Best Practices:

Fostering a Culture of Dialogue Across Difference

Executive Summary

This best practice document highlights the role of dialogue across difference in nurturing an academically rigorous, viewpoint-diverse, and respectful campus culture. It covers the benefits and challenges of both systems and programmatic approaches, providing implementation strategies and successful examples for each. It concludes with a list of organizations with expertise guiding campuses in fostering a culture of dialogue.

Highlights

- A Systems Approach requires institution-level analysis to address the underlying conditions of engagement on campus. Its success depends upon:
  - Communicating institutional values
  - Creating group experiences to establish norms and foster community building
  - Providing dialogue skill-building opportunities
- A Programmatic Approach leverages Intergroup Dialogue methods of narrative sharing and issue-based discussion between members of different social groups in order to build trust and safety as a foundation for relationships, explore identity, discuss difficult topics, and activate the group beyond the dialogue.
  - Challenges include racial and intergenerational trauma, invalidation of experience, and anti-normalization
  - Strategies for success include incorporating dialogue into co-curricular programming early in students' campus experience, offering incentives, choosing well-trained facilitators, and developing dialogue groups

Introduction

Dialogue plays an essential role in advancing the academic mission of a college or university by providing a means through which students can explore diverse perspectives and beliefs in order to engage with complex ideas and societal issues. Effective dialogue cultivates critical thinking and intellectual curiosity and promotes empathy and understanding across lines of difference. In an environment where diverse perspectives are welcomed and interrogated respectfully, students become equipped to challenge assumptions, deepen their learning and contemplate solutions to real world problems. Dialogue not only enhances experiences in the classroom and on the quad, it also prepares students to navigate a pluralistic society with empathy, insight and the ability to collaborate across differences. Campuses with a strong culture of respectful dialogue create a sense of safety and inclusion. On the other hand, student success may be hindered where respectful dialogue across difference is absent or discouraged, as students may feel isolated, misunderstood or unsafe expressing their identities and perspectives.

To be successful and impactful, dialogue must be approached thoughtfully, implemented strategically, and supported broadly by campus stakeholders skilled in dialogue facilitation. In this document, CCI provides best practices for developing a dialogue-centered culture that supports the wellbeing of students and the broader campus community.

I. Systems Approach

Adopting a systems approach to dialogue across difference means recognizing that the causes of campus conflicts and the quality of dialogue are shaped by the interconnectedness of a campus' policies, practices, cultures and resources rather than by isolated events. Campuses that adopt a systems approach do not seek to resolve individual conflicts as they arise. Instead, they **analyze the entire institution as a complex system and explore the structures and practices that shape communication, including institutional values and norms for engagement, curriculum design, faculty development, student leadership training** and more. This approach engages everyone on campus, from senior leadership to students and faculty, and seeks to align institutional policies and practices with inclusive dialogue principles while creating ongoing opportunities for all stakeholders to build their toolbox of skills for engaging in dialogue across differences. By addressing the underlying conditions that influence how ideas are exchanged, a systems approach fosters a sustainable culture of thoughtful, open and constructive conversation across the campus community.

Building a systems approach takes time and a campus-wide commitment rooted in shared goals and values. The following steps, adapted from principles developed by the [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#), are essential to building a systems approach to dialogue on your campus.

1. **Communicate your institution's values** about what constitutes a robust learning environment **and your expectations** about how members of the community should conduct themselves on campus.

   - Inform students early in their campus experience - even upon acceptance to your institution - that they will be **challenged intellectually** on your campus and are expected to **engage respectfully** with people of different backgrounds, beliefs and values.

   - Articulate the **importance of free expression** on campus and in a democratic society, as well as its **limitations**. Students must understand that their free speech rights cannot impinge on the free speech rights of others.

   - Likewise, articulate what, when and how students may **engage in protest** activity on campus, along with the **limitations of, and responsibilities that come with, campus protest**. Proactively share the consequences of violating campus protest policies as well as counterprotesting techniques that allow students to voice their concerns without denying the rights of others to speak or disrupting university operations.

2. **Create group experiences** to foster a sense of common purpose, shared identity and trust. These experiences can begin as early as orientation. They should establish norms such as the value of uncomfortable conversations, calling-in as opposed to calling out when peers say things that offend others, being conscientious about how one's speech might affect their peers, assuming good faith, and allowing peers to correct mistakes that others find offensive.

3. **Provide skill-building opportunities** for administrators, staff, faculty and students across the institution. Dialogue skills can be embedded into training for new staff and faculty. Consider incentives for completing training programs, such as offering research stipends, integrating training into tenure or promotion criteria or creating an award recognizing faculty members who excel in facilitating meaningful dialogue in classroom discussions. For students, dialogue skills can be embedded into first-year seminars or other required general education courses or offered as a for-credit or co-curricular course.

Examples

Vanderbilt University's *Dialogue Vanderbilt* is a hub for programming and partnerships that promote constructive dialogue and civil discourse across campus and beyond. Through workshops, lectures, courses and student-led initiatives, the program seeks to embed the university's values of free expression and civil discourse as essential elements of higher education and democratic society. Student engagement with Dialogue Vanderbilt begins before first-year students arrive on campus through a summer webinar for incoming students and their families, and all incoming students attend an Introduction to Dialogue Vanderbilt session with university leaders to explore Vanderbilt's commitment to free expression and civil discourse. Launched in 2023, the initiative is guided by an advisory board of more than 30 students who represent a wide range of backgrounds and viewpoints. These student leaders help shape Dialogue Vanderbilt's programming, facilitate campus discussions and contribute fresh, creative ideas to expand its reach and impact.

The City University of New York is partnering with the Constructive Dialogue Institute on a university-wide strategic initiative that seeks to drive a systemic culture shift across its 25 campuses to embed dialogue - even across disagreement - across leadership structures, student engagement programs and classroom experiences. The initiative is designed to strengthen CUNY's ability to navigate ideological differences, combat hate, and promote a campus environment where all students feel a sense of belonging.

Key components of the initiative include:

- **Leadership development** and training for the presidents and cabinets of the 25 CUNY campuses to build institutional capacity for leading through polarization and embedding dialogue as a strategic priority across campuses.

- **A dialogue facilitation certification program** for student-facing staff across all CUNY colleges to build sustainable, campus-wide networks of dialogue facilitators.

- **Dialogue facilitation workshops** for faculty and students to empower educators and student influencers to shape classroom and campus-wide discourse.

- **Scalable online learning** about dialogue across CUNY's campuses through CDI's Perspectives online learning program

- **Evaluation and assessment** of the effectiveness of these initiatives to track shifts in campus climate.

Dartmouth Dialogues is a system-wide initiative at **Dartmouth College** designed to strengthen a culture in which community members engage in respectful discussion across differences and feel comfortable having their views challenged. The initiative features programs across the institution dedicated to facilitating conversations and skills that bridge political and personal divides.

UCLA's Dialogue Across Difference Initiative (DaD) partners with campus leaders, scholars and departments to model and promote the values of intellectual engagement, curiosity, empathy, active listening, and critical thinking. It is based on a four-pronged approach: teaching, student engagement, training and public programs. In Spring 2024, DaD began offering training opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and senior leaders in partnership with Resetting the Table (RTS) a national nonprofit organization that promotes dialogue and healthy engagement across division and conflict. Partnering with RTS has helped the campus develop a shared language for how to engage in difficult dialogue across campus. UCLA has also sent delegations of staff and faculty to RTS's train-the-trainer program to empower more stakeholders with dialogue facilitation skills. DaD's student intern program and "Bruin Bridge Builders Fund" supports grassroots initiatives to build community and connection among students.

II. Programmatic Approach

Some campuses have developed programs that align with the Intergroup Dialogue (IGD) model. IGD seeks to build trust, curiosity, empathy, understanding, and collaboration between members of different social identity groups who perceive themselves to be divided. IGD involves four essential steps: building trust and safety as a foundation for relationships, exploring identity, surfacing and unpacking difficult topics, and activating the group beyond the dialogue.

a. Types of Intergroup Dialogue

Narrative sharing

- Uses conversation about personal stories and experiences to connect participants to one another
- Participants build common understanding and grow in their capacity for empathy.
- Participants gain new understandings of different experiences and develop curiosity about the lives of others

Issue-based discussion

- A structured approach to dialogue that focuses on specific topics
- Builds trust in order to deepen understanding and develop solutions through reflective discussion
- May be challenging to facilitate and can devolve into debate

b. Challenges

Improving interpersonal interactions can contribute to greater inclusion and more productive interactions. In fact, studies show that the impact of cross-cultural interaction may be most significant for people of the majority culture or who hold the dominant viewpoint because their perspectives are likelier to have previously gone unquestioned. However, a number of social and psychological factors can impede students' ability to engage in intense dialogue. Facilitators who are aware of these factors and skilled in navigating them are better positioned to support students throughout the dialogue process. Failure to do so could perpetuate or prolong conflict. These factors include:

- **Racial and intergenerational trauma:** Students may be hesitant to discuss these types of trauma, particularly if they have experienced discrimination themselves.

- **Invalidation of experience:** On some campuses, Jewish students are told that their narratives and experiences are not real, causing them to experience more pain. If this happens, facilitators should acknowledge that students can empathize with the pain of others even if they disagree with them on political or other issues. Well-supported dialogue can help students humanize one another and acknowledge their pain. The dialogue process can thereby help students develop respect and trust, diffuse tense situations, and defuse challenging disputes that may arise on campus.

- **Anti-normalization:** a form of cancel culture, anti-normalization is the idea that some beliefs are so untenable they, and those who support them, must be shunned. On the progressive left, anti-normalization may be applied to hateful ideologies such as racism, sexism and homophobia, but it may also be applied to Zionism, which most Zionists understand to be a belief in the right of Jewish self-determination on some part of the Jewish indigenous homeland. On campus, anti-normalization of Zionism operates by marginalizing Jewish and Israeli students unless they denounce Zionism, interrupting and silencing Jewish and Israeli speakers, denying participation in campus events to Zionist students, and refusing to participate in dialogue intended to bring parties together across perceived divides.

c. Setting Up for Success

A common complaint from staff who facilitate dialogue programs on their campuses is that only a small group of committed students show up - not enough to move the needle on campus climate. Even if your campus does not institute a system approach to dialogue, there are ways to motivate students to participate in dialogue programs.

- **Strategic scheduling:** Incorporating dialogue into co-curricular programming early in students' campus experience, such as during first-year student orientation, helps set the tone for the institution's expectations for civil discourse, elevate shared values and help students build relationships with their peers that may withstand political or ideological differences. .

- **Incentives:** Offering incentives that students find valuable may encourage them to participate in dialogue programs. Effective models have offered students a boost in the housing lottery at a residential institution and parking spots close to main buildings on a commuter campus.

- **Choosing an effective facilitator:** Discussion leaders should be well-trained in difficult dialogue facilitation, which includes skills to manage their own triggers and blind spots and participants' concerns over any real or presumed bias. Effective practice of multipartiality - an approach that actively acknowledges and addresses the different perspectives and power dynamics within a group, rather than remaining strictly neutral or impartial - will work to create a space where all voices can be heard and valued.

- **Developing Dialogue Groups:** Dialogue programs that consist of a series of conversations with a consistent group of students (i.e. students cannot join after the program has begun) will have the greatest impact on participants because they are structured to allow time for students to build trusting relationships and to challenge their assumptions. The most successful models on campuses today feature an intentional selection process in which seeks students who actively engage many other students on campus, such as RAs, student government leaders and student mentors. Students who serve in these roles can be multipliers for a culture of discourse that may positively impact the climate on campus.

d. Venue

Dialogue programs are best held in spaces students perceive as neutral. Spaces where only one group feels comfortable may create an imbalanced power dynamic that could undermine a sense of comfort. Dialogue doesn't need to happen in the same place every time - groups may want to host on a rotating basis to balance dynamics and even allow students to share aspects of their identities with one another. Any venue chosen for dialogue should provide a space where students can step away momentarily to process or decompress.

e. Examples:

University of California

- *UC Irvine* is among several UC campuses that have adopted the Courageous Conversation protocol. Courageous Conversation models civil discourse to promote dialogue, discourage anti-normalization, and support positive connections that lead to improved climate. The UC Office of the President provides administrators and staff with professional development opportunities so that they can promote this approach on their campuses.

Syracuse University

- Rabbi Ethan Bair and Imam Amir Durić, chaplains at Syracuse University's Hendricks Chapel, co-founded the university's Jewish-Muslim Dialogue Fellowship, which began by bringing students together for a shared meal and a service project. In Spring 2023, when the Muslim holy month of Ramadan and the Jewish holiday of Passover overlapped, Imam Durić and Rabbi Bair hosted students for an iftar meal catered at Syracuse Hillel. They guided students in discussing the role of fasting in their faith and lives, and supported them in surfacing differences and commonalities, such as the moral obligation of charitable giving in Islam and Judaism.   Imam Durić and Rabbi Bair have also participated in "Taste of Dialogue: Empathy and Ethics in Judaism and Islam," an open discussion intended to further elevate discourse on campus through modeling and broader engagement. The pair were recognized for their work by Interfaith America in Fall 2024.

Partner Organizations

The following organizations provide expert support and guidance to campuses seeking to foster a culture of dialogue:

The **Constructive Dialogue Institute** conducts original research and offers webinars, workshops and certifications for higher ed staff, faculty, and student leaders. Their blended "Perspectives" program can be implemented at scale for a fee but is free for individual educators and their students.

The **Resetting the Table** (RTT) model draws on conflict resolution and mediation frameworks to train facilitators in interventions and skills that help participants remain receptive and connected to each as they confront their differences. The training focuses on learning how to ask questions, offer reflections, name differences, and build bridges among participants to help create conversations of meaning, depth, stability, clarity, and focus even while "going toward the heat." Participants practice facilitation skills and receive immediate coaching and feedback.

Project Shema offers workshops, programming, and written resources for corporate, K-12, and higher ed settings that focus on "depolarizing difficult conversations around anti-Jewish harm" and emphasize "how anti-Jewish ideas and implicit biases can be carried alongside conversations about Israel and Palestine." Project Shema believes that without the ability to effectively tell our story, our concerns often go unheard or we may be unable to build the personal connections necessary to engage in difficult conversations. Offerings for campuses teach students the skills necessary to improve their engagement with their peers.

Interfaith America's Shared Values Facilitation Guide provides facilitation guidelines for leading interfaith dialogue and conversation around shared values that draw on texts from different religions and ethical perspectives.

III. Campus-Specific Support

The CCI team is available to consult and provide resources to assist your campus in supporting dialogue across difference in many ways, including but not limited to:

- Review of current dialogue programs on your campus
- Collaboration on new programs or facilitator guides for challenging conversations
- Recommendations for partnership with external organizations

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About the Hillel Campus Climate Initiative

CCI is a collaboration between Hillel International, higher education administrators and campus-based Hillel professionals that fosters a positive, affirming campus climate where Jewish students feel comfortable expressing their identity and values, free from antisemitism, harassment, and marginalization. If you have questions or wish to consult with the CCI team, please contact us at cci@hillel.org.