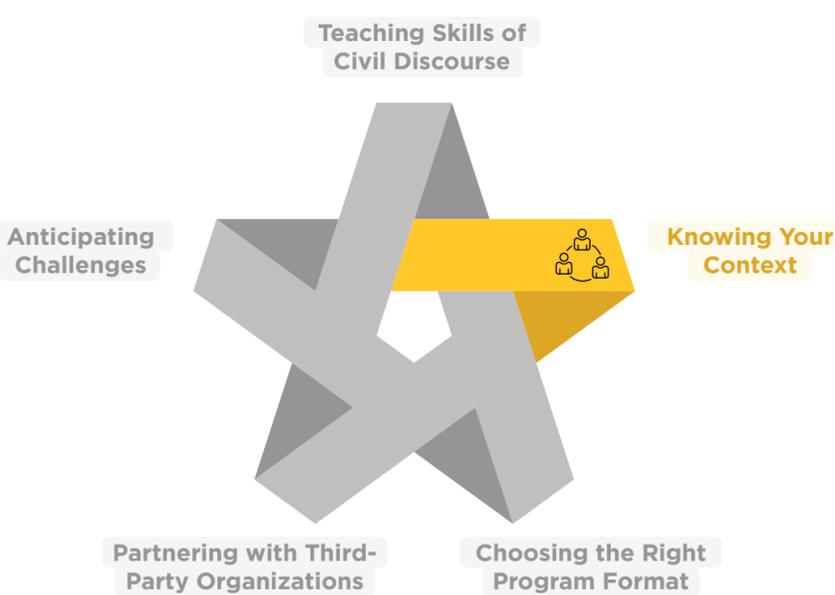


Knowing Your Context



It is essential to assess your campus context to gauge the feasibility of civil discourse programs, including interest in various types of programming and where it can and should be placed on campus. Many factors impact the approach a particular campus may take, including its size, mission, type (e.g., community college, four-year residential), student body diversity, political environment, leadership interests, and relationship to the local community. We discuss several key factors to consider when developing or expanding civil discourse programming.

Leadership Support

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

Placement

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

Program Staffing and Support

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

Attracting Students

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

Campus Partnerships

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

