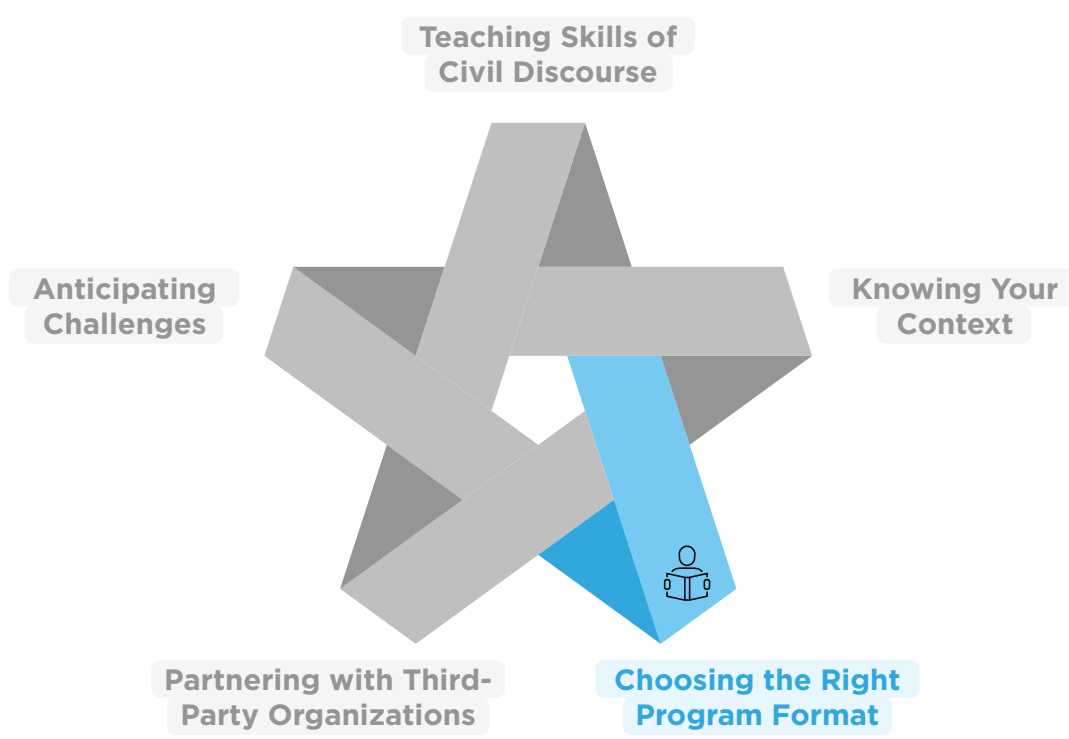


Choosing the Right Program Format



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

Cohort Model

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

Course-Based Model

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

Embedded Courses

Embedded courses integrate dialogue-focused content into disciplinary coursework while remaining affiliated with a central campus center, allowing faculty to weave deliberation, civic engagement, and dialogue theory into fields ranging from biology to engineering to communications. Centers typically support faculty by providing funding, resources, and communities of practice, enabling sustainable integration of dialogue pedagogy. This model broadens reach across the university and often serves as an entry point for students to engage more deeply with dialogue-focused centers and programs.

Campus-Wide Programs and Events

Centers often host campus-wide events - such as public lectures, dialogue forums, and interactive programs - that expose large numbers of students to civil discourse and create opportunities for them to practice engaging across differences. Many centers use these broad events as an entry point, following up with attendees to funnel interested students into certificates, fellowships, or more intensive dialogue experiences. To maximize participation, programs strategically consider logistics such as timing, food, and event format, often incorporating active or creative elements like political speed dating or dialogue walls to make engagement accessible and appealing. Together, these approaches create a welcoming on-ramp to deeper involvement while fostering a campus culture that values dialogue, curiosity, and community-wide engagement.

Faculty Fellows

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

