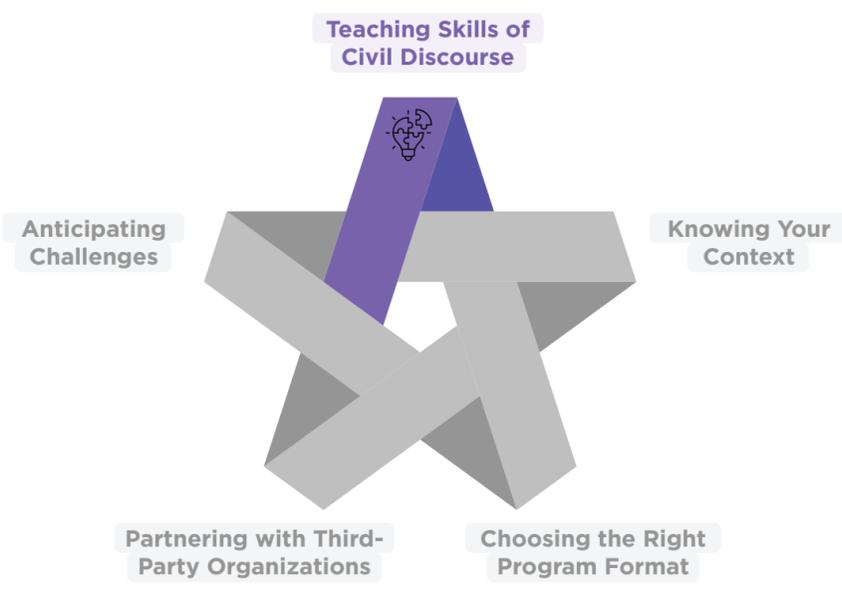


Teaching Skills of Civil Discourse



Before designing formats, choosing partners, or tailoring programs to campus contexts, university administrators should first consider which skills they would like to focus on with their programming. This acts as the anchor for intentional program design and ensures the work maintains a focus on transferable skills.

While the content of discussions varies, the underlying goals of civil discourse programs often center on building students' capacities to communicate effectively, reflect on their own beliefs and behaviors, and take thoughtful, leadership-oriented action in professional and community life. Based on our interviews, the student learning outcomes of these programs can be grouped into five broad categories.

Personal Growth and Self Awareness

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

Interpersonal Communication

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

Applied Professional Skills

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

Community Orientation

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

Leadership Skills

Civil discourse programs serve as strong incubators for leadership development by teaching students to navigate difficult conversations with inclusivity, collaboration, and emotional awareness. Rather than focusing on formal titles, these programs cultivate skills such as coalition-building, facilitation, stakeholder engagement, and conflict navigation through student-led projects and real-world advocacy work. Students gain experience initiating campus conversations, developing community-based initiatives, and learning from role models who demonstrate diverse forms of leadership. Across campuses, program directors emphasize that these competencies translate to any profession, helping students "show up" with empathy, strategic thinking, and confidence in complex environments.

