Constructive Dialogue Institute

Maintaining Campus Community During the 2024 Election

A Guide for Leaders, Faculty, and Staff

Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI)

Founded in 2017, CDI is a non-profit organization dedicated to equipping the next generation of Americans with the mindset and skill set to engage in dialogue across differences. At CDI, we seek to help teachers, faculty, and administrators build learning environments that enable students to feel comfortable engaging with challenging topics so that real learning can occur. To accomplish this goal, we translate the latest behavioral science research into educational resources and teaching strategies that are evidence-based, practical, and scalable.

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Acknowledgments

Introduction

No event is as effective at shunting communities into "us" versus "them" as a U.S. presidential election. In 2016, the toxicity on many college campuses surrounding the presidential election caught many administrators unprepared—they had no playbook for the intense emotion displayed by students, faculty, and staff alike. Many students—and some faculty and staff—pushed the boundaries of acceptable campus speech in new ways that were not always clearly delineated by existing policy or precedent. The 2020 election coincided with social distancing and, consequently, much less on-campus political activism.

This combination of events leaves many campuses ill-prepared for the 2024 election. Most student affairs staff and senior administrators were likely not in their current position or even at their current institution 8 years ago. Thus, there is thus a lack of institutional knowledge of what tactics were effective and what lessons were learned. This guide is intended to fill that gap. By collating the experiences of subject matter experts and university educators in a range of roles–faculty; staff; offices of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); civic engagement centers; and university presidents–we hope to share knowledge about what works to contain campus conflict and transform discourse.

The 2024 election adds a unique challenge because higher education itself is on the ballot. After years of increasing legislative scrutiny and public critique, November 2024 could mark a significant moment for higher education as a policy focal point. Across the nation, more states are asserting control over curriculum and programming, evident in actions such as book bans and restrictions on content related to race and gender identity. According to the Bipartisan Policy Center, more than 30 states are actively seeking to regulate DEI initiatives on college campuses.[1]

Many college campuses are justifiably worried that this election season will fan flames that they have yet to fully contain. Disturbingly, instances of hate crimes have surged by 90% since 2018, disproportionately affecting Black, LGBTQ, and Jewish students.[2] On many campuses, emotions are still raw; fear of saying "the wrong thing" is still at the forefront; and nerves, patience, and resolve are all wearing thin.

> **We can't teach people if they feel afraid. Minds don't open when people feel insulted or unsafe. I wish that it were a very cut-and-dried question of helping folks navigate between being uncomfortable and being unsafe. But I think that's the work.**
>
> **– Faculty and program director**

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1 Lederman, J. (2023, October 20). DEI legislation, academic freedom, and free expression: Where to go from here? Bipartisan Policy Center. https://bipartisanpolicy.org/blog/dei-legislation-academic-freedom-and-free-expression-where-to-go-from-here/

2 Goldstein, D. (2024). Hate crimes reported in schools nearly doubled between 2018 and 2022. *The New York Times*. https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/29/us/hate-crimes-schools-universities.html

Against this backdrop, university educators are grappling with myriad concerns about how the upcoming election will unfold in their communities. Many lack the confidence to engage in conversations about political issues. Others are demotivated by the public's negative perception of higher education, a field to which they have devoted their lives' work. Regardless of political affiliation, university staff, faculty, and leaders are worried about the impact of negative political rhetoric on the already-strained sense of community on their campus.

We recognize that the election poses many risks to colleges and universities. Yet, this touchstone ritual of democracy also offers an opportunity to encourage students to be thoughtful, engaged citizens. The interconnected social and intellectual skills that students acquire to thrive in postsecondary civic spaces are invaluable across all facets of their lives. The effort invested in preparing for the 2024 election will also help cultivate campus environments that encourage community members to grapple with discomfort, champion freedom of thought, and foster the capacity to listen to others, replacing anger and fear with a spirit of curiosity.

General Principles for Preparing for the 2024 Election

Principle 1

Rather than treating the 2024 election as an isolated event, leverage your existing campus investments in cultural transformation and trust building.

Many institutions are grappling with tension related to the Israel–Hamas conflict. Several of the strategies and practices that result from these efforts will also be useful structures for mitigating election-related conflict. Practices like checking in with stakeholders, creating space for dialogue, and auditing and disseminating policies are integral components of proactive conflict management and community building. They serve as foundational pillars that can be adapted to effectively navigate potential conflicts arising from the 2024 election.

Principle 2

Investing heavily in proactive strategies before November 2024, rather than relying solely on reactive measures, will pay dividends in preventing conflict.

These strategies will also advance the important work of educating students on issues and equipping them with the skills to engage with those who think differently. This forward-thinking approach prepares campuses for the challenges of the upcoming election while contributing to a more robust and resilient institutional fabric.

3

Campuses require proactive leadership and a clear vision from the top to inspire coordinated efforts across every layer of an institution's system.

The best campus strategy will include leadership, staff and faculty, students, alumni and donors, board members, neighboring communities, and legislators. Leadership can be especially effective at organizing collectives. However, both top-down and bottom-up approaches are necessary for cultivating positive campus climates.

Strategies for Faculty and Staff
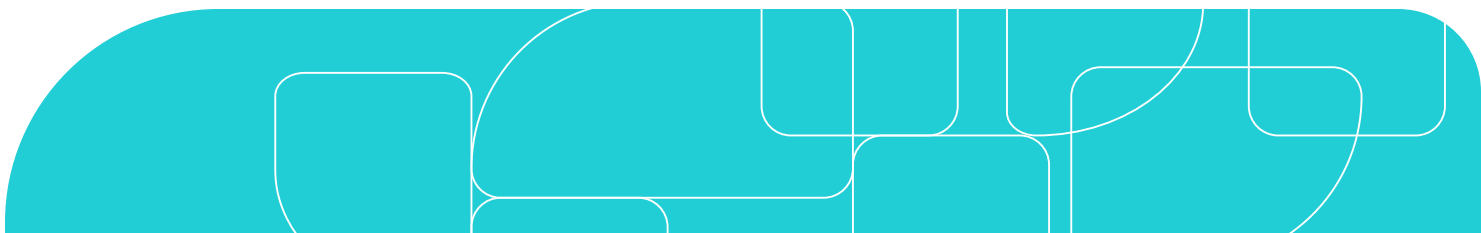
Student experiences are shaped by their day-to-day interactions with faculty and staff. Before elections, offering low-stakes dialogue opportunities provides students with a platform to express their viewpoints, engage in respectful discourse, and refine their communication skills in a nonconfrontational environment.

By participating in such exercises, students can better understand diverse perspectives, build empathy, and cultivate the ability to navigate potentially contentious discussions with civility. This practice fosters a culture of open dialogue and mutual respect, ultimately contributing to a more informed and engaged electorate capable of constructive political discourse. The following are some suggestions for cultivating constructive dialogue in curricular and cocurricular environments.

Strategy 1

Establish election-related norms with students.

Complement campuswide policies with shared norms, common values, and a network of trust. Classroom or program norms fortify a structure for dialogue and social cohesion, which are essential precursors for political discussions. At the beginning of students' engagement with each other, be it in a classroom or cocurricular setting, set clear expectations for respectful and civil discourse within the classroom. Ask students about the election topics they care about and those that worry or rile them. IDHE finds that two agreements are critical: "Assume good will" and "Share responsibility for the quality of the discussion."[7]

Strategy 2

Foster student agency.

Administration, faculty, and staff need to create the structures for dialogue across differences, but successful civic engagement requires student ownership. At the University of Delaware, the Blue Hen poll is an annual public opinion survey conducted by students for students. And, at several campuses, we heard about instances of peaceful, even joyful, counterprogramming, attributed by interviewees to the organic nature of being student led.

Strategy 3

Prepare for aftercare.

Many campuses already use mechanisms to check in regularly with students. For example, Ohio Northern University uses EdSights, an AI-powered text messaging service for students. Human resources or department heads may be using performance management systems to gauge employee engagement. Analysis of these responses can help anticipate categories of unmet or high-volume needs. Consider supplementing these existing practices to also evaluate the election's impact, possibly adjusting the outreach frequency as November approaches. Several interviewees felt caught off guard following the 2016 election. Analyzing preelection check in results could inform priority postelection aftercare.

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7   Thomas, N., & Kennedy, C. (2020). *How faculty can prepare to handle the post-election classroom*. The Scholars Strategy Network. https://scholars.org/contribution/how-faculty-can-prepare-handle-post-election

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We use these little chat bots that will reach out and ask, 'How are you feeling?' The students know it's AI– they recognize the ping. The responses get sorted and then somebody reaches out. They know it's artificial, and they know we will follow up and still they pour their hearts out into it. It has been a game changer. Our retention increased. Unity increased–through AI.

– President

Cocreating Resilient Group Norms[8]

15 minutes for one-time meetings; 45 to 60 minutes for recurring group meetings

Suggested Language for Instructor Framing

"This activity will help us define the type of group culture we want to create together. Creating a culture starts with discussing what our culture will look like. So that's what we'll start doing today."

INSTRUCTIONS:

1. Ask students to think about a group of any kind that they have been a part of where they felt they could be themselves, including voicing their stance on a potentially controversial topic.

Ask them, "What are the elements of that group that made it so welcoming?" Have participants brainstorm words that represent the group qualities they observed, and let them discuss what sorts of elements or qualities they would like to see in this group.

If you need help kicking things off, use the following list for ideas:

- Communicate your perspective thoughtfully and with the intention of being understood.
- Give others the benefit of the doubt. Listen with curiosity first, rather than judgment.
- Speak for yourself. Use "I" statements.
- Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process.
- Be prepared for you, and others, to make mistakes; respond with curiosity rather than judgment.
- Share the air–speak up, but also make room for others to contribute.
- Honor confidentiality–what happens here, stays here.
- Participation is voluntary–you can "pass" if you don't want to share.

8 *Co-creating resilient group norms.* (n.d.). The Constructive Dialogue Institute. https://constructivedialogue.org/resources/co-creating-resilient-group-norms#s

2. Solicit student feedback.

   "Here is a list of possible norms we could use. Is there anything about this list that you would like to add, revise, or remove? Which norms need further discussion or clarification?"

3. Revise and refine the list, then test for agreement.

   - Consider group additions and changes together, and add them to the norms list started previously.

   - Check for agreement using a visual sign, such as a thumbs-up, to ensure everyone can agree.

   - "Does everyone agree with these norms? Is anyone concerned about their ability to uphold these norms?"

4. Make the norms visible.

   - Post the norms to the class homepage.

   - Add the norms to the syllabus.

   - If possible, hang a norms poster on the classroom wall.

Suggested Language for Instructor Wrap-Up

"Groups are always a work in progress, and so norms should be, too. That means everyone should feel free to revisit them whenever they think the norms don't fit the needs of the group anymore. This will help us all create the group culture we all want to be a part of."

Strategy 4

Introduce low-stakes practice opportunities.

Encourage students to attend election-oriented events and programs and to report back by asking questions, challenging assumptions, and providing evidence to support their arguments. Source articles from the student newspaper. Start these discussions before the election. Be aware of your own political leanings when interacting with students. Review your teaching or program materials to avoid any perception of bias in your classroom or student-facing discussions. Make it a habit to use examples from across the political spectrum.

> **What kinds of programming can you put in place to grow the muscle that you will need to sustain you through the result? What can you do as a parallel to the election that isn't so focused on the election—but it is focused in a constructive way on other issues in the country, in our civic space, in our democracy—where students might be able to see a more constructive path for their own engagement?"**
>
> **– President**

Strategy 5

Initiate dialogue across differences during orientation.

Introduce dialogue across differences during orientation to lay the foundation for constructive engagement on campus. Extend this initiative beyond orientation into academic and cocurricular realms, integrating dialogue training into various programs such as first-year seminars, student leadership initiatives, and residence life activities. By doing so, institutions foster interconnected pathways that promote civil discourse throughout students' college experience.

**"	The problem we have on college campuses is we tend to do one really good program for 50 kids, and we put it up on the website and claim victory. This has to seep throughout the entire campus culture. Obviously, a lot of this work can be done through student life, but faculty have to own it as well. And so do coaches. Everybody on our campus has got to lean into this space." – President**

Situate election events into residence life.

The immersive experience of residential campus life stands out as one of the rare settings where community members gain abundant practice opportunities amid individuals with diverse perspectives. It serves as an environment where encountering disagreements is expected, and how these disagreements manifest significantly shapes campus culture. Yet it is also a space where the absence of room for respectful disagreement can result in irreversible alienation. As such, the election becomes a pivotal juncture for institutions to showcase the value of fostering dialogue and understanding within their academic communities.

Living learning communities can examine election issues important to their residential themes. Postdebate discussions or issue-oriented presentations with local or on-campus experts can inform students while also demonstrating respect for a range of viewpoints and expertise. These programs provide an opportunity to include counseling and psychological services, thus raising awareness of other resources, both generally and postelection. One institution we spoke with has integrated restorative practices into residence life. Resident leaders are trained in circle practices and are given engagement guidelines, which empower students to address conflicts on their own. The institution phased in these techniques, initially targeting a small group before expanding them campuswide with secured funding.

> " I say to students in our orientation program, my expectation is that you're going to find the person in your residence hall whose life experiences are most different from your own and form a friendship right on our campus. When somebody says something you find deeply politically insulting, we expect you to take them out for coffee. Don't ask about their politics, but ask about their life. **– President**

Class Assignment Ideas[9]

- **IDEA 1:** Assign students to cover election-related news for class credit and invite faculty with relevant expertise to engage in the dialogue. Hold classroom follow-up discussions after election events like caucuses, primaries, and national conventions.

- **IDEA 2:** Teach quantitative analysis and data storytelling by assigning students to conduct and disseminate campus community surveys.

- **IDEA 3:** Encourage student groups to develop programming and share their opinions in the student paper linking their lived experiences with policy issues. For example, the campus cadet corps could discuss attitudes and issues surrounding veterans' health.

- **IDEA 4:** Use campus space to program events like the University of Miami's 2020 Healthcare Games where the college Republicans and Democrats debated the Affordable Care Act.

9   Campus Election Engagement Project. (2018). Engaging your campus in elections: Seven key ways to engage your campus. https://civicinfluencers.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/7-Key-Ways-to-Engage-Your-Campus.pdf

Dialogue Activities From the Constructive Dialogue Institute[10]

The following are practical, ready-to-go strategies designed to foster and facilitate constructive dialogue in the classroom.

You can choose to go through each resource sequentially, or you can peruse the options and pick one or two you prefer. When choosing which ones to use, you might consider your time constraints, your experience level with facilitating constructive dialogue, or your students' particular needs and interests.

Generally, these are activities and exercises that help *start* conversations. It can often be difficult to know how to broach divisive topics. These suggestions aim to structure conversation in an accessible way so that dialogue can flow constructively from there.

10   Fay, J., & O'Neil, E. (2022). *Constructive dialogue and elections: An educator guide to engaging students*. The Constructive Dialogue Institute. https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/elections-guide

The Questions Game

Suggested Language for Framing

"Constructive dialogue is about understanding, not changing, others' minds. We are going to practice listening without responding, and asking questions that can get people to share even more. Good listening and thoughtful question-asking are fundamental skills of constructive dialogue."

Silent Brainstorm

First, ask participants to think about a political opinion or value that they hold.

Suggested Language

"Start by thinking about a political opinion or value that you hold. To get you thinking, consider your answers to these questions: When you think about the problems of the world, what comes to mind as the most concerning? What is an issue that gets you really fired up and angry? What is the issue you are most likely to write to a politician about or to attend a protest about?"

Pair Work

Next, divide participants into pairs for 5 minutes.

INSTRUCTIONS

- **Person 1:** Share a political opinion or value that you hold.

- **Person 2:** Ask follow-up questions to understand more about your partner's stance. Hold back on responding or sharing anything about your own stance–Person 2 should only ask questions during this time. The questions should have the intention of learning more about where Person 1 is coming from.

- **Person 1:** Share your responses.

After one 5-minute round, pairs should switch roles.

EXAMPLES OF CONSTRUCTIVE QUESTIONS

- What makes you say that?

- Why is that issue so important to you?

- Did a person or experience influence your belief?

- Can you say more about what you mean when you say _____?

- Why do you think that is?

- Have you always felt that way?

Wrap-Up

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did you notice or experience in your pairs?

- What did it feel like when you shared your political opinion or value?

- What did it feel like to just ask questions?

- Did anything surprise you?

Facilitator Considerations

- The Questions Game can be modified for varied skill levels or topics. Facilitators can make each pair segment longer or shorter, depending on how in depth you would like the sharing to be.

- Regardless of topic or depth, the key component should always remain the same: one person only asking questions, and the other person only answering those questions (and then switch roles).

Belief Spectrum: Election Edition

[20 MINUTES FOR THE ACTIVITY; 30 TO 40 MINUTES FOR DEBRIEF/DIALOGUE]

This activity prepares students to share about their stance on key issues and belief systems by arranging themselves across a physical spectrum between "strongly agree" and "strongly disagree." Students share their positions (agree or disagree) by moving themselves along a spectrum. From this, students can share silently (which can be easier), and educators can learn which issues or topics represent the most diverse viewpoints among their students.

Set the Stage

1. Put two pieces of paper on opposite sides of the room (the floor or walls): "Strongly Agree" and "Strongly Disagree."

2. Suggested language to set the stage:

   - "Everything between these two polar opposites is a spectrum. The middle of the spectrum can be thought of as neutral or unsure.

   - "I will read through a series of statements, one at a time. When you hear a statement, please move silently along the spectrum, based on your opinion or stance on that statement.

   - "The goal of the activity is to begin to see where we differ. So be as honest as you can–don't just follow your friends.

   - "You'll have the chance to discuss afterward, so please hold your comments or questions until that stage. This part is fully silent."

Instruction Tips

1. Read statements twice so students can really think through their stance before moving, and pause for 10 to 15 seconds after reading each statement.

2. After the 10 to 15 seconds, ask students to look around and notice who is near them and who is not.

3. Read the next statement until you have gone through them all.

Instructor Considerations and Modifications

- For a more student-led activity, instructors can choose to ask students to generate their own list of statements in advance.

SUGGESTED PROMPTS

- I think there are things in my country that need to improve.

- I think that my country's political leaders accurately represent my views.

- I feel comfortable sharing my political views openly in this community.

- I think criticizing political leaders is patriotic.

- The best way to make change is to vote.

- The best way to make change is locally and in your community.

- The government has a responsibility to care for its people.

- The two-party system is a good thing for our country.

- I think people make assumptions about my political party that are untrue.

- I have had people unfairly stereotype me based on where I am from.

- I have had people unfairly stereotype me based on how I look.

- When people succeed, it is because of hard work.

- The media is a good place to learn about the world.

- It is better to be a member of a group than a leader of a group.

- I feel hopeful about this election.

Wrap-Up

DEBRIEF QUESTIONS

- What did you notice about this exercise?

- What did you learn about your peers?

- What did you like about this activity? What was challenging about this activity?

- What questions do you have for your peers about some of the beliefs that surfaced within this activity? Be sure to ask questions from a place of curiosity rather than judgment.

Conversation Simulator

[15 MINUTES]

Follow the link in this QR code to an interactive program to learn three science-backed strategies for navigating difficult conversations and practice them through a personalized interactive online simulator. You will get a chance to practice the following:

- Establish a collaborative goal.
- Get curious.
- Tell a personal story.

When Discussions Get Too Heated[11]

It is normal and expected that when talking about divisive topics that matter deeply to students, some conflict or discord will arise. Here are some ways to intervene to lower the temperature in the conversation.

SCENARIO	INTERVENTION SUGGESTION
A student makes a statement based on misinformation.	• Ask questions to start. Begin from a place of genuine curiosity: "Can you tell me more about what you mean?" "What makes you say that?" "How did you come to believe that?" • Refer to group expertise. "What is it like to hear this?" "I'd like to hear some people's reactions." • Point out shared values. "I can see that many students care about democracy and truth." "Both of you value fairness."
A student disengages from the conversation because it is uncomfortable and awkward.	• Refer to norms: When establishing group norms, we suggest including "Embrace discomfort as an essential part of the learning process." Remind students of that purpose when things get uncomfortable. • Then, consider changing the structure of the conversation to small groups or pairs. Check in with the student one on one to see how they want to proceed and what would help them feel better about staying in the conversation next time.

A student has become frustrated after hearing a classmate's commitment to a candidate or stance with which they strongly disagree.	• Once each student has expressed their point of view, try naming the feelings being expressed. "It sounds like hearing that made you feel frustrated—is that right?" This gives everyone a chance to slow down and lets students know you are listening.
	• Ask constructive questions:
	  ◦ What makes you say that?
	  ◦ Why is that important to you?
	  ◦ How do you know?
	  ◦ Can you say more about what you mean when you say_____?
	  ◦ Why do you think that is?

A student expresses feeling shamed because of their identity.	• Connect to norms and purpose: "Everyone is here to learn and understand. Learning and understanding new experiences or perspectives can definitely be uncomfortable."
	• Promote agency over shame: "Shame can be a strong reaction, and we want to empower students to feel the agency to create change based on what they see and hear, rather than focusing on guilt-based responses."
	• Ask the following:
	  ◦ "These conversations can feel really difficult at times. What do you notice in yourself that feels difficult or uncomfortable?"
	  ◦ "What are you learning right now about this group or the world around you? What do you wish were different?"

A student has said something harmful or ignorant about a group of people.	• Change the pace: "I could be wrong, but I want to pause and notice that something was just said that could possibly be harmful to some students" • Name the statement or assumption: "That statement assumes x, y, or z, which could feel hurtful or inaccurate to some of you. Given that the purpose of constructive dialogue is to learn and understand, I want to be sure we're sticking with those values." • Refer to group expertise: "I notice some of our class looks like they are withdrawing from the conversation. Would someone like to address the feelings that may exist or the reactions that are happening?" • Change the structure: Initiate a turn-and-talk: "Share with your partner how you are feeling about this dialogue and a question you may have."

11 Fay, J., & O'Neil, E. (2022). *Constructive dialogue and elections: An educator guide to engaging students.* The Constructive Dialogue Institute. https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/elections-guide

CDI Products For Students, Faculty, and Staff

Programming that large groups of the campus community experience can signal an institutional commitment to the importance of dialogue across differences. New student orientation, first-year experiences, student leadership training, residence life programs, and staff and faculty onboarding are pathways with broad campus reach. IDHE found that "four of the seven highly politically engaged campuses embedded dialogue and discussion skills in a required course."[12]

Perspectives for Students

CDI's research-backed blended learning program uses psychology concepts and interactive scenarios to equip students with the skills for conversation, collaboration, and problem-solving across differences. Features include the following:

- Six asynchronous lessons (30 minutes each)
- Three optional peer-to-peer conversation guides (30 minutes each)
- A dashboard and quizzes to track learners' progress

Perspectives for Faculty and Staff

CDI offers a version of its blended learning program *Perspectives* geared toward faculty and staff. It explores the roots of divisions and equips participants with evidence-based practices to navigate difficult conversations. It includes practice scenarios relevant to campus faculty and staff.

Scan this QR code to learn more about CDI's campus-wide offerings.

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12   Thomas, N. (2019). *Readiness for discussing democracy in supercharged political times.* Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Initiatives/IDHE/idhe-discussing-democracy.pdf

Strategy 7

Foster media literacy and critical thinking.

Efforts to combat misinformation sometimes inadvertently exacerbate ideological divisions rather than bridging them. Throughout history, governments, scientists, and the media have contributed to this issue, eroding trust in them as reliable sources. Hence, it's imperative to cultivate critical thinking skills and champion evidence-based arguments. Encourage students to scrutinize sources and critically evaluate information instead of merely parroting or unquestioningly accepting it. Leading by example, demonstrate transparency by divulging your own sources and methods of information verification. Emphasize active engagement with diverse sources of information rather than passive consumption. Combating misinformation entails actively seeking and absorbing more information.

Strategy 8

Invest in advanced professional development.

Effective conflict management processes are essential for engaging across lines of difference and for fostering a sense of community. Consider attending workshops or training sessions on facilitating classroom conflicts and fostering inclusive environments. For advanced facilitators, consider training in mediation, conflict de-escalation, and restorative practices. Audit your own strengths and deficits. Engage with colleagues to share best practices and strategies.

One of the institutions we spoke with has implemented a training program involving nearly one-third of their faculty and staff. This initiative operates through semester-based cohorts, commencing with a 2-day opening workshop and structured dialogue sessions. Subsequently, cohort members convene every 2 weeks during lunch, facilitated by faculty peers, to discuss topics such as classroom climate, navigating challenging conversations, and experimenting with new teaching techniques. The organizers have now expanded the training to include student-facing staff. This initiative fosters collaboration across traditional institutional boundaries, leading to the development of new relationships among participants

CDI Professional Development Offerings for Faculty and Staff

Research conducted by IDHE showed that students were mixed about whether they prefer faculty to disclose their personal viewpoints on controversial topics. However, the study emphasized the need for faculty to carefully consider their approach in advance.[13] It is possible to navigate difficult conversations when they arise without exhibiting bias, but it requires skill and forethought.

> **I'm worried, especially in this moment, about politicization in the classroom and the ripple effects that come from that. I remember in 2020, students complaining or raising grievances around their perception of propagandizing in the classroom. That's something that I'm trying to be thoughtful about.**
> **– Staff**

13 Thomas, N. (2019). *Readiness for discussing democracy in supercharged political times.* Institute for Democracy and Higher Education. https://dgmg81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Initiatives/IDHE/idhe-discussing-democracy.pdf

Foundations in Facilitating Dialogue

This half-day virtual professional development session for faculty, staff, and student leaders focuses on equipping participants with skills for facilitating meaningful conversations on contentious issues. The session includes out-of-the-box strategies to proactively foster a culture of trust, techniques for supporting students' mindset development, and skills for engaging across differences. It also covers specific tactics for intervening in tense moments of conflict.

Dialogue Facilitation Certification

This 20-hour certification program empowers student-facing staff and student leaders with the skills to confidently facilitate difficult conversations on campus as they arise. The program will equip participants with facilitation techniques and intervention strategies so that they can support students during high-pressure moments, regardless of the situation. After successfully completing the program and demonstrating competency, participants will receive a certification in campus dialogue facilitation from CDI.

Strategy

9

Embrace novel counterprotest techniques.

Encourage students to consider organizing counterprogramming as opposed to counterprotests. For many student groups, a counter program that draws attention away from the controversial speaker is more likely to meet their goals. It is even better if the counterprogram serves to build community or to show support for groups who may feel marginalized by the speaker's statements.

❝ A controversial speaker was booked to come on campus. The campus leadership had a great conversation about 'What do we do? We believe in free speech.' If you believe in free speech, that includes the people you don't like to hear. So make it clear to [the speaker] they cannot encourage violence. And the students had a concert. They had a little carnival going. So what could have been awful turned into almost a nonevent." – President

Strategy

10

Ask students about their postelection preferences.

Making assumptions about what campus community members need can unleash unanticipated backlash. Before the announcement of results, collaborate with students to discuss and determine what support they anticipate requiring after the election. Schedule designated conversation spaces in advance, and be ready to facilitate open discussions for processing thoughts and emotions. In the days after election results are announced, draw from insights gleaned from prior electoral experiences to ready campuses for fostering well-being services. Establish dedicated platforms where students, faculty, and staff can engage in facilitated intimate discussions to process election outcomes.

By taking these proactive steps, college staff and faculty can create an environment that encourages healthy debate, critical thinking, and respectful dialogue while preparing for potential conflicts related to the 2024 presidential election.

"

Our students really do want to engage across differences, but nobody's role-modeled that for them. We need to help them develop the skills and then have the experiences of doing it.

— President

Higher Education Bridge–Builders Provider Landscape

Nonpartisan organizations can also support forums, deliberative dialogues, and skill building to accompany such programming. Scan this QR code for a landscape view of the bridge-building organizations that serve U.S. higher education institutions.

These group structures provide diverse opportunities for college students to engage in meaningful discussions, gain a deeper understanding of the electoral process, and actively participate in the democratic system during the 2024 presidential election and beyond.

"

How do we use what's going to be a contentious election to strengthen what we do on our campuses? This election gives us a chance to push back on what author Amanda Ripley calls conflict entrepreneurs and to reclaim our central mission, which is to educate students—to recenter higher education on the search for truth. Our campuses need to be places where students learn to work across differences because the future of the country really depends on that."

– President

Conclusion

Engaging across lines of difference not only provides an opportunity for personal learning and growth for students on campus but also benefits the entire community. When individuals with diverse views interact, the exchange of ideas can lead to innovative thinking, effective problem-solving, and community resilience. The ability to navigate difficult conversations cultivated through this process contributes to the improvement of our national cultural landscape. Nevertheless, on some campuses, students hesitate to engage in discussions on "political matters" because they do not want to cause offense or incur potential repercussions from their peers or their instructors. Such apprehension poses a significant threat to the vitality of our democracy.

Encouragingly, research indicates that almost all students, including liberals, moderates, and conservatives, agree on the importance of listening with an open mind (94%) and understanding each other's experiences through empathy (90%).[17] Although students express eagerness to practice these principles, they depend on institutions to provide opportunities for skill-building experiences. The upcoming 2024 national election presents a unique chance to meet this need. Rather than a crisis that needs mitigating, the election can serve as a platform for reinforcing the core values of a campus culture that celebrates differences.

Voting for the president of the United States should be a cause for celebration, especially for college students, many of whom are first-time voters. Despite the constant conflict portrayed in the 24-hour news cycle, many higher education institutions already have structures in place to navigate campus conflicts. The Israel–Hamas conflict has put some of those structures to the test, but it offers invaluable lessons for the fall. Every conflict provides the opportunity to teach about free speech and freedom of expression. Treating the 2024 national election as another form of conflict allows administrations, faculty, and staff to leverage existing infrastructure. The key to success lies in adopting a unified, campuswide approach rooted in institutional values and trust. By showcasing the positive impact of universities on fostering understanding, curiosity, and a willingness to engage respectfully, we can rewrite the narrative surrounding higher education and can emphasize its essential role in shaping informed and engaged citizens.

17   Duong, M., Hawkins, S., Welker, K., Duong, F., Oshinski, P., & Yudkin, D. (2023, September 21). Free speech and inclusion: How college students are navigating shifting speech norms. Constructive Dialogue Institute & More In Common. https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/collegesurvey