explained, "students came up with a set of guidelines for how…to handle situations." The first question they posed on the dialogue wall was: what differentiates free speech from hate speech. He pointed out that a project like the dialogue wall works best when it is complimented with in-person dialogue or a public talk. The dialogue wall is one aspect of a broader culture change around civil dialogue. What's unique about the wall is that "it's a kind of reimagining of public space," he said, "when you walk around the campus, there's all these different spaces that can be opportunities to facilitate dialogue. So that's one, it's a social infrastructure that we're creating and it gives to a public, voice, or at least captures the attention of people who would never come to a dialogue."

Together, these strategies reflect a broader commitment to making dialogue-centered events both accessible and engaging - drawing students in through creative formats and inclusive outreach, and gradually connecting them to deeper, sustained opportunities for civil discourse. Campus-wide events serve as both an entry point and a bridge – introducing students and the community to the value of dialogue while inviting them into more intentional, ongoing engagement. By combining strategic outreach with inventive formats and practical incentives, centers effectively lower barriers to participation and foster a culture of curiosity and engagement. These efforts highlight the importance of meeting individuals where they are while offering clear pathways for deeper involvement in civil discourse initiatives.

Faculty Fellows

Some colleges and universities invest in faculty fellowship programs as a key strategy for embedding dialogue into the academic core. By equipping instructors across disciplines with the tools to facilitate civil discourse in their classrooms, these fellowships help shift campus culture from within the curriculum itself. At UCLA, faculty fellows play a central role in advancing campus-wide dialogue efforts by embedding dialogue across difference into the classroom. Through a partnership with the university's teaching and learning center, UCLA launched a faculty fellowship program that supports instructional innovation around dialogue. The current cohort includes 20 faculty members from 9 disciplines - including law, medicine, the arts, and writing - who are revising existing courses or designing new ones with the explicit goal of fostering dialogue across differences. Fellows meet regularly for skill building, goal setting, and peer learning sessions, and are tasked with producing learning artifacts that demonstrate how they are integrating dialogue principles into their teaching. These outcomes are intended to contribute to a collective resource bank for other instructors, creating

a ripple effect across the university. As the program scales – from less than 20 fellows this year to over 30 in the next – it reflects a strategic, layered approach to institutional change through faculty leadership and curricular innovation. This approach not only deepens faculty engagement but also ensures that the principles of dialogue are woven into students' everyday learning environments, reinforcing civility as a shared academic value.

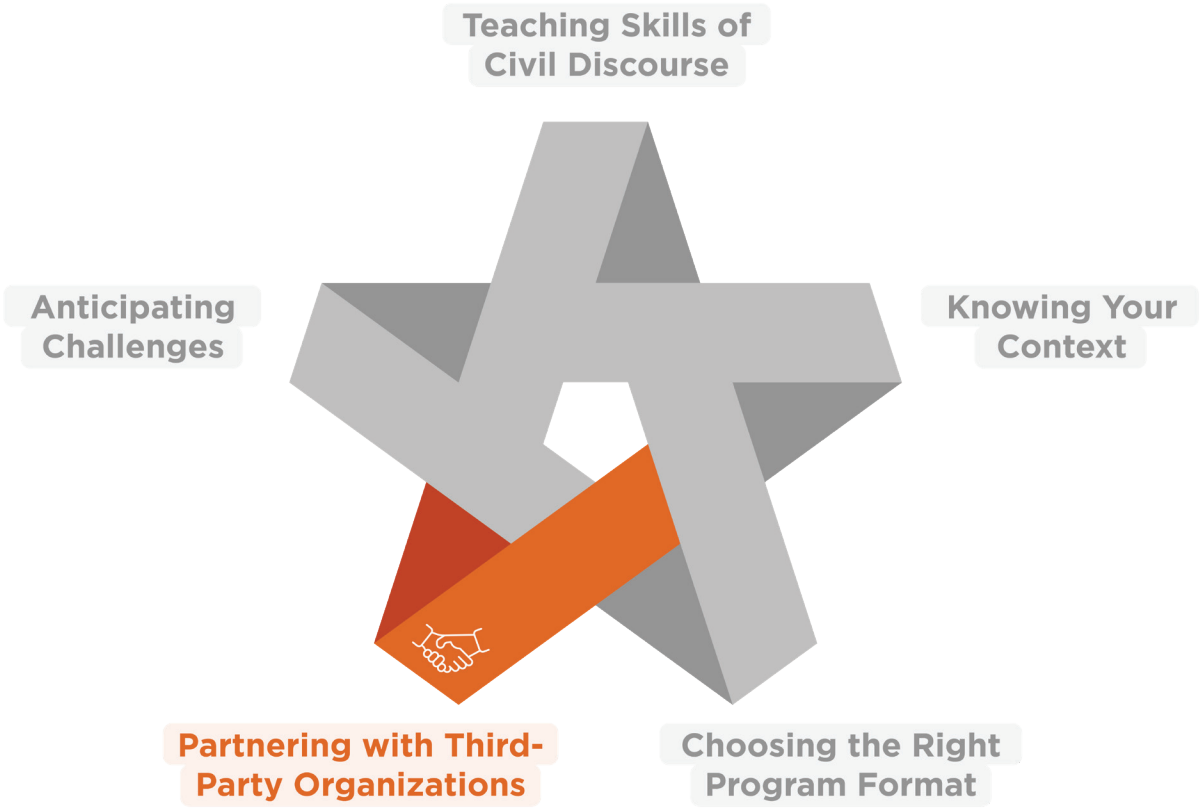
PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: DAVIDSON COLLEGE - AN ALL-OF-CAMPUS APPROACH

Davidson College's Deliberative Citizenship Initiative, led by Graham Bullock, is grounded in a deliberate effort to integrate dialogue and civility work across all campus constituencies – including students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members. Motivated by a national scan of over 100 similar programs, Bullock noted that most excelled at engaging one or two groups but lacked a holistic, intersecting model. Davidson's approach seeks to build connections across these silos, fostering conversations that wouldn't otherwise occur. This integrative philosophy is reflected in the initiative's diverse and reinforcing program structure, which offers multiple entry points for participation and learning.

At the student level, Davidson's yearlong Fellows Program provides intensive facilitation training and hands-on practice leading campus discussions. These fellows support additional offerings such as D Teams – small, semester-long discussion groups – and public deliberative forums that blend expert panels with community deliberation. The initiative also hosts an annual speaker series in collaboration with other campus programs and departments and leads a national Deliberative Pedagogy Collaborative, in which faculty from across institutions learn to embed dialogue into their coursework. This layered model not only broadens participation but also deepens institutional commitment to fostering a campus-wide culture of dialogue and civic engagement.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **Assess campus capacity to determine a scalable and layered format.**
- **Cohort models can support deep skill-building and community.**
- **Dialogue can be integrated into curriculum through course-based and/or embedded models.**
- **Campus-wide events may serve as an entry point to attract students and guide them into deeper engagement.**
- **A faculty fellows program can provide a pathway for embedding dialogue into instruction.**



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 contexts, external organizations can provide content expertise, infrastructure, legitimacy, and ongoing support.

The Advantages of Third-Party Organizations

One of the main advantages to partnering with third-party organizations is access to readymade, adaptable materials that ease the burden on campus staff and faculty. Third-party organization Living Room Conversations, for instance, offers more than 150 one-page self-facilitated discussion guides that make it easy for any student to engage in structured dialogue. When we asked Becca Kearl of Living Room Conversations why campuses should partner with third-party organizations, she explained that limited capacity on campus can make it feel like "one more thing" they have to do. She noted, "[it's not necessary] to develop something from scratch when something already exists, and we have so many different topics, so it's very likely that we already have something that would work." This was the case at Bard College where Roger Berkowitz, Academic Director of the Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities, adapted Living Room Conversations programming after the organization approached him. Similarly, Asma Rasheed, who started a BridgeUSA chapter at Stony Brook University, explained, "a lot of the times, if I didn't want to take the time to figure out questions on my own, I would just use discussions guide[s] that were already made."

In addition to offering readymade materials, third-party organizations can also train campus faculty and staff. Lee Keylock is the Senior Director of Programs at Narrative 4, a nonprofit organization that uses personal storytelling and facilitated story exchanges to build empathy and compassion, break down barriers, and foster connections across lines of difference. They run in-person and online training courses for interested parties where they first get to experience a story exchange and then are taught the practical logistics on how to facilitate a story exchange on their own. Christine Cusick, an English professor at Seton Hill University is a Narrative 4 master practitioner. She described the training as a "great opportunity to get more expertise and experience and facilitation methods." She has since worked to embed Narrative 4 story exchanges throughout all of Seton Hill's campus.

> *"[Narrative 4's] story exchanges, and having to place myself in someone else's story, have allowed me to value people's backgrounds and stories more and become interested in learning about people."*
>
> **STUDENT SURVEY RESPONSE.**

Third-party groups also offer customizable programs tailored to a particular campus context. Jake Fay from the Constructive Dialogue Institute described their adaptable "Perspectives" curriculum, which can be delivered online or in-person and is structured around building both mindset and skillset for constructive dialogue. "What we are trying to do," he shared, "is think about who are the stakeholders that we need to support." After evaluating the individual stakeholders' needs (be it leadership, faculty, or students), they offer an approach that works for that specific campus. At Essential Partners, they customize their approach by "focusing on identifying people who are already holding space for dialogue work in formal or informal ways and training them to hold those conversations in really intentional ways," according to Katie Hyten, Co-Executive Director.

Rhonda Fitzgerald from the Sustained Dialogue Institute says they determine a campus' needs based on a readiness pathway. They refrain from working with campuses that take a superficial approach to bridging, whereby they are trying to mollify or moderate a population. Once they have determined that a campus is ready to take on the deep work required to engage in meaningful dialogue, they are then offered an approach to help meet the campus where they are at and work towards a culture of civil dialogue. Similarly, Katie Hyten from Essential Partners shared how they say yes to campus partnerships when "values and methodologies are aligned." This approach allows institutions to embed principles of dialogue across layers of campus life that are intentional, sustainable, and practical.

Partnerships with external organizations can also drive cultural change at scale. Third-party organizations can help facilitate a broader shift that touches upon the entire campus community. They do so by identifying the right partners across the entire campus community that can influence, promote, and elevate these efforts. Laura Weaver from Campus Compact emphasized the importance of infrastructure: "How do we help create and shift that infrastructure for college campuses?" In this sense, the infrastructure consists of all the spaces that students may touch upon throughout campus, including courses, extracurriculars, and everything in between.

As external partners, it can be effective for third-party organizations to showcase evidence of how their work has been successfully implemented in other campus settings. This can lend legitimacy to their work and help convince campus administrators that conducting these programs with the support of a third-party organization is an effective strategy for their campus. For example, Becca Kearl from Living Room Conversations cited an 18-month study of their pro-

gramming conducted by the Fetzer Institute that shows both the long-term and short-term impacts of their programming. They show this research to campuses as evidence of the effectiveness of their programming when creating partnerships.

PROGRAM SPOTLIGHT: CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE INSTITUTE'S PERSPECTIVES PROGRAM AT OHIO WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

Jake Fay from CDI applauded the efforts of his research team for "constantly looking at how people are experiencing our trainings and our programming, and what we can do to better adapt to the communities that we want to be using our work." This approach appealed to President Matt vandenBerg of Ohio Wesleyan University who partnered with CDI to bring their Perspectives program to the campus. As he explained,

> *We really liked CDI because...they're the only evidence-based blended learning program focused on promoting constructive dialogue in colleges and universities like ours, and they were able to speak with gravitas and specific statistics about how they can increase intellectual humility and conflict resolution skills while decreasing what they call dichotomous thinking.*

Finally, many educators and students appreciate the sense of belonging to a broader movement. Some national networks offer convenings, peer learning, and emotional support. "It's not just you on your campus doing something amazing," said Becca Kearl. "It's you and you and you…these different points of light can help to give you more hope." This type of network is exemplified by the higher education network coordinated by Nancy Miranda for Braver Angels. This group of faculty, staff, and administrators meets quarterly to discuss discourse work on their campuses and share challenges and opportunities. They problem-solve together, share contacts and resources, and situate their campus efforts within a wider national landscape.

While third-party organizations can offer valuable resources, training, and legitimacy to campus civil discourse efforts, their involvement is not always essential – and their role should be evaluated in light of a campus' specific needs and internal capacity. For some institutions, particularly those lacking existing infrastructure, partnering with an external organization can accelerate growth and help ensure quality. Katy Brecht from UC San Diego emphasized that while they could have trained student facilitators internally, they would have lacked the coaching, structure, and depth provided by their external partner, the National Conflict Resolution Center. "I don't think we could have done it so quickly," she said. Even small things like post-event summaries or how they track metrics were all built out by NCRC. In addition to programming infrastructure, Laura Weaver from Campus Compact explained that external partners can also be powerful advocates: "there are things that an external organization...can say that someone at an institution cannot say." In this way, third-party groups can not only provide expertise but also validate and elevate a campus's internal efforts.

As civil discourse gains national attention, the number of external providers has grown, leading to concerns about oversaturation and misplaced funding priorities. Leslie Garvin of North Carolina Campus Engagement (NCCE) points out that long-standing organizations with deep local relationships are being overlooked in favor of newer entrants with better marketing or development teams. Some funders now prioritize template-driven approaches over grounded, long-term work that can provide flexible approaches based on knowledge of the context and history of that institution. In saturated markets, campus leaders must navigate a landscape where external partnerships can be helpful but also potentially duplicative or

disconnected from institutional history. Ultimately, whether to engage with a third-party organization should depend on a campus' goals, capacity, and the depth of partnership being offered – not simply the promise of a polished product.

In sum, third-party organizations offer campuses far more than just content; they bring structure, support, and momentum to civil discourse efforts. Their well-developed models, customizable tools, and national networks allow institutions to expand capacity while building credibility and buy-in across stakeholder groups. Partnerships with these organizations can play a crucial role in driving meaningful, sustainable culture change but should be viewed in relation to existing local efforts and how they can be additive rather than duplicative.

Implementation Outcomes

The implementation of third-party civil discourse programming varies significantly across campuses, shaped by student motivation, institutional infrastructure, and the degree of support offered by the partnering organization. BridgeUSA, for example, uses a level system to assess chapter maturity – from newly trained "Level 0" chapters to high-performing "Level 3" chapters – and adjusts support and funding accordingly. However, sustaining quality remains a challenge. Asma Rasheed, BridgeUSA's former Chapter Development Manager, noted that some chapters struggle because they "may not feel motivated if they see a lack of need for this type of work... [or they] will struggle to get people in through the door, and they might not be marketing right." Despite regular check-ins and a strong rapport between staff and students, she admitted, "We don't know exactly what's going on at these chapters." Her colleague Hailie Addison underscored the difficulty of maintaining consistent standards across a growing network: "quality over quantity is what we're looking for right now. And I think for a while it was quantity over quality." Yet, BridgeUSA also values giving students autonomy. As Asma, a former student chapter leader herself put it, "all we want is freedom and a little bit of control over the things we do."

Variation also exists in how closely chapters and programs work with campus leadership. Some student groups operate in close collaboration with administrators, while others function more independently. Hailie Addison shared that BridgeUSA encourages chapters to capitalize on institutional momentum. If they see leadership aligning themselves with civil discourse efforts, "We're immediately texting the chapters and connecting them with a BridgeUSA employee who focuses on supplying chapter leaders with the necessary support to connect with their administration."

The level of integration also differs when faculty are involved. For instance, Becca Kearl of Living Room Conversations noted that some instructors focus on discussion guides for classroom use, while others help build campus-wide, student-led programs. Similarly, at the Constructive Dialogue Institute, Jackie Li described a flexible implementation process tailored to campus goals whether through orientation, residence life, or student government. CDI provides high-touch support that includes launch planning, training, weekly progress emails, and an end-of-program analytics report. This adaptability allows institutions to implement programming that fits their structure and priorities while gradually working toward broader cultural saturation.

Other organizations like Omicron Delta Kappa (ODK) also face the challenge of sustaining varied engagement across their 256 active chapters. Of these, only about 50 are considered highly engaged, while a significant number fall into a mid-level or "troubled" category. These differences in implementation highlight a broader reality: third-party programming is not one-size-fits-all. Effectiveness often hinges on the local context, available leadership, and clarity of purpose. While third-party organizations can offer structure, resources, and accountability, their impact depends on how well campuses integrate them into existing ecosystems and how much attention is given to maintaining both quality and responsiveness as programs scale.

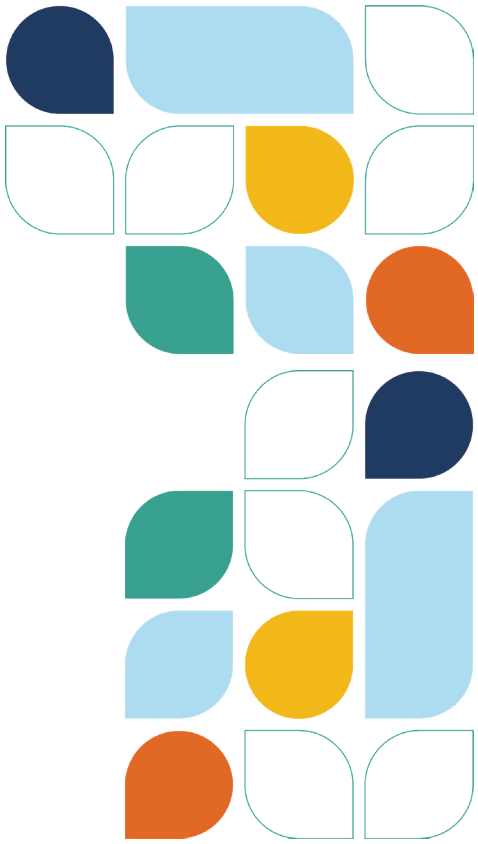
Connecting with Organizations

Third-party civil discourse organizations use a mix of organic, grassroots, and targeted strategies to connect with college campuses. Some rely heavily on digital outreach and student-driven interest. BridgeUSA, for example, actively grows its network through Instagram, sometimes creating school-specific accounts (e.g., "Bridge Berkeley") before a chapter even exists. "We'll follow a bunch of students that go to Berkeley and DM them asking if they are interested in starting a chapter," explained Hailie Addison, noting that this tactic often leads to conversations with interested students who then go through a brief application process. Similarly, Becca Kearl from Living Room Conversations noted that their visibility often stems from organic Google searches: "People will land on our doorstep that way." Viral social media posts, news coverage, and student curiosity often initiate these partnerships – showing that students are not just participants in civil discourse efforts but active recruiters and conveners as well.

Other organizations take a more institutionally focused approach, connecting with campuses through strategic outreach to faculty and administrators. Jackie Li from the Constructive Dialogue Institute described a dedicated partnerships team that builds institutional partnerships with campuses, while Jennifer Waller of Omicron Delta Kappa shared that her team attends national conferences like NASPA for student affairs professionals and directly contacts new college presidents who were former ODK members to invite them to bring an ODK chapter to their campus. For Narrative 4, growth was very organic and word-of-mouth, with one department sharing with another. But with the proven success of their programming, they are now engaging more intentionally at the whole-school and district level, partnering directly with administrators, superintendents, and entire school systems to embed their work more broadly and sustainably. Whether student-driven, admin-initiated, or passed through faculty networks, these varied outreach strategies reflect how third-party programs must meet campuses where they are culturally, structurally, and interpersonally.

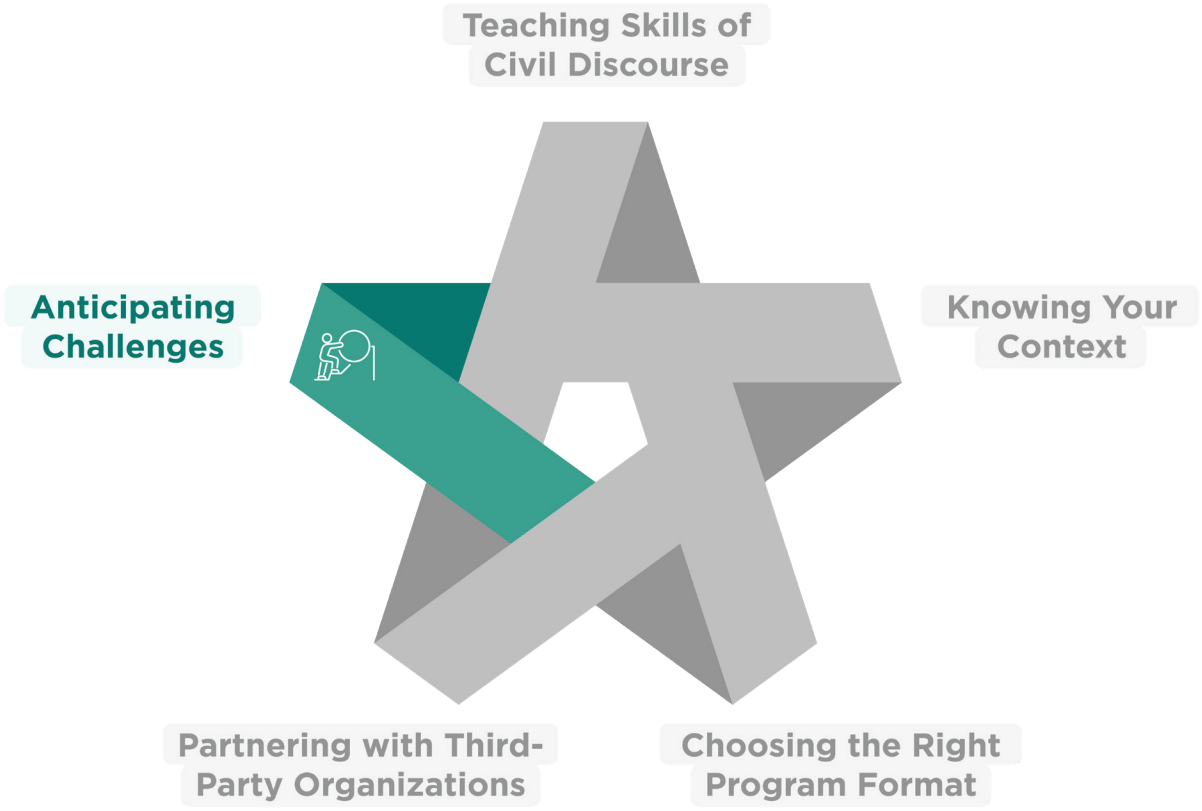
Funding Models

Funding models for third-party civil discourse organizations vary widely, reflecting the different structures and scopes of their work. Some organizations, like BridgeUSA, operate primarily on external fundraising, relying on grants, individual donations, speaker fees, and foundation support. Others, like the Constructive Dialogue Institute, use a blended model that includes both institutional fees and philanthropic support. Jackie Li noted that CDI charges a sliding scale fee to campuses based on student enrollment and offers subsidized programming – supported by philanthropy – to campuses with financial needs. Meanwhile, Campus Compact operates on a membership dues structure, where institutions pay to join and gain access to a suite of benefits for all campus affiliates. These different financial models shape how organizations scale their offerings, structure partnerships, and tailor support for the campuses they serve.



KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- Third-party organizations can provide ready-made discussion guides, facilitation tools, and expert training.
- Determine whether a third-party partnership adds value, paying attention to partners who bring unique expertise.
- Clear goals and accountability mechanisms support effective collaboration with external partners, and implementation often benefits from being tailored to the local context.
- A mix of outreach strategies may be useful for identifying and building relationships with third-party organizations that align with campus culture and priorities.
- Understanding the funding structures of potential partners, along with identifying a campus liaison, can help coordinate communications, budgeting, and implementation logistics.



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

Despite a growing national interest in fostering dialogue and civil discourse on college campuses, many programs continue to grapple with how to measure success in a meaningful way. While some initiatives use pre- and post-surveys to track shifts in student attitudes, comfort levels, or perceptions of polarization, even these tools have limitations. As Alice Siu explained, "people don't have to change their opinion in order to have had a civil discussion." For her, the most significant outcomes – like being moved by someone's story or wanting to continue engaging – are intangible and deeply personal, yet difficult to quantify. This tension between what is measurable and what matters remains a central challenge for the field.

In many cases, program impact is identified through anecdotal evidence, student stories, or long-term reflections. Paula Lustbader at Seattle University shared an example of a student whose law school application centered on the listening and dialogue skills he gained in her program, while Christine Cusick from Seton Hill University recalled a former student who unexpectedly attributed her decision to work in under-resourced women's health to a first-year dialogue exchange. Recalling a letter he received from a former student, Tim Shaffer from the University of Delaware asked, "how do we help these students at

whatever point in the future…say, 'you remember that class three years ago…the things we talked about, the work that we were doing, like, that's showing up for me in real ways." These kinds of testimonials, while powerful, emerge months or even years after a program ends, making it difficult to systematically track or compare outcomes. As Cassandra Veney from Howard University noted, sometimes success is about "planting a seed" that only becomes visible long after students leave the classroom or program.

At the same time, many educators and program directors express a strong desire to move toward more rigorous and scalable assessment models. Dareen Basma at Carnegie Mellon University, for instance, voiced her interest in creating tools that measure student skill development over time, but acknowledged the complexity of doing so accurately; students may report feeling confident in their abilities yet hesitate to speak during actual dialogues. This disconnect between self-perception and observed behavior complicates efforts to document program effectiveness, particularly in ways that might satisfy institutional funders or demonstrate replicable models to other campuses.

In response to these challenges, some organizations are beginning to develop more systematic and iterative evaluation strategies. Groups like BridgeUSA and Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) now administer standardized surveys across events or campuses to gauge changes in polarization, listening skills, or hopefulness. For instance, CDI integrates evaluation findings into program redesigns each year. Some programs – like the North Carolina Student Dialogue Ambassadors program run by North Carolina Campus Engagement – also find the Social Cohesion Impact Measurement (SCIM) tool an effective approach for providing an evidence base to their programming. Still, as Kevin Marinelli from UNC Chapel Hill emphasized, anecdotal feedback remains central: "when I hear students talk about stasis, that brings a joy to me… that's a sign of success." Ultimately, civil discourse programs operate in a space where personal transformation and intellectual growth are deeply valued but not easily captured by metrics alone.

Getting Students to Participate

One of the most persistent challenges for campus civil discourse programs is simply getting students to show up. As Ashley Horst put it, her greatest challenge is "competing for attention... [students] have classes, they have jobs...there's sororities, fraternities, [and] other opportunities to participate on campus." Others echoed similar concerns. Cassandra Veney described the difficulty of trying to attract students on a busy, urban campus where "you're competing for this pool of students who have 1001 things to do." Even when events are well-planned, Alice Siu from Stanford University says, "we can't force people to actually show up," especially when programs must compete with academic responsibilities and extracurriculars. These time constraints limit not only student interest but also their ability to participate, no matter how well-designed or meaningful the event may be.

Compounding these logistical challenges is the fact that many students do not readily seek out spaces for dialogue. As Jason Schreiber at California State University San Marcos observed, students often "steer away" from anything involving conflict or structured communication unless it's required. Others pointed out generational dynamics and digital saturation as additional barriers. Alannah Glickman from WashU noted the difficulty of cutting through the noise of online life, where students consume information rapidly and may resist guidance about how to process it. Ashley McGuire with the National Conflict Resolution Center echoed this tension, saying students are hungry for deeper connection but often find it difficult to initiate it themselves. Even students who might be interested face pressure to prioritize other concerns. This is especially the case for international students, who, as Dareen Basma at Carnegie Mellon University explained, are often focused on securing jobs to repay substantial loans and may not see dialogue programming as directly beneficial to that goal.

To overcome these barriers, many programs rely on creative incentives and scheduling strategies. Several interviewees emphasized the role of food. Food is not just a fun perk; it can also be a critical support for food-insecure students. Christina Foust highlighted that at Metropolitan State University Denver, "it's not just [about] fun and community, even though it is, it's also that students at this institution are food insecure." Others focus on convenience and exclusivity, choosing times like Friday at lunch, hosting events at desirable campus spaces like the faculty dining club, and letting students help select controversial, relevant topics to boost interest. Programs like Asma Rasheed's BridgeUSA chapter at Stony Brook incorporated hands-on activities to entice participation, such as having students build bridges out of popsicle sticks while discussing polarization, demonstrating that creativity and play can be powerful tools for engagement.

Another strategy for encouraging student participation is by using online tools like Sway and Cortico as scaffolding. These tools not only provide students with opportunities to engage with those who have opposing viewpoints, but they also offer suggestions and guides for how to construct their arguments in respectful and constructive formats.

Finally, even when events are well attended, many programs struggle to attract students from across different academic disciplines. As Amanda Clark of UT Dallas and Cassandra Veney from Howard University explained, housing a program within a specific department or division (e.g., Economics or Humanities) can inadvertently limit its reach. Students may perceive these initiatives as only relevant to certain majors, reinforcing disciplinary silos. To address this, leaders like Haley Winston at University of Central Florida are increasingly turning to faculty as partners. By embedding civil discourse content into a range of courses or distributing asynchronous modules, faculty can act as conduits, normalizing dialogue skills across the curriculum. Still, even with these efforts, many programs acknowledge that participation remains uneven, and outreach must be constant, adaptive, and responsive to student realities.

Obtaining Campus Buy-In

Securing leadership support and broader institutional buy-in for civil discourse programming is a significant barrier to long-term sustainability. Many program leaders find themselves facing a paradox: even when they have strong student engagement and positive outcomes, that isn't always enough to persuade decision makers to invest. Christina Foust at MSU Denver, for instance, gathered compelling data showing how her programs improved students' essential skills and sense of belonging, yet institutional funding is sporadic. As she put it, "those numbers are good… it is mind boggling to me why we're not getting more money." Similarly, Haley Winston at UCF expressed pessimism about her program's future following administrative turnover, noting that new leadership viewed it as too niche to warrant continued support, despite serving hundreds of students.

Part of the difficulty lies in misaligned institutional priorities. Several interviewees described the uphill battle of convincing leadership that this work takes time, intentionality, and trust. These programs do not transform individuals through one-off sessions. Christine Cusick at Seton Hill pointed out that administrators often want civil discourse programming to happen "in an hour" when, in reality, it requires preparation, follow-up, and a commitment to process over speed. In some cases, when programs are not even in existence yet, it also takes time to convince leadership of the importance of this programming. Noreen Lape from Dickinson College notes, "institutions aren't designed to change on a dime. It takes a lot of hard work and a lot of running into walls and saying, 'Hey, let's try that again.' But I think the work that we're doing is actually slowly dismantling some of those institutional structures that might be averse to this type of work." Looking at this process from a long-term perspective can help when advocating to leadership, even if the buy-in and implementation takes longer than originally planned.

Danika Brown at Rice raised a related concern. Institutions may support programming only insofar as it produces visible outcomes, like prestigious fellowships, while overlooking the deep developmental value of the process itself. This focus on metrics can distort the purpose of civil discourse efforts and discourage risk taking. Even when program leaders are ready to manage difficult dialogue, institutional hesitancy around the politicized nature of this work can make it challenging to do the difficult and deep work necessary for transformative change.

Challenges also arise at the faculty level. Alice Siu at Stanford described the difficulty of trying to partner with faculty across campuses. She would email professors suggesting they offer extra credit opportunities for students who participate in the Deliberative Democracy Lab's programming but would get few replies. Christina Foust from MSU Denver pointed to the fact that modern universities are promoting more of an entrepreneurial spirit, which can mean "that people don't work together." There is, however, room for hope. Graham Bullock from Davidson noted a surprising breadth of faculty interest across disciplines, suggesting a latent demand for these skills. Still, without sustained support from the top and across campus, these programs will continue to experience challenges in securing footholds across campus.

Securing Appropriate Staffing

Staffing for civil discourse programs poses an ongoing challenge across campuses, particularly when the work is underfunded and/or added onto already full workloads. Many program directors, like Alannah Glickman at WashU, described the strain of juggling long-term strategic planning, program management, and student-facing support, creating a workload that few teams are staffed to manage. Leah Seppanen Anderson at the University of Pennsylvania acknowledged that while they are fortunate to have funding, they receive more requests for partnership and support than their staff can fulfill. At Shepherd University, where staffing is also minimal, Ashley Horst relies heavily on an advisory board to extend the reach of the program and access expertise. Without adequate staffing, it can be challenging for programs to think broadly about scope, sustainability, and depth of programming.

In some cases, programs survive only because of individual dedication and creative restructuring. Jason Schreiber at Cal State San Marcos described how, when he changed roles at the university, he kept the program alive by continuing it under his new department's umbrella, creating an informal workaround that highlights how dependent these programs are on champions willing to sustain these programs. Carl Luna, Professor Emeritus at the University of San Diego, is asking himself, "How do I pass the baton to somebody else now to really continue this work?" These programs are often the passion projects of staff or faculty members, and when that individual retires or switches institutions, the chasm can become too great to fill.

When institutions do make intentional investments, the difference is stark. Danika Brown at Rice felt fortunate to have a well-staffed center and could see her programming scaling up in the future. She expanded, "if that kind of investment is made by a university to create a strong center that's doing really focused work with a really clear set of resources and principles and mission, it's just an amazing foundation for that work to be expanded." Chris Anderson at Wabash similarly benefits from a resource-rich environment that enables him to compensate student leaders, provide professional materials, and foster a strong sense of identity and pride in the work. But for most campuses, the reality looks more like Alice Siu's operation at Stanford, where they must piece together grant funding and rely on student assistants, never being entirely sure the program will survive the next academic cycle. Without long-term staffing plans and institutional recognition that this work requires both expertise and protected time, many programs remain fragile, improvised, and overly dependent on the goodwill of a few individuals.

Financing Programs

Financial instability is a persistent and deeply felt challenge for civil discourse programs across institutions. Program directors like Alice Siu at Stanford summed it up when asked about her main challenge: "my mind is running to money." Carl Luna at USD shared how his program has always operated on a shoestring budget, relying on in-kind support to stay afloat. Cassandra Veney at Howard described the need to co-sponsor events with other departments to manage costs, while Jake Fay of the Constructive Dialogue Institute voiced a desire for philanthropic partners to stake out larger investments for longer projects; this would allow programs to develop with stability and intention, rather than being stuck in cycles of short-term grants and reactive planning.

Even well-regarded or popular programs face financial limitations that constrain their potential. Graham Bullock at Davidson noted that while initial grants from foundations enabled fellow stipends and staffing, the real struggle lies in sustaining and institutionalizing the work over the long term. Without consistent financial support – whether through campus investment or external partners – many programs are unable to expand, deepen, or guarantee their future, no matter how compelling their outcomes or student demand.

Political Context

Civil discourse programming exists within an increasingly politicized landscape, where even the intent to foster respectful dialogue is often met with skepticism. Across institutions, the people we interviewed report that the very concept of "civility" can signal partisanship depending on the audience. It can make it challenging to pick topics. Graham Bullock from Davidson says the DCI tries to pick topics that are interesting enough "but you also don't necessarily want them to be too ripe...how do you frame the event so that everybody feels like they're welcome and that their side is represented." As Kevin Marinelli at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill shared, programs can even be branded as "Trojan horses" for a particular ideology, regardless of their actual content or intent. This politicization complicates efforts to build broad-based participation across the political spectrum and contributes to challenges in recruiting facilitators or participants who fear reputational risk. In such a fraught climate, civil discourse is no longer a neutral aim; it is seen by some as inherently ideological, which can stifle dialogue before it even begins.

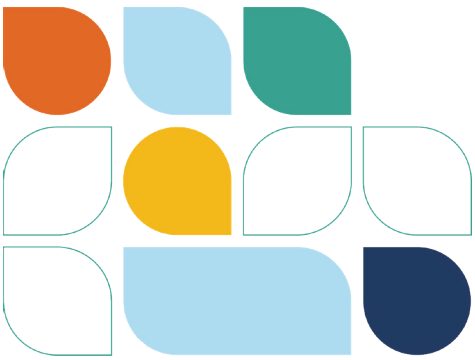
The broader political context also exerts significant pressure on how programs operate, frame their content, and are perceived by stakeholders. In states like Florida, for example, legislation and public transparency requirements have shaped how civil discourse efforts are implemented. Haley Winston at the University of Central Florida described the need to be especially mindful of language, emphasizing that their events aim not to change anyone's opinions but to improve understanding across perspectives. Similarly, Lee Keylock of Narrative 4 explained how in politically sensitive regions, terms like "diversity" or "empathy" are avoided in favor of less politically loaded language like "character development" or "leadership skills." These shifts reflect a strategic adaptation to local contexts but also highlight the limits placed on open engagement in politically polarized environments. When discourse is shaped not only by who's speaking but by where and how they say it, the work becomes as much about navigating perception as it is about fostering dialogue.

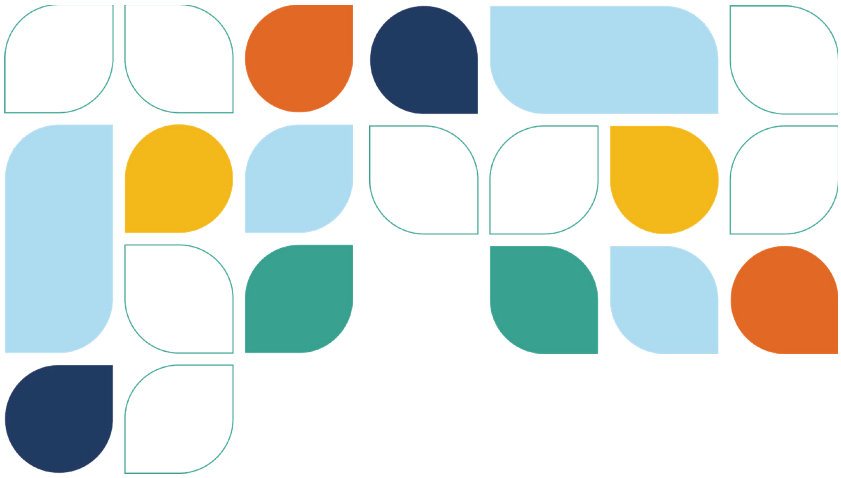
Terminology itself has become a flashpoint. Words like "civility," "norms," or even "dialogue" carry layered connotations that vary across communities. Jason Schreiber from Cal State San Marcos noted how the term "civility" drew criticism from students and faculty, who felt it was used to police tone or suppress difficult questions. Others, like Leila Brammer from the University of Chicago, avoid the term entirely, noting its historical use to silence marginalized voices. Leah Seppanen Anderson from the University of Pennsylvania reported that students don't seem to resonate with the term civility, associating it with behavioral expectations rather than authentic exchange. Instead, programs often adopt alternative language, emphasizing "productive discourse" or "intentional conversation" to reduce resistance and broaden appeal. Still, even these re-framings

do not fully insulate programs from criticism. As Ashley Biser from Ohio Wesleyan University observed, even concepts like "norms" can be interpreted as reinforcing existing power structures. In such a politicized context, program leaders must not only facilitate meaningful conversations, but also constantly renegotiate the language that makes those conversations possible.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

- **There is growing interest in developing assessments of civil discourse programs but measuring success is complex.**
- **Student participation is difficult to establish and sustain because of competing demands on students' time and students avoiding spaces involving potential conflict.**
- **Institutional buy-in remains uneven even when programs demonstrate strong student outcomes.**
- **Many programs rely on a small number of passionate individuals juggling multiple roles, making them vulnerable to turnover.**
- **Most programs operate with limited or unstable financial support, threatening longevity and sustainability.**
- **Civil discourse work is increasingly politicized, with terminology and program intent often misinterpreted through partisan lenses.**





Conclusion

In a moment marked by deep political polarization and eroding trust in institutions, colleges and universities have a unique opportunity and responsibility to cultivate civil discourse as a cornerstone of democratic life. This report has showcased a wide array of campus-based programs that aim to do just that, helping students build habits of listening, reflection, and meaningful exchange. Whether through cohorts, classroom-based dialogues, one-time events, or a unique combination of other programs, these efforts collectively affirm a powerful premise: that students are not only capable of engaging across difference, but they are also ready for it.

Yet the path forward is not without challenges. From securing institutional buy-in to navigating politicized climates and measuring intangible outcomes, program leaders operate in a complex and often under-resourced landscape. And as many interviewees highlighted, student engagement remains elusive amid crowded schedules, financial pressures, and fears of conflict. Still, the creativity and commitment of program leaders offer a blueprint for what is possible. Whether it's offering food to address both logistical and equity concerns, embedding dialogue into coursework, or rethinking terminology to meet students where they are, campuses are adapting in ways that make this work more accessible and inclusive.

Leaders in civil discourse programming emphasize the importance of action over perfection. Colene Lind from Kansas State University reminds us that "it doesn't have to be perfect to be making a difference," while Matt vandenBerg from Ohio Wesleyan University underscores the value of an entrepreneurial mindset: launching a "minimum viable product" early to learn and adapt, rather than waiting for ideal conditions. This approach encourages programs to embrace uncertainty and iterate rapidly in response to changing contexts.

Despite the structural and political headwinds, the enduring value of civil discourse programs lies in their potential to plant seeds that blossom over time. Stories shared by program directors - from students reshaping career paths to citing dialogue experiences in law school essays - demonstrate that the impact of this work often reveals itself months or even years after the fact. The bravery of showing up, listening without rehearsing a rebuttal, and holding complexity is what civil discourse nurtures, even when it's messy, slow, or invisible to funders and administrators.

This guide is not just a catalog of current practices; it is a call to sustain and scale a growing movement. Civil discourse work does not promise easy consensus or universal comfort. But it does offer students and the institutions that serve them a vital toolkit for navigating a pluralistic world with empathy, rigor, and humility. The question now is not whether these programs matter, but whether we will commit to supporting them for the long haul. If we do, the next generation of graduates may leave higher education not only with sharper minds, but with fuller hearts and a renewed capacity to build bridges in a fractured world.

Appendix A. Civil Discourse Programs at U.S. Colleges and Universities

College/University	Program	
Bard College	Hannah Arendt Center for Politics and Humanities	https://hac.bard.edu/
Baylor University	Public Deliberation Initiative	https://multicultural.web.baylor.edu/pdi
Cal State University San Marcos	Civility Campaign	https://www.csusm.edu/civility/index.html
Carnegie Mellon University	Deliberative Discourse Initiative	https://www.heinz.cmu.edu/student-experience-engagement/deliberative-discourse
Colorado State University	Deliberative Discourse Initiative	https://cpd.colostate.edu/
Dartmouth College	Dialogue Project	https://dialogues.dartmouth.edu/
Davidson College	Deliberative Citizenship Initiative	https://deliberativecitizenship.org/
Delaware State University	Hornet Leadership Academy	https://www.desu.edu/academics/academic-affairs/urelah-program/hornet-leadership-academy
Dickinson College	Dialogues Across Differences	https://www.dickinson.edu/homepage/1639/dialogues_across_differences
Duke University	Civil Discourse Project	https://civildiscourse.duke.edu/
George Washington University	Honey W. Nashman Center for Civic Engagement and Public Service	https://serve.gwu.edu/
Gustavus Adolphus College	Public Deliberation & Dialogue	https://gustavus.edu/academics/departments/communication-studies/public-deliberation-dialogue
Hiram College	Civility Leadership Institute	https://www.hiram.edu/academics/centers-of-distinction/the-garfield-center-for-public-leadership/civility-leadership-institute/
Howard University	Center for Women, Gender and Global Leadership	https://cwggl.howard.edu/
Johns Hopkins University	SNF Agora Institute	https://snfagora.jhu.edu/
Kansas State University	Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy	https://www.k-state.edu/media-communication/about/icdd/
Morgan State University	Morgan EVOLVE	https://www.morgan.edu/evolve
MSU Denver	Dialogues Program	https://www.msudenver.edu/dean-of-students/student-conflict-resolution-services/dialogues-program/
Ohio Wesleyan University	Arneson Institute for Practical Politics and Public Affairs	https://www.owu.edu/academics/departments-programs/department-of-politics-government/arneson-institute/
Princeton University	Tigers Leading Tigers	https://lead.princeton.edu/

Providence College	Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Lab	https://institutional-diversity.providence.edu/did/
Rice University	Center for Civic Leadership	https://ccl.rice.edu/
Seattle University	Alfie Scholars Program	https://www.alfiescholars.org/
Seton Hill University	Narrative 4	N/A
Shepherd University	Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications	https://stubblefieldinstitute.org/
Spelman College	Social Justice Fellows Program	https://www.spelman.edu/academics/special-academic-programs-and-offerings/social-justice-fellows-program/index.html
Stanford University	Deliberative Democracy Lab	https://deliberation.stanford.edu/
Stetson University	Bonner Program	https://www.stetson.edu/other/academics/non-degree/bonner-program.php
UC Berkeley	Center on Civility & Democratic Engagement	https://gspp.berkeley.edu/research-and-impact/centers/ccde
UC Berkeley	Greater Good Science Center – Bridging Differences Program	https://ggsc.berkeley.edu/what_we_do/major_initiatives/bridging_differences
UC San Diego	UCSD Dialogues Program	N/A
UCLA	Dialogue Across Difference Initiative	https://evcp.ucla.edu/priorities/dialogue-across-difference/
UNC Chapel Hill	Program for Public Discourse	https://publicdiscourse.unc.edu/
University of Alabama	Crossroads Civic Engagement Center	https://crossroads.ua.edu/
University of Central Florida	Ginsburg Center for Inclusion and Community Engagement	https://sja.sswb.ucf.edu/
University of Chicago	Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse	https://parrhesia.uchicago.edu/
University of Delaware	SNF Ithaca Initiative	https://www.udel.edu/academics/colleges/biden-school/research-public-service/snf-ithaca/
University of New Hampshire	Civil Discourse Lab	https://cola.unh.edu/communication/opportunities/civil-discourse-lab
University of Pennsylvania	SNF Paideia	https://snfpaideia.upenn.edu/
University of San Diego	Institute for Civil Civic Engagement	https://www.sandiego.edu/institute-for-civil-civic-engagement/
UT Dallas	Initiative for Civic Leadership	https://epps.utdallas.edu/initiativeforcivicleadership/
Wabash College	Democracy and Public Discourse	https://www.wabash.edu/wabashx/democracy/
Washington University in Saint Louis	Gephardt Institute for Civic and Community Engagement	https://gephardtinstitute.wustl.edu/

Third-Party Organizations	
Arthur Vining Davis Foundations	https://www.avdf.org/
Braver Angels	https://braverangels.org/braver-education/
BridgeUSA	https://bridgeusa.org/
Campus Compact	https://compact.org/
Citizen Discourse	https://citizendiscourse.org/
Constructive Dialogue Institute	https://constructivedialogue.org/
Essential Partners	https://whatisessential.org/
Interfaith America	https://www.interfaithamerica.org/
LEAD California	https://leadcalifornia.org/
Living Room Conversations	https://livingroomconversations.org/
Narrative 4	https://narrative4.com/
Omicron Delta Kappa	https://odk.org/
Sustained Dialogue Institute	https://sustaineddialogue.org/
National Conflict Resolution Center	https://ncrconline.com/
North Carolina Campus Engagement	https://nccampusengagement.org/

Appendix B. Summary of Key Takeaways

In our interviews with university staff and faculty and third-party organizations, we heard many approaches and strategies for structuring civil discourse programming and categorized them into five sections. Here, we compile these key takeaways from each section into a shorthand guide.

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse

- Clear student learning goals can help programming reflect a holistic skill development framework.
- Ongoing reflection activities built into programs can help students develop self-awareness, clarify values, and cultivate empathy and humility.
- Direct instruction and repeated practice in key interpersonal skills, in addition to creating space for students to reflect on their communication habits and receive targeted feedback, can strengthen students' growth.
- Programs that simulate professional contexts may provide students with experiences and skills that transfer across career paths.
- Opportunities to apply dialogue and facilitation skills in community-based settings can emphasize asset-based engagement and critical reflection on positionality, complexity, and power dynamics.
- Leadership development can be scaffolded by giving students increasing levels of responsibility, helping them identify their leadership style, and offering visible role models and advocacy opportunities to build capacity for inclusive, collaborative leadership.

Knowing Your Context

- Visible and sustained support from campus leadership often develops when civil discourse initiatives are aligned with institutional goals, when leaders are invited into public-facing events, and when long-term relationships are built to legitimize and scale programming.
- Program placement – whether in an academic unit, a central office, or a standalone center – can be shaped by campus culture and goals. Balancing visibility, reach, and autonomy can maximize student engagement and program impact.
- Staffing models that pair a dedicated staff member with a faculty champion can help co-lead civil discourse programs, ensuring the work is embedded in existing roles and sustained through shared responsibility.
- Programs often gain broader reach when marketed to students across disciplines and professional pathways, with student leaders playing a valuable role in extending visibility and engagement.
- Campus partnerships can expand the reach of your program, help to reach a diverse audience, and can be the foundation of mutually beneficial partnerships.

Choosing the Right Program Format

- Assess campus capacity to determine a scalable and layered format.
- Cohort models support deep skill-building and community.
- Dialogue can be integrated into curriculum through course-based and/or embedded models.
- Campus-wide events may serve as an entry point to attract students and guide them into deeper engagement.
- A faculty fellows program can provide a pathway for embedding dialogue into instruction.

Partnering with Third-Party Organizations

- Third-party organizations can provide ready-made discussion guides, facilitation tools, and expert training.
- It is helpful to assess your campus' internal capacity and goals to determine whether a third-party partnership adds value, paying attention to partners who bring unique expertise.
- Clear goals and accountability mechanisms support effective collaboration with external partners and implementation often benefits from being tailored to the to local context.
- A mix of outreach strategies may be useful for identifying and building relationships with third-party organizations that align with campus culture and priorities.
- Understanding the funding structures of potential partners, along with identifying a campus liaison, can help coordinate communications, budgeting, and implementation logistics.

Anticipating Challenges

- There is growing interest in developing assessments of civil discourse programs but measuring success is complex.
- Student participation is difficult to establish and sustain because of competing demands on students' time and students avoiding spaces involving potential conflict.
- Institutional buy-in remains uneven even when programs demonstrate strong student outcomes.
- Many programs rely on a small number of passionate individuals juggling multiple roles, making them vulnerable to turnover.
- Most programs operate with limited or unstable financial support, threatening longevity and sustainability.
- Civil discourse work is increasingly politicized, with terminology and program intent often misinterpreted through partisan lenses.

Appendix C. Building Next-Gen Leaders: Empowering Students to Navigate a Divided World

On October 20, 2025, the Applied Research Center for Civility (ARCC) - a collaboration between the National Conflict Resolution Center (NCRC) and the University of California San Diego (UCSD) - hosted a welcome cocktail hour and a full-day convening in San Diego, California focused on building and strengthening college civil discourse initiatives nationwide. With generous support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations and LEAD California, the event gathered 160 participants from across the country for rich discussions on effective strategies, persistent challenges, and opportunities for partnership in preparing the next generation of leaders in dialogue, discourse, deliberation, and facilitation. Representatives from 26 states and 68 campuses took part in the convening.

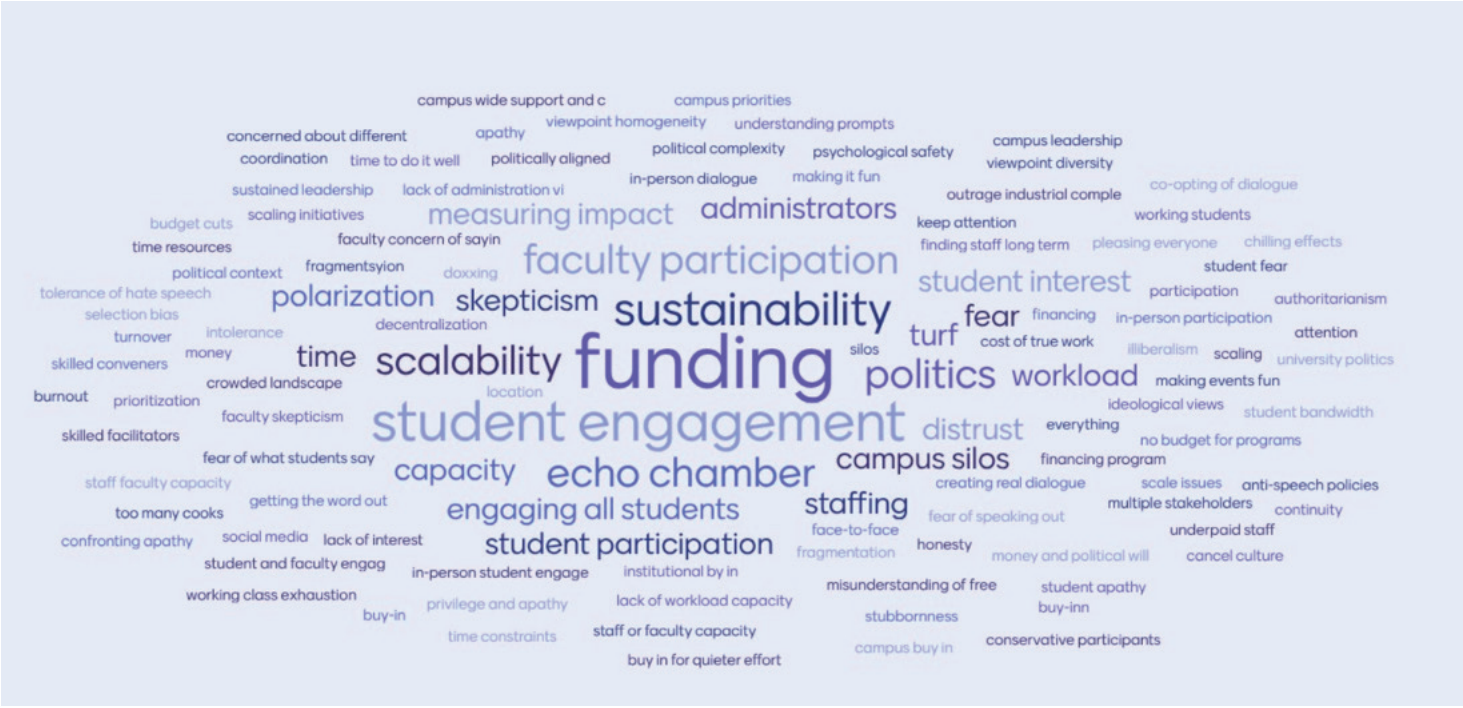
Conference Structure

The conference opened with a cocktail hour for individuals to network and meet one another. Dr. Timothy J. Shaffer, SNF Ithaca Initiative Director at the Biden School at the University of Delaware offered framing remarks. At the opening of the daylong convening, welcome remarks were delivered by Dr. Elizabeth H. Simmons, Executive Vice Chancellor at UC San Diego and Steven P. Dinkin, President of the National Conflict Resolution Center. Dr. Jennifer L. Mnookin, Chancellor of the University of Wisconsin, delivered the morning's keynote address. Dr. Becky Petitt, Vice Chancellor for Organizational Transformation at UC San Diego emceed the day's events.

IMPACT PAPER

Following the morning remarks, Karina Shklyan, Senior Research Analyst at the UC San Diego Center for Research and Evaluation presented this impact paper. The impact paper presentation covered the main topics discussed in this report and was accompanied by audience polls. The first audience poll asked participants which of the campus models presented would work best in their campus context. A total of 88 conference attendees responded to this poll, with 41 individuals saying they would like to see all the models on their campus. 21 individuals replied saying they prefer cohort models, with 15 expressing their preference for course-based models. Only a few individuals expressed preferences for embedded courses, campus-wide events, and faculty fellows (11 total).

In the second poll, attendees were asked to write in the biggest challenges of doing dialogue and discourse work on a college campus. In the word cloud (see below), the top replies included funding, student engagement, and sustainability.



The impact paper presentation was followed by a discussion with Amy Binder, SNF-Agora Professor of Sociology at Johns Hopkins University; Kelly Nielsen, Director of the UC San Diego Center for Research and Evaluation; and Karina Shklyan, Senior Research Analyst at the UC San Diego Center for Research and Evaluation. The discussion focused on the meaning of dialogue and civility, why college campuses are aptly positioned for this work, how to recruit students, and political tensions surrounding this work.

PANELS AND BREAKOUT SESSIONS

There were three speaker panels throughout the day that gave conference attendees insights into diverse program structures, third-party partnerships, and regional collaboration.

Panel 1: Campus Models for Next-Gen Leadership in a Divided Age. This panel featured campus representatives who discussed their individual approaches to teaching civil discourse on their campuses. This session focused on four types of programs: cohorts, course-based models, micro-credentials, and whole campus approaches. This panel was preceded by a presentation by Maia Ferdman at UCLA about recent efforts at UCLA to create an online repository of civil discourse initiatives (e.g., courses, events, programs) taking place across campus.

- Maia Ferdman, Dialogue Across Difference Initiative at UCLA (Moderator)
- Martín Carcasson, Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University
- Paula Lustbader, Civil Center for Law at Seattle University
- Ashley Horst, Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications at Shepherd University
- Leila Brammer, Forum for Free Inquiry and Expression at University of Chicago

Panel 2: Campus to Community – Third-Party Organizations. This session featured representatives from third-party organizations who discussed their unique approaches, how they connect and partner with campuses, and the benefits of engaging an external partner in civil discourse programming.

- Matt vandenBerg, Ohio Wesleyan University (Moderator)
- Rhonda Fitzgerald, Sustained Dialogue Institute
- Jake Fay, Constructive Dialogue Institute
- Leah Flack, Narrative 4
- Andrew Weinzierl, BridgeUSA

Panel 3: Collaborative Regional Approaches. This session highlighted perspectives from North Carolina and their regional approach to dialogue work and its many benefits, including cross-promoting events, including a more diverse student body, covering a wider range of issues, and exposing students to issues in their broader communities.

- Carl Luna, Institute for Civil Civic Engagement at the University of San Diego (Moderator)
- Leslie Garvin, North Carolina Campus Engagement
- Graham Bullock, Deliberative Citizenship Initiative at Davidson College
- Kevin Marinelli, Program for Public Discourse at UNC Chapel Hill
- Donovan Bethea, Office of Leadership & Civic Engagement at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University

Following the panels, conference attendees attended one of five interactive breakout sessions:

- **Narrative 4 Story Exchange:** Participants engaged in a story exchange – a dialogue program rooted in the power of stories designed to build a culture of inclusivity and connectedness.
- **Measuring and Communicating Impact:** This session examined how the Civil Discourse Lab at the University of New Hampshire measured and communicated the impact of its programs, highlighting methods for selecting outcome variables, quantifying success, and integrating evaluation into civil discourse initiatives.
- **Student-Led Facilitation in Practice:** This breakout showcased Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation, where students facilitated a values exercise illustrating the program's "wicked problems" framework and its application in training and community events to reduce polarization.
- **Student-Led Conversations on AI:** Empowering Campus Voices for Civic Leadership: This session highlighted how student-led conversations supported by AI-powered listening tools amplified campus voices, built empathy across differences, and promoted civic leadership through authentic dialogue and actionable insights.
- **Dialogue in Divisive Times:** This interactive session, led by the National Conflict Resolution Center, equipped participants with tools for navigating divisive conversations, emphasizing conversational receptiveness, inclusive communication, and active listening to strengthen empathy and leadership skills.

LARGE-GROUP WORKSHOP REFLECTIONS AND CLOSING REMARKS

Following the breakout sessions, representatives from the National Conflict Resolution Center offered summary remarks of each session for the wider audience. Dr. Becky Petitt shared closing reflections, and Steven P. Dinkin offered final remarks.

Q&A

Conference attendees were invited to submit questions and comments online throughout the day. While we were able to address many themes during presentations and breakout sessions, we also wanted to compile a list of key themes raised by attendees

These included:

- Tensions in the Concept of Civility and Dialogue - Participants challenged whether "civility" and "dialogue" can promote justice rather than silence dissent, emphasizing the need to balance free expression with belonging.
- Measurement, Evaluation, and Accountability - Attendees sought concrete, behavioral measures of impact and urged clearer definitions of success to secure sustained funding and institutional support.
- Engagement and Inclusion - Questions focused on reaching reluctant students and adapting dialogue practices to reflect cultural, racial, and economic diversity in communication norms.
- Program Design and Institutional Dynamics - Participants explored how to navigate campus siloes, foster student co-creation, and scale programs without losing authenticity or context.
- Third-Party and Cross-Sector Partnerships - Attendees weighed the benefits and risks of partnering with external organizations, highlighting trust, reciprocity, and shared learning across methods.
- Political Polarization and Ethical Boundaries - Many grappled with fostering dialogue amid moral divides, asking how to engage differing views without legitimizing hate or extremism.
- Broader Social and Educational Implications - Participants connected campus dialogue work to civic action, leadership preparation, and rebuilding trust in a polarized society.