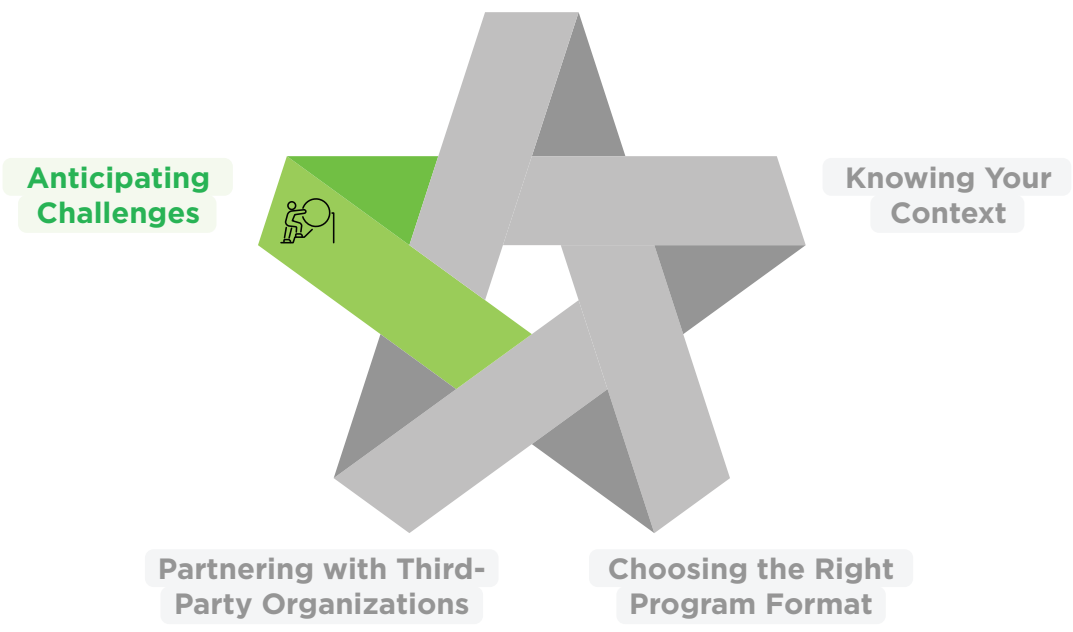
Applied Research Center for Civility

UC San Diego

NCRC NATIONAL CONFLICT RESOLUTION CENTER

Anticipating Challenges

Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse



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

Measuring Success

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

Getting Students to Participate

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

Obtaining Campus Buy-In

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

Securing Appropriate Staffing

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

Financing Programs

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

Political Context

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