

# Bridging Differences in Higher Education Playbook

Research-based practices to  
foster dialogue, connection,  
and belonging on campus



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# Why Bridge on Campus?



# Why Did We Create This Playbook?

College students today say they want their campus to expose them to diverse people and ideas and help them navigate these differences. One recent [survey](#) found that 94% of students agree that “we should listen to others with an open mind, including those with whom we disagree,” and 90% believe in the importance of understanding others’ experiences through empathy.

However, the reality on campuses has been very different: That same survey found that nearly half of college students refrain from sharing their opinions in the classroom for fear of offending their peers; one in five has actively “called out,” punished, or “canceled” another person or group.

A [survey](#) from the Knight Foundation found that the number of students who think their free speech rights are secure decreased by 30 percentage points from 2016 to 2024. During this same period, we have seen record-level spikes in [antisemitic](#), [Islamophobic](#), and [anti-LGBTQ+](#) incidents on campuses.

In response to these trends, since 2021 we have supported more than 200 campus leaders—students, faculty, staff, and administrators—through the Bridging Differences in Higher Education Learning Fellowship that we run through our Bridging Differences program at UC Berkeley’s Greater Good Science Center (GGSC). As part of the fellowship, participants learn research-based strategies for fostering constructive dialogue, connections, and understanding across group lines. They then explore how to apply these strategies in classrooms and across nearly every aspect of campus life, from first-year seminars to residence halls, student clubs, campus media, and beyond.

A goal of this playbook—which builds on our very popular [Bridging Differences Playbook](#), released in 2020—is to share these research-based strategies with many more campus professionals, empowering them to reduce toxic polarization and division, promote dialogue and understanding, and strengthen feelings of respect and belonging in their campus community.

It also features dozens of real-world examples, including from our Fellows, that show how campuses can foster critical skills for bridge-building and help their members come together across varied backgrounds and perspectives.

Building on these case studies, along with lessons from relevant research, we want this playbook to serve as both an inspiration and a tactical guide to bridging differences on your campus.

While this is complicated, often challenging work, you don't have to go it alone or start from scratch. By drawing on the science and stories of bridging differences that we have synthesized here, you have a starting place and a springboard for your own good work—and you are joining a community that's changing the culture of higher education, one bridge at a time.



### REFLECTION EXERCISE

- Why did you start to read this playbook?
- What are you hoping to learn?

# What Does Bridging Differences Mean in Higher Education?

Before you dive into this playbook, we need to clarify what we mean and don't mean by bridging differences in the context of higher education. At the Greater Good Science Center, we define bridging differences as both: (a) seeing the humanity of people or groups whose backgrounds or views differ from your own; *and* (b) better understanding their perspectives. It doesn't require endorsing or even agreeing with that other perspective, but it does lay the groundwork for more positive attitudes and relationships rather than exacerbating conflict or division.

On campuses, this doesn't mean that everyone agrees and gets along all the time. It means staying open to the possibility that your way of doing things isn't the only way; that some of your beliefs or assumptions might be incomplete or mistaken; and that engaging with people or groups who don't look, think, or act like you—in the classroom, dining hall, dorms, or beyond—is at the heart of what

higher education is for: expanding our perspectives, deepening our understanding of how the world works, and learning to live and work together in a diverse, pluralistic society.

When this is part of a campus's culture, it can take many different forms: a student-run dialogue club, a dinner during orientation where everyone shares an important story about their lives, a class assignment to experience and reflect on a culture different from your own, or a facilitated conflict-resolution session where faculty and administrators seek to understand each other's needs.

Bridging asks you to bring your full self to the experience; your story, your commitments. And from that place, the challenge is: Can you listen to someone else's story and *try* to understand where they're coming from, even if they seem different from you?

As important as knowing what bridging is, it's important to know what it is *not*:

- **Bridging does not require you to put yourself in harm's way—to bridge with someone who threatens your personal safety or your right to exist.**

For this reason, bridging is not the right choice with every person, in every situation.

- **Bridging isn't about convincing or converting.** It's not a strategy to win an argument. If that's your motivation for trying to engage with someone different from you, there's a good chance you'll wind up further apart than when you started.

- **Bridging does not require compromise, neutrality, or reaching consensus.**

You can disagree. You can speak your truth. And you can do so without abandoning your values or your identity. It means being clear about your values and being open to understanding how others came to theirs.

- **Bridging is also not yours to do alone.** All sides must be willing to engage, with openness and respect. It's not your job alone to carry the weight of understanding, especially when the conditions for bridging don't yet exist, like when there's no mutual willingness to engage, no baseline of respect, or very real threats to one side's safety or dignity.



### REFLECTION EXERCISE

- What kinds of differences or conflicts on your campus are you hoping to bridge?
- What potential barriers do you see to this work on your campus? How might you overcome them?

# Why Is It Important to Bridge Differences in Higher Education?

The skills of bridging differences may seem “soft”—nice to have, but not crucial to students’ success or to the health of college campuses. They can seem especially frivolous at a time when higher education faces crises like funding cuts, an upcoming “enrollment cliff,” astronomical costs of attendance, and even questions about the value of a college education in an age of artificial intelligence.

But research suggests that the skills of bridging differences are actually essential—both to fulfill the academic mission of the university and to prepare students for success at work, as community members, and in their personal lives.

Below, we elaborate on five key, research-backed reasons why it’s so important to nurture the skills of bridging differences on college campuses.

## **1. To address the conflicts that have divided campuses.**

Campuses have been on the front lines of all kinds of social and political conflicts, from debates over free speech to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which have damaged their cultures and undermined their academic missions. Deliberately teaching the skills of bridge-building can help an entire campus body—including students, faculty, staff, and administrators—become less polarized and divided and instead use these conflicts as opportunities for learning.

**“Student leaders from our programs are often included in stakeholder conversations with administrators when a campus crisis arises. They’re able to better address these situations because of the relationships and skills the students developed through our bridging programs.”**

— Lane McLelland, Executive Director of the Crossroads Civic Engagement Center, The University of Alabama

**2. To promote belonging.** There are ongoing mental health and loneliness crises on campuses, where students crave connection and a sense of belonging. Bridging differences makes more students feel like they have a place on their campus, where their views are heard and their identities are respected. That improves their retention and academic achievement, not to mention their overall quality of life, particularly for students who are at the greatest risk of feeling marginalized.

**“In our campus surveys, we’ve found this work has moved the dial on improving students’ sense of belonging at the college.”**

— DT Graves, Vice President of Student Affairs, Claremont McKenna College

### **3. To foster intellectual growth.**

Learning to bridge differences promotes learning in general. For instance, research has found that curious students perform better academically, perhaps because they’re more motivated to seek out new knowledge. Similarly, students can solve problems more effectively when they have the ability to consider and understand other perspectives.

### **4. To prepare students to be**

**engaged citizens.** Bridge-building skills—like communicating effectively with those who don’t already share your views—go beyond supporting academic success. They prepare students to participate in a diverse and democratic society, where they’ll need to understand, appeal to, and find common cause with people who don’t

think exactly like they do. Incidentally, these are also the skills that make good neighbors, friends, and partners.

**5. To equip students for the 21st century workplace.** The skills that students develop in order to bridge differences are skills that will help them succeed in the workforce. These include skills like collaborative problem solving, emotional regulation, conflict management, and seeing a problem from multiple perspectives. They'll also need the

ability to collaborate with diverse groups—which requires openness to different viewpoints and cultures—and engage in constructive dialogue to work through disagreements and find productive solutions (rather than spiraling into toxic conflict). Campus leaders we've surveyed also find these skills help students solve problems, rise to challenges, and manage stress in new or uncertain situations—all competencies that prepare them for a wide range of careers and leadership roles.



### REFLECTION EXERCISE

- How would you describe the impact bridge building can have on your campus?
- Why do you think it is important to invest in it?

# What's the Connection Between Bridging and Character?

The bridging practices in this playbook are more than skill-building tools. They do something deeper—they help strengthen our character.

By “character,” we mean the collection of moral qualities (virtues) that guide our identity and behavior, especially in how we treat others. These virtues—such as curiosity, compassion, courage, and patience—are foundational to bridging differences. They influence not only our willingness to engage across divides, but also how constructively we do so.

For example, curiosity motivates us to learn more about someone's story, while virtues like humility and justice help ensure that curiosity is expressed with respect. Courage gives us the fortitude to listen to someone even when their perspective is difficult to hear—anchored in a commitment to the dignity and humanity of all people.

These virtues are not fixed traits; they grow over time, shaped by our

environments, our actions, daily practices, and experiences with others. When we practice bridging differences—by leaning into discomfort, slowing down to listen, or opening ourselves to someone with different beliefs or experiences—we cultivate the very qualities that enable us to connect more deeply with people whose views or backgrounds differ from our own.

In doing so, bridging doesn't just shift what we do—it shapes who we are. In other words, character virtues help us bridge differences—and bridging differences helps to build character virtues. Here's how we define these virtues in the context of bridging:

At the heart of bridging work are two guiding principles: **Love** and **Justice**. Together, they form an orientation that shapes both *how* and *why* we engage across lines of difference. We assess every other virtue in this framework by this question: *Does it contribute to a more loving and just world?*

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### How we ground our purpose and approach to bridging

#### Love

A conscious choice to recognize the full humanity of others. It fuels our desire to connect, even when we disagree, and to treat people with care and respect.

#### Justice

A commitment to confronting inequity, reducing exclusion, and creating environments where everyone belongs. Anchored in the inherent value and dignity of all people, justice calls us to recognize unequal conditions and work to transform them.

## BRIDGING VIRTUES

### How we embody love and justice in action

#### Intellectual Humility

Recognizing that our knowledge is limited and our views may be wrong—including our assumptions about others. This creates openness to learning without abandoning our core convictions.

#### Curiosity

A desire to understand others and explore perspectives different from our own, guided by respect for the other person's dignity. It involves giving genuine weight to new information and resisting defensiveness or premature judgment.

#### Courage

The willingness to take values-driven risks in service of connection. This might include engaging with others when it's hard and when discomfort, conflict, or fear might tempt us to withdraw.

### Patience

The capacity to sustain bridging over time, hold tension, tolerate discomfort, and trust that growth is possible, even without immediate resolution.

### Empathy

The deliberate—and often difficult—choice to engage emotionally with someone else’s experience, even when that experience is unfamiliar or challenging to our own worldview.

### Compassion

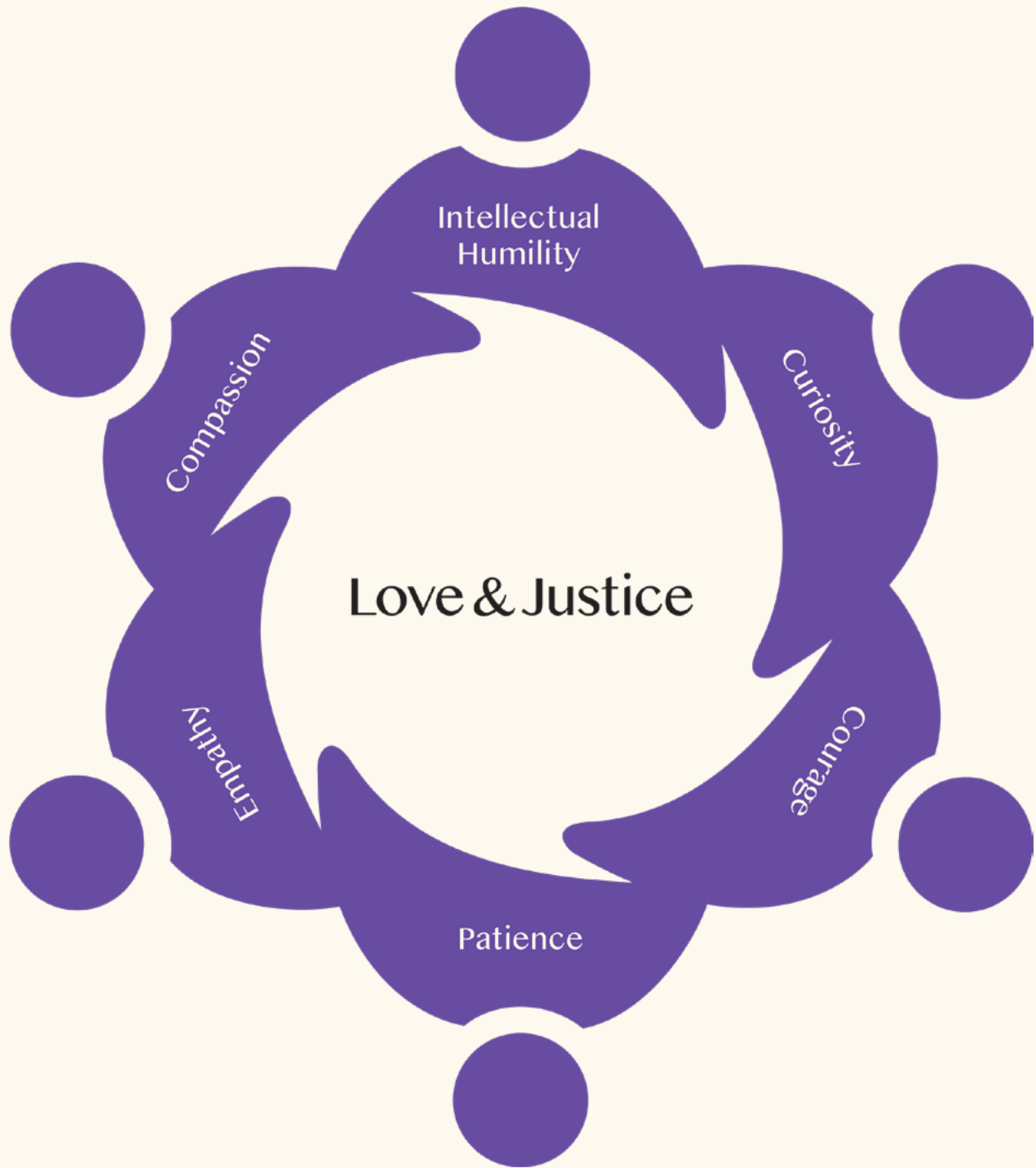
Sensing the suffering of others and feeling motivated to relieve it, whether by offering care and support or by standing up for them when they are harmed or excluded.

Throughout this playbook, we highlight how bridge-building draws upon and helps develop character virtues. At the beginning of each practice, you’ll see a set of virtue tags indicating the specific virtues linked to that practice, highlighting the many connections between character development and bridge-building.

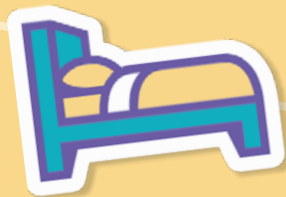


### REFLECTION EXERCISE

- Choose one of the virtues named above that you feel drawn to—not because you’ve mastered it, but because you want to grow it.
- What’s one way you could begin to nurture it?



# Where to Bridge on Campus?



# Mapping Opportunities to Bridge on Campus

Opportunities to bridge differences aren't limited to structured dialogue programs in a classroom. They can happen in almost every space on a campus. They can guide how offices of residential life make housing assignments or shape the design of an orientation program for the incoming class. Student leaders can use these skills on athletics fields or in Greek life. They can be integrated into study abroad offices or a center for civic engagement. Bridging can be promoted, even implicitly, by exhibitions at the university art gallery, in programming at the library, or through official university marketing or student-run media.

Capitalizing on all of these opportunities relies on understanding the different forms that bridge-building can take in

different settings—and the different ways that bridge-building skills can be nurtured.

The map below highlights the different areas of campus life that can promote bridge-building and provides real-world examples of what these efforts look like in action. It includes examples from the GGSC's Bridging Differences in Higher Education Learning Fellows, as well as examples shared by several of our partners—the [Institute for Citizens & Scholars](#), [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#), [Essential Partners](#), [Sustained Dialogue Institute](#), and [BridgeUSA](#)—based on their work with campuses across the country. We hope it helps you envision similar programs on your own campus and perhaps even spurs creative ideas for taking this work in a new direction.



## REFLECTION EXERCISE

- What ideas does the following list spark for your campus?
- Where is bridging work already happening on your campus?
- What existing activities or programs on campus could be easily adapted to promote or incorporate bridging?
- Where might you develop a new effort—what resources would it require, and whose buy-in would you need?

# Campus Bridging Map



Clubs and Events



Admissions



Galleries and Museums



Classrooms



Libraries



Administration/  
Office of the President



Residence Halls



Dining Halls



Co-curricular Programs



Athletics



Orientation Programs



Religious and  
Interfaith Initiatives

## Admissions



- The **University of Chicago** gives extra weight to admissions essays that are focused on the importance of open discourse and intellectual engagement as a core element of the educational experience.
- Schools like **Vanderbilt University** and **Northwestern University** are now accepting “dialogue” portfolios from [Schoolhouse.world](https://www.schoolhouse.world/), a platform co-founded by Sal Khan, the founder of Khan Academy. High schoolers will log into a Zoom meeting with other students and a peer tutor to discuss topics like the future of higher education, artificial intelligence, and free will, and rate one another on traits like empathy, curiosity, and kindness.

## Administration / Office of the President



- The **City University of New York (CUNY)** system launched a [Constructive Dialogue Initiative](#) across its 25 campuses to foster an environment where students, faculty, and staff can openly exchange ideas, even amid disagreement. It includes training for top leadership at all campuses, a dialogue facilitation certification program for student-facing staff, workshops for faculty and student leaders, and training for students in bridge-building skills.
- **Dartmouth University** created [Dartmouth Dialogues](#), a campus-wide initiative to foster conversations and skills that bridge political and personal divides. It includes courses explicitly focused on constructive dialogue, training faculty

to facilitate challenging conversations, and hosting co-curricular workshops and public events on hot-button issues for students.

- **Shenandoah University** launched Shenandoah Conversations, a program that aims to equip faculty and students with the communication skills to confront disruption and difference with curiosity, mutual understanding, and respect. They've engaged more than 150 faculty members and 3,400 students.
- The **University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA)** hired an administrative member to lead bridging efforts across the university.
- The **University of Connecticut** is rolling out a core competency in dialogue, which involves training faculty across schools to scale these skills in curricula within and across each campus.
- **Pomona College** built a six-year Presidential Initiative to strengthen campus-wide ability to bridge differences. This includes capacity building for faculty chairs, the development of a shared vocabulary and framework for addressing campus challenges, and dialogue-enhanced coursework.

## Athletics



- In the Farmer Fellows program at the **University of Mary Washington**, student athletes are trained in dialogue skills and serve as bridging ambassadors for their teams and the rest of campus.
- The Engaged Athlete Fellowship provides leadership training to student athletes at several universities across the country to strengthen non-partisan civic participation on their teams, on their campuses, and in their broader communities.

## Classrooms



- A professor at **Samford University** assigns students homework to pick a social issue on which they have a strong opinion—and write an essay from the opposing viewpoint.
- Early in the semester, a humanities professor at Mid Michigan College asks students to complete exercises that help them find commonalities with class peers who they didn't know before. She has found that the exercises—and resulting connections—encourage more compassionate dialogue and a freer exchange of ideas, fostering better classroom discussions.
- At **Colorado College**, the "How to Deeply Listen" class trains students in interview techniques, nonjudgmental curiosity, and deep listening skills. The course is part of a broader institutional commitment to center dialogue in campuswide culture change.

## Clubs and Events



- An instructor at the **University of Texas at Austin** asks undergraduates to broaden their understanding of diverse populations by training them to conduct 1-on-1 interviews with other students and community members using skills like empathic listening and perspective taking.
- **The University of Pittsburgh** created a “Governing Deep Differences” speaker series featuring talks by authors, academics, and community leaders that offer insights into how Americans can find common ground at a time of deep political and cultural divides.
- **Pomona College** offers student-facing programming that includes a monthly speaker series, trustee–student dialogues on cancel culture, and summer student leadership summits. Each semester, dozens of students, faculty, and staff are trained as moderators to facilitate conversations that foster a culture of constructive engagement across campus.

## Co-Curricular Programs



- The Deliberative Citizenship Initiative at **Davidson College** trains students to apply bridging skills, including the ability to listen actively and to understand the arguments of others, when volunteering in diverse areas of the community.
- **College Corps** volunteers across colleges in California are trained in bridging differences

skills as they engage in community service in the neighborhoods surrounding their schools.

- **Harvard University** created a Bridging Fund that provides grants to student-run initiatives that seek to bridge differences on campus.
- **Sacramento City College** opened its food pantry for student tours to help them better understand food insecurity and its impact on everyday life.

## Dining Halls



- **Tufts University** hosts small group conversations in the dining hall, moderated by one faculty member and one student, where other faculty members and students can constructively discuss important topics while enjoying a meal together.

## Galleries and Museums



- University Art Gallery at **San Diego State University** features an exhibition dedicated to challenging stereotypical Western perspectives of the Amazon, featuring the work of many artists who are Indigenous inhabitants of the forest.
- At **The University of the South**, one student spearheaded a series of dialogues about representation in campus art, in collaboration with two art and art history professors. The dialogues inspired portraiture students to include more diverse figures in their art, such as the first Black tenured faculty member and the first Black students at the university.

- **Fort Lewis College** is launching an interactive exhibition in its campus museum that explores what it means to belong—at the college and in Durango, Colorado. Through reflective activities, art, and storytelling, the exhibit invites participants to engage with the layered histories of the region and to reflect on their own connections to it.

## Libraries



- At **Baylor University**, the Moody Library fosters connection and understanding across differences through visual art and music. One installation—a transdisciplinary collaboration combining data and fiber art—explored the development of gratitude in Muslim American youth, advancing interfaith understanding within the context of a Baptist institution. Meanwhile, the Black Gospel Archive and Listening Center offers an immersive experience that builds empathy through listening, inviting students, faculty, staff, and visitors to engage with and appreciate the contributions of Black artists.
- At the **University of Arkansas**, campus libraries partnered with the multicultural center to create pop-up libraries that promote collections that highlight voices and stories from people of diverse heritage. Some events included opportunities to engage directly with featured authors. These efforts help students recognize and engage with a range of perspectives and backgrounds they may encounter as they bridge divides.

## Orientation Programs



- At **Catawba College**, incoming students begin their campus journey with a mandatory student retreat before courses begin, aimed at building a sense of belonging, increasing civic engagement, and providing civic discourse opportunities.
- **Claremont McKenna College** hosts a dinner during orientation for incoming first-year students where they can better understand and connect with peers from different backgrounds, using prompts like, “What stories from home are you bringing with you?”

## Religious and Interfaith Initiatives



- Theological Horizons, a Christian ministry based at **The University of Virginia**, developed Deeper Dialogues, a series of carefully structured and facilitated small-group conversations for the campus community around profound questions about what it means to be human.
- At **Miami University in Ohio**, the Interfaith Center is creating an arts and dialogue project around their first-hand experiences with bridge-building, which will include a photo exhibition and a day of dialogue.
- **Iliff School of Theology in Colorado** convenes multifaith leaders to heal divisions in their community—across lines of religion, race, politics, and economic status—through monthly gatherings that share food, culture, music, and ritual. Together, these religious leaders aim to expand bridge-

building conversations within and between their faith communities.

## Residence Halls



- **Duke University's Transformative Ideas Living-Learning Community** has students opt into dinners and discussions with their residence hallmates around the concepts of civility and dialogue.
- Resident Advisors at **Washington State University** lead a group conversation that encourages their floor or hall residents to talk about the people, traditions and customs, and objects that have shaped their identities, values, and beliefs—a way of strengthening more human connections (incentivized by free pizza).

# How to Bridge on Campus



# PREPARE

## How We Cultivate a Bridging Mindset

Social psychology research suggests that we often form judgments before we even realize it. Our brains rush to make sense of situations, filling in gaps and drawing conclusions with incomplete information. This tendency helps us navigate the world efficiently—but it can also lead us astray. When we rely on mental shortcuts, we're more likely to misunderstand others or "other" them entirely, viewing them as unworthy of our respect and concern.

The skills in this section help us slow down, notice our assumptions, and stay open and curious. They encourage us to approach others with a mindset that makes bridging differences not only possible, but more likely to succeed.



Practice  
Mindfulness



Question  
Your Assumptions



See the Person,  
Not the Label



Seek and Promote Counter-  
Stereotypical Information



Imagine Another  
Point of View



Expand Your  
Views and Circles



# Practice Mindfulness

**Research suggests we can reduce social biases by building moment-to-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, and surroundings through mindfulness practices. On college campuses, mindfulness can help students, faculty, staff, and administrators stay grounded in difficult conversations, navigate conflicts, and manage stress in high-stakes situations—whether it’s a campus protest, a controversial speaker, or a complex classroom dialogue.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Patience](#) | Draws on: [Curiosity](#) [Empathy](#) [Courage](#)



## PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

# How to Do It

- 1. Find a relaxed, comfortable position.** Sit on a chair or floor cushion. Keep your back upright, but not too tight. Hands resting wherever they're comfortable. Relax your gaze or close your eyes, whatever feels most comfortable for you.
- 2. Notice and relax your body.** Try to notice the shape of your body, its weight. Let yourself relax and become curious about your body seated here—the sensations, the touch, the connection with the floor or the chair. Relax any areas of tightness or tension. Just breathe.
- 3. Tune into your breath.** Feel the natural flow of breath—in, out. Allow your breath to flow naturally. Try to let go of the need to control each breath. Notice where you feel your breath in your body. It might be in your abdomen. It may be in your chest or throat or in your nostrils.
- 4. Stay here for five to seven minutes.** Notice your breath, in silence. From time to time, you'll get lost in thought, then return to your breath.
- 5. After a few minutes, once again notice your body, your whole body, seated.** Take a deep breath. Let yourself relax even more deeply and then offer yourself some appreciation for doing this practice.
- 6. You don't need to sit in silence to practice.** Mindfulness can happen in real time—pausing before responding in a tough conversation, noticing your breath when emotions run high, or checking in with your body during a disagreement.





## PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

# The Practice on Campus

Leading up to the 2024 elections, faculty, students, and staff at the University of Maryland led a series of mindfulness exercises in classrooms, student centers, and virtual spaces. These meditations and mindfulness-based practices were designed to help the campus community manage stress, regulate emotions, and engage in more productive dialogue across political and other differences.

In particular they focused on body-based awareness—they used breathing and movement-based mindfulness exercises

to help them tune into their bodies and understand how they were really feeling in a given moment, and they used short meditations on paying attention to their breath to help them manage difficult emotions in moments of distress.

They also emphasized research showing that mindfulness can interrupt unconscious bias, making it a useful tool for reducing prejudice and fostering a more inclusive campus community. Guest speakers invited to campus reaffirmed these lessons.

**“When doing this work, we focus so much on the thinking, conscious brain—promoting intellectual humility or fostering emotional intelligence. But when it comes to emotion regulation in interactions across differences, there’s so much to learn and honor in tapping into the wisdom of the body, as well.”**

*— Beth Douthirt-Cohen, PhD, Clinical Faculty & Director of Strategic Initiatives,  
University of Maryland School of Public Health*



## PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

# Where to Try It



### CLUBS AND EVENTS

Before campus-wide events, offer guided mindfulness sessions to help students and faculty approach conversations with greater ability to lower perceived stress.



### HEALTH/MEDICAL SCHOOLS

Collaborate with health and medical schools to highlight research on how mindfulness supports stress reduction and social connection.



### RESIDENCE HALLS

Train RAs and student leaders to introduce short mindfulness exercises before conversations where they're mediating a conflict.



### CLASSROOMS

Whenever possible, begin classes, meetings, or trainings—especially those that may involve tension or conflict—with a brief mindfulness practice. This “primes” people to be more open and receptive—and less emotionally reactive—during difficult or spirited discussions.



### LIBRARIES

Create “mindfulness spaces” on campus—quiet areas in libraries or student centers where students can take a few minutes to breathe, reflect, or decompress.



## PRACTICE MINDFULNESS

# Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Kang, Y., Gray, J. R., & Dovidio, J. F. (2014). The nondiscriminating heart: Lovingkindness meditation training decreases implicit intergroup bias. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 143(3), 1306–1313.

Lueke, A., & Gibson, B. (2015). Mindfulness meditation reduces implicit age and race bias: The role of reduced automaticity of responding. *Social Psychological and Personality Science*, 6(3), 284–291.

Price-Blackshear, M. A. et al. (2017). Mindfulness practices moderate the association between intergroup anxiety and outgroup attitudes. *Mindfulness*, 8(5), 1172–1183.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
[How Mindfulness Can Create Calmer Classrooms](#)

**Exercise:**  
[Greater Good in Action’s Mindfulness Activities](#)

**Inspiration:**  
[University of Washington’s Resilience Lab](#)





# Question Your Assumptions

**If you assume that someone on campus dislikes or distrusts you—or has harmful motives—you’re likely to approach them with anxiety that can negatively impact the interaction before it even begins. Without a doubt, sometimes these concerns are justified—but too often, they end up undermining connection. If you’re willing to question your assumptions and instead approach the other person with curiosity, the experience is likely to be better for both of you.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Intellectual Humility](#) | Draws on: [Curiosity](#) [Courage](#)



## QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

# How to Do It

Before you engage with someone across differences, question the assumptions you're holding about that other person.

Try writing them down. If some of them feel negative or leave you anxious, pause and ask yourself where they might be coming from. Often our assumptions grow out of past experiences of being mistreated—or even from stereotypes we've absorbed along the way.

Try to remind yourself that the person you are meeting is not who mistreated you or the person from a disturbing news story or social media post.

You can even practice this during a conversation: The next time you feel slighted in an interaction, pause to ask yourself whether your interpretation of what they're saying is influenced by past experiences that may not have much to do with the person before you.



## QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

# The Practice on Campus

On the first day of classes at Linn-Benton Community College, Speech Communication faculty member Mark Urista leads an activity where students share a little bit about themselves with one another using a prompt like: “What is something that people wouldn’t know about you just by looking at you?”

This helps students question initial assumptions they might make about one another, which creates a less threatening classroom environment.

The following week, he builds on this by assigning students to write and deliver a speech that identifies a social problem

they really care about. Afterwards, the class responds to prompts like: “Did the speaker convince you that there’s a problem?”, “Did the speaker convince you that their solution will work?”, “Did the speaker convince you that you will personally benefit?” Why or why not?

He then asks the students receiving feedback to assume good intent: their peers are answering these prompts to help them learn and grow. According to Urista, that framing leads students to say, “Oh, yeah, I never really considered that point,” rather than taking the feedback too personally or straining classroom relationships.

## QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

# Where to Try It



### CLASSROOMS

Frame class discussions with a reminder: “Let’s assume that everyone in this room is here to learn and engage, not to tear each other down. If something is said that bothers you, consider asking a question with curiosity before making an assumption.”



### CLASSROOMS

As an instructor, assume students’ questions come from genuine curiosity rather than an attempt to challenge your authority. This small shift can make classroom or one-on-one discussions more open and dynamic.



### ADMINISTRATION

When campus administrators respond to student activism, engage student leaders as partners in problem-solving rather than seeing them as adversaries. Assume that their concerns—whether about campus policy, funding, or inclusion—are grounded in real experiences.



## QUESTION YOUR ASSUMPTIONS

# Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Mendoza-Denton, R., Page-Gould, E., & Pietrzak, J. (2006). Mechanisms for coping with status-based rejection expectations. In Levin S., van Laar C., (Eds.), *Stigma and group inequality: Social psychological perspectives*, the Claremont symposium on Applied Social Psychology (151–169). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.


Trawalter, S., Adam, E. K., Chase–Lansdale, P. L., & Richeson, J. A. (2012). Concerns about appearing prejudiced get under the skin: Stress responses to interracial contact in the moment and across time. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(3), 682–693.

Turner, R. N., & Cameron, L. (2016). Confidence in contact: A new perspective on promoting cross–group friendship among children and adolescents. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 10(1), 212–246.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
[Even Your Political Opponents Want to Believe They’re Good People](#)

**Article:**  
[How Curiosity Can Help Us Overcome Disconnection](#)





## See the Person, Not the Label

**We often see others on campus in terms of their group membership: He's an old professor, she's in a sorority, they're the international students. When we judge people solely based on the labels that represent them, we tend to feel more threatened by them and count them as "the other."**

**But according to research, when we instead view people in terms of their own individual tastes and preferences, we feel less threatened by those who might seem "not like us."**

### VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Empathy** **Compassion** | Draws on: **Love**

**SEE THE PERSON, NOT THE LABEL**

## How to Do It

The essence of this practice is to shift away from seeing another person as an anonymous member of a group and instead view them as a unique human being. This could mean looking for those features and quirks that define them as an individual, just like you.

To get into that mindset, ask yourself questions about that person's particular tastes, preferences, or experiences. You don't need to discover the actual answers to those questions—just thinking about them can be enough.

For instance:

- Do they prefer carrots or broccoli?
- What was a low point and a high point of their week?
- Do they like to exercise on campus?
- What's their favorite place to eat?
- How do they like to finish their class assignments: staying up late or waking up early?

**SEE THE PERSON, NOT THE LABEL**

## The Practice on Campus



Lane McLelland is the director of a program at The University of Alabama that invites 6-10 student leaders into a credit-earning course, including representatives of student organizations like the Black Student Union and Greek Life council. These leaders impact thousands of students through their work across campus. During the class, they learn skills to help them facilitate conflicts and challenging conversations on campus.

McLelland starts each class with an exercise called “High Tide, Low Tide, Roll Tide,” which is a play on both the icebreaker “Highs and Lows” and the popular “Roll Tide!” saying at the university. Each student leader goes around and shares a low point (Low Tide)

and high point (High Tide) of their week, as well as something they’re looking forward to the next week (Roll Tide). It’s a short and simple exercise, but McLelland says this has helped the students warm up to each other as human beings—rather than only seeing each other as members of the groups they represent.

Though they may at first experience activities like this one as an insignificant use of class time, students consistently report—even years later in longitudinal studies—that it was the small, somewhat playful times of engagement that allowed them to make everyday life connections. These moments ultimately helped them build the relationships and trust strong enough to hold the inevitable tensions of tougher conversations.



## SEE THE PERSON, NOT THE LABEL

# Where to Try It

**CLASSROOMS**

A faculty member invites students to share a favorite animal, childhood habit, or quirk. Peers are encouraged to keep that characteristic in mind whenever the classmate speaks, which helps them be seen as an individual.

**CLASSROOMS**

Integrate questions onto a learning management system like Canvas that prompt students to see the individuality of their peers.

**ADMINISTRATION**

During a planning meeting, invite administrators or faculty to explore questions like: "In small groups, find three things you have in common that aren't actually that common" or "Share a photo from your life that brings you happiness or gratitude. Why does it have that effect on you?"

**RESIDENCE HALLS**

Encourage students to decorate their dorm room door with an image of their favorite food or an object that represents their hometown. This moves beyond appearances and shares something about their personality or personal history, helping peers see them more fully as individuals and inviting conversation.

## SEE THE PERSON, NOT THE LABEL

# Learn More

**SUPPORTING RESEARCH**

Harris, L. T., & Fiske, S. T. (2007). Social groups that elicit disgust are differentially processed in mPFC. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2(1), 45–51.

Wheeler, M. E., & Fiske, S. T. (2005). Controlling racial prejudice: Social-cognitive goals affect amygdala and stereotype activation. *Psychological Science*, 16(1), 56–63.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES****Article:**

[How to Beat Stereotypes By Seeing People As Individuals](#)

**Video:**

[How to Hack Your Brains Prejudice With Veggies](#)



# Seek and Promote Counter-Stereotypical Information

The stereotypes we hold about other people or groups can shape how we interact with them—often in ways we don't even realize. But when we're exposed to information that challenges those stereotypes, our views can shift, leading to greater openness, empathy, and stronger campus relationships.

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Empathy](#) | Draws on: [Intellectual Humility](#) [Curiosity](#) [Patience](#)

**SEEK AND PROMOTE COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL INFORMATION**

## How to Do It

Start by acknowledging that stereotypes exist in every campus environment—whether about different academic disciplines, student organizations, political affiliations, or cultural backgrounds. These assumptions can shape interactions in classrooms, residence halls, and faculty meetings, often reinforcing division rather than promoting understanding.


Breaking down stereotypes requires actively seeking information that contradicts them. This can happen in small, everyday ways—like noticing how certain groups are portrayed in campus conversations, questioning assumptions about who belongs in certain academic fields, or engaging with perspectives that challenge your own.

**SEEK AND PROMOTE COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL INFORMATION**

## The Practice on Campus

At a recent internship fair at Stanford University, Thomas Schnaubelt, the executive director of the Hoover Institution's Center for Revitalizing American Institutions and a lecturer on campus, took a creative approach to engaging students: He created a quiz about rural life designed to spark reflection on stereotypes that students, especially those without lived experiences in rural communities, might unknowingly hold. The questions challenged common misconceptions while highlighting the diversity, innovation, and cultural richness that exists in rural America.

The quiz quickly became a conversation starter, drawing in students who might not have otherwise considered working in rural areas. This simple intervention not only broadened students' understanding of rural life but also encouraged them to take the next step—immersing themselves in a community they may have previously overlooked. The activity became an unexpected but highly effective recruiting strategy for the Center's pilot People, Politics, and Places Fellowship Program, designed to expose students to rural life through a spring workshop series and summer placements in towns across Alaska, California, and Wisconsin.



## SEEK AND PROMOTE COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL INFORMATION



## Where to Try It

**CLASSROOMS**

Design assignments that require students to engage with counter-stereotypical narratives. For example, students analyze media portrayals of different social groups and then seek out real-world perspectives that contradict those representations.

**CLASSROOMS**

Develop an interdisciplinary mentorship program that pairs students across majors to challenge stereotypes about people in other academic fields.

**CLASSROOMS**


Use critical media literacy to help students recognize when media frames identity and conflict in divisive or simplistic ways, and how to move beyond those frames toward shared solutions.

**FAITH/INTERFAITH OFFICES**

Encourage organizations representing different faith backgrounds to partner with each other, co-hosting events like an interfaith discussion series or service project.

**MEDIA/STORYTELLING**

Create a “Day in the Life” storytelling campaign featuring students, faculty, and staff sharing aspects of their identities or experiences that challenge common misconceptions about their communities.

**MEDIA/STORYTELLING**


University media teams can create short video campaigns or written profiles for their official communications channels that showcase the diversity of student experiences, particularly for groups that often feel misunderstood or misrepresented.

## SEEK AND PROMOTE COUNTER-STEREOTYPICAL INFORMATION

Learn More


## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Cox, W. T. L., & Devine, P. G. (2019). [The prejudice habit-breaking intervention: An empowerment-based confrontation approach.](#) In Mallett, R. K. & Monteith, M. J. (Eds.), *Confronting Prejudice and Discrimination: The Science of Changing Minds and Behaviors* (pp. 249-274). Elsevier.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
[How to Beat Stereotypes By Seeing People as Individuals](#)

**Article:**  
[How Do Stereotypes Shape Your Judgment?](#)





# Imagine Another Point of View

**Sometimes the most powerful shifts in how we see others happen entirely in our own minds. This practice invites you to vividly imagine the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of another person on campus, mentally “trying on” their point of view. Research suggests that this kind of perspective-taking can reduce both conscious and unconscious stereotypes by decreasing the perceived distance between you and the other person. Practicing this can help create the openness and understanding that makes deeper dialogue or collaboration across differences possible.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Empathy](#) | Draws on: [Curiosity](#) [Courage](#) [Intellectual Humility](#)



## IMAGINE ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

# How to Do It

- 1. Choose a person** you feel distant from or at odds with—someone whose background, beliefs, or identity differs from yours.
  - How might their feelings in a given situation differ from yours?
  - Can you imagine how their unique life experiences could contribute to their emotional response?
- 2. Imagine** for a moment that you are this person, walking through the world in their shoes and seeing the world through their eyes.
  - What emotions are they experiencing, and how might that feel in their body?
- 3. Notice** where their hopes, fears, or struggles feel familiar to you. Can you imagine saying, “I get that—I’ve felt something like that too”? This step helps bring them closer to you in your mind, which can reduce stereotyping and bias.



## IMAGINE ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

# The Practice on Campus

Alverno Devine, with the Kern National Network for Flourishing in Medicine (KNN), integrates this practice into medical training for students, faculty, and staff.

Participants practice in three ways:

### 1. Visualization

Students close their eyes and imagine how their supervisors see them: What might the supervisors care about? What might they notice—or miss—about the students' performance?


### 2. Written Reflection

Faculty write about their students' lived experiences and how they may be impacting the way they navigate their medical education.

### 3. Real-world Application

Students are given this prompt to practice with patients: Try to see things from where they're sitting, beyond what's on their charts. Many report using this skill not only with patients but also with colleagues, leaders, and in their personal lives.

Devine also uses creative tools like "empathy maps," where students draw a picture of the person whose perspective they're taking, and respond to prompts such as: Who is the person? What do they do? What might they feel? What are they seeing or hearing?



## IMAGINE ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

# Where to Try It

**RESIDENCE HALLS**

Use role-reversal in leadership training. Student leaders, RAs, and campus organization leaders can practice making a case for an issue from an opposing perspective to practice the skill of perspective-taking.

**GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS**

Invite students who are learning creative technologies to develop a VR experience that encourages users to imagine another point of view. Later, invite people to try out their projects at a university museum exhibition.



IMAGINE ANOTHER POINT OF VIEW

## Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Galinsky, A. D., & Moskowitz, G. B. (2000). Perspective-taking: Decreasing stereotype expression, stereotype accessibility, and in-group favoritism. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 78(4), 708-724.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Podcast:**  
[Why Listen to the Other Side?](#)





# Expand Your Views and Circles

**Bridging doesn't have to start with difficult conversations—it can start with curiosity. When we expose ourselves to new communities, perspectives, and environments, we stretch our sense of what's familiar and comfortable, and we often grow in the process. College campuses can create opportunities for students and staff to seek out new experiences that can challenge assumptions and expand understanding.**

**Research shows that when we do this, we're more open and generous in cross-group interactions—and more likely to feel connected across lines of difference. Regularly attending a campus event hosted by a cultural or identity-based group you don't belong to, or assigning extra credit for students to join a cross-group club or service project, are great ways to expand our views and circles.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Courage** | Draws on: **Curiosity** **Intellectual Humility** **Patience** **Empathy**

## EXPAND YOUR VIEWS AND CIRCLES

# How to Do It

Begin by noticing your own activities. Where do you feel most at home on campus? Who do you tend to spend time with? What perspectives dominate your conversations?

Now, consider intentionally stepping outside of those familiar spaces and acquainting yourself with individuals who you don't regularly connect with.

For instance:

- A faculty member might co-facilitate a course or event with someone who holds a different perspective, or engage with research from scholars that challenges their own thinking.
- A non-Indigenous student might regularly attend events at the Indigenous cultural center on campus to gain new insights and build relationships with peers there.

- Administrators could have conversations with student leaders from organizations with whom they haven't worked before, or they might partner with a student-led cultural organization or a faculty-led campus initiative.

The goal of expanding your activities is not to agree with everything you encounter, but to immerse yourself in different ways of thinking, feeling, and seeing the world as a way of expanding your understanding. And if it feels meaningful, invite others from your own community to join you.

### KEEP IN MIND

Superficial exposure will have limited impact; expanding your views and circles often requires deeper, ongoing engagement.

## EXPAND YOUR VIEWS AND CIRCLES

# The Practice on Campus

At Samford University, a private Christian university in Alabama, pharmacy professor Jonathan Thigpen first noticed that some students were hesitant to provide care to patients whose backgrounds differed from their own. In response, he created an assignment that required them to engage with a community that was new to them, such as by attending an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting or volunteering in a neighborhood outside of their usual environment.

Today, Thigpen continues to use this assignment as part of his curriculum. He introduces it later in the semester, after students have established trust with one another and gained some confidence in bridge building skills like listening, which they practice in class and are required to apply in the field. To truly immerse themselves and have a meaningful experience, students are encouraged to adopt a curious mindset and take practical actions to avoid feeling like outsiders (e.g., some activities may

require them to ask for permission prior to arriving).

When students return to class, Thigpen invites them to reflect on the experience of encountering diverse groups on their own terms. Many report a shift in their understanding and views, serving them well in their future roles as health care providers. Rather than approaching these groups with discomfort or stereotypes, they develop a deeper sense of connection and professional responsibility.

**“If you ask a student to do this practice, the majority won’t. But if you assign a grade for it, are very sincere about their engagement, and remind them it has a lot of meaning for their lives—I find that students usually take on that challenge.”**

*—Jonathan Thigpen, Assistant Dean for Curricular Innovation and Professional Development, Samford University*

## EXPAND YOUR VIEWS AND CIRCLES

# Where to Try It

**CLASSROOMS**

Design coursework that pushes students to engage with new perspectives. Faculty can assign students to attend a campus event outside their typical circles, interview someone with a different background, or analyze a single issue through multiple ideological lenses.

**CLASSROOMS**

Create a cross-campus shadowing program. Students and faculty can spend a day in another role—such as a STEM major shadowing a humanities student or faculty observing a colleague’s class—to expand understanding. This can also be mutual, for instance a faculty member shadows an administrator, and that administrator then shadows the faculty member in class.

**LIBRARIES**

Libraries and student centers could host film screenings, book clubs, and speaker series featuring underrepresented voices or divergent views to provide opportunities for students to encounter new perspectives.

## EXPAND YOUR VIEWS AND CIRCLES

## Learn More



## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Dys-Steenbergen, O., Wright, S. C., & Aron, A. (2016). Self-expansion motivation improves cross-group interactions and enhances self-growth. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 19(1), 60–71.

Page-Gould, E., Mendoza-Denton, R., & Tropp, L. R. (2008). With a little help from my cross-group friend: Reducing anxiety in intergroup contexts through cross-group friendship. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 95(5), 1080–1094.

Paolini, S., Wright, S. C., Dys-Steenbergen, O., & Favara, I. (2016). Self-expansion and intergroup contact: Expectancies and motives to self-expand lead to greater interest in outgroup contact and more positive intergroup relations. *Journal of Social Issues*, 72(3), 450–471.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**

Four Campuses Where Students Are Having Hard Conversations

**Inspiration:**

Interfaith America's Guide for Religious Site Visits



# ACT

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## What We Do In the Moment

Even with extensive preparation, it can be incredibly difficult to stay calm and collected during a hard conversation—and it can seem even harder to engage in dialogue where all parties feel heard and understood, especially when trying to bridge differences in culture or worldview. So when you find yourself in the thick of a classroom discussion or faculty meeting where a disagreement arises, what do you do?

For starters, you can draw on the next group of practices. You can use them in the moment to help you listen with empathy, understand where other people are coming from, and respond to them with greater care and sensitivity. Listening, in particular, is foundational to these skills—and in fact for all of bridging differences.



Listen with  
Empathy



Focus on  
Personal Stories



Practice Perspective  
Getting and Giving



Try  
Self-Distancing



Understand  
Values



Find Shared  
Identities



# Listen with Empathy

Whether in the classroom, residence halls, department meetings, or elsewhere on campus, conversations can quickly become charged. But research shows we're more likely to want to bridge our differences with someone when we feel listened to and understood—and we're more likely to be effective at connecting with others when we truly listen to where they're coming from. Listening with empathy increases trust, reduces defensiveness, and helps people open up. It makes our conversation partners less guarded and more open-minded—creating more room for understanding. When empathic listening becomes a practice that's taught, modeled, and reinforced across campus, it not only eases individual moments of tension; it helps create a culture where people feel seen and are more willing to stay in dialogue, even across deep differences.

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Empathy**, can also lead to **Compassion**

Draws on: **Curiosity** **Patience** **Intellectual Humility**

## LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

## How to Do It

**1. Be Curious**

Are you asking questions to encourage the other person to elaborate on his thoughts or feelings? Curiosity shows that you're interested in what the person has to say and that you care.

*Helpful Strategies:*

Thoughtful and open-ended questions such as:

- "Can you expand on that?"
- "Can you tell me more?"
- "When you say \_\_\_\_\_, do you mean \_\_\_\_\_?"
- "I find this topic really intriguing; can you share more about it?"

*Counterproductive Practices:*

- Looking away or disengaging
- Changing the subject
- Failing to ask follow-up questions
- Providing uninterested responses like "hmm" or "okay"
- Monopolizing the conversation (e.g., interrupting the speaker)

**2. Be Present**

Are you actively engaged in the conversation, refraining from passing judgment, preventing interruptions, staying mentally focused, and avoiding the urge to give advice?

*Helpful Strategies:*

- Avoid preparing a response. Instead, concentrate on mentally repeating key words or phrases shared (this serves as a mental anchor that keeps you connected to the message)
- Steer clear of overthinking, making judgments and jumping to assumptions
- Minimize physical distractions (e.g., keep your phone out of sight)

*Counterproductive Practices:*

- Interrupt with counterarguments
- Mentally prepare a rebuttal while the other person is speaking (which means you are not really listening)
- Offer unsolicited advice, engage in judgmental thinking, or let distractions take your focus away



### 3. Affirm Feelings/Intentions

How are you affirming the feelings or opinions of the speaker? To achieve this, it's important to set aside your ego and any desire to be right. Do your best to try to find what you are able to affirm, so it doesn't come across as insincere.

#### *Helpful Strategies:*

- "I get where you're coming from."
- "I can see why you would feel that way."
- "Yes, I hear you."
- "I'm here to listen and learn."

#### *Counterproductive Practices:*

- "You shouldn't feel this way."
- "I can't believe you think that."
- "You mean you actually believe that?"

### 4. Express Empathy

Why does the speaker feel or think the way they do? Think less about how you would feel or think in their situation, and more about them.

#### *Helpful Strategies:*

- "I sense that you're feeling X, Y, Z..."
- "I can understand how that situation could cause you to feel that way..."
- Paraphrase: "So what I heard was..."
- Confirm understanding: "Let me see if I got this right. You're saying..."

#### *Counterproductive Practices:*

- Repeating the same questions
- Failing to connect with an aspect of what the other person is experiencing (although you might still disagree)
- Distorting their words or intentions
- Immediately shifting the conversation to your own story after they've finished speaking

### 5. Use Engaged Body Language

Are you using your body language and gestures to convey active listening?

#### *Helpful Strategies:*

- Eye contact, nodding, and facing the other person
- Maintaining an open and relaxed body posture
- Mirroring the speaker's emotions when appropriate
- Note that cultural appropriateness should be considered for each of these items (e.g., not all cultures practice direct eye contact)

#### *Counterproductive Practices:*

- Facial expressions that might communicate disapproval or disgust (e.g., eye rolling)
- Turning away from the speaker or crossing your arms



## LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

# The Practice on Campus



At Providence College, Global Studies professor Nicholas Longo integrates empathic listening into classroom discussions. He puts students in pairs: One student responds to a prompt about a personal experience, such as, “Describe a time when you felt excluded”; the other student listens with empathy, with instructions to show engaged body language and curiosity rather than interjecting or offering solutions.

Once the student is done sharing, the listener repeats back what they heard, using the prompt, “What I hear you saying is...” before the roles switch.

The impact is immediate, according to Longo: “Students immediately recognize the value of feeling deeply heard. And then experiencing what it feels like to be truly listened to encourages them to bring this practice into other areas of their lives beyond the classroom—in campus and community engagement projects, as well as with friends and family.”

## LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

## Where to Try It

**RESIDENCE HALLS**

Train student leaders—like RAs, orientation leads, and student government representatives—in empathic listening so they can foster more meaningful peer conversations and better mediate conflicts when they arise.

**ADMINISTRATION**

Model empathic listening as a faculty member or administrator on campus, setting the tone and norm that it's important to prioritize understanding before jumping into debate or solutions.

**CLUBS AND EVENTS**

Integrate empathic listening into public events hosted on campus: After a lecture or panel discussion wraps up, but before the Q&A session begins, the moderator asks all attendees to turn to the person sitting next to them (ideally someone they don't already know) and share one reaction they have to what they heard, while the other person listens for two minutes; then they switch. See if this changes the tone of the ensuing group discussion.

**ORIENTATION PROGRAMS**

Design a lunch experience at orientation week where students discuss hopes and fears about their forthcoming campus experience, while others in their group practice listening with empathy—repeating back what they hear.

## LISTEN WITH EMPATHY

## Learn More



## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Itzchakov, G., Weinstein, N., Leary, M., Saluk, D., & Amar, M. (2024). Listening to understand: The role of high-quality listening on speakers' attitude depolarization during disagreements. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 126(2), 213–239.

Itzchakov, G., Weinstein, N., Legate, N., & Amar, M. (2020). Can high-quality listening predict lower speakers' prejudiced attitudes? *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 91, 104060.

Weger, H., Castle Bell, G., Minei, E. M., & Robinson, M. C. (2014). The relative effectiveness of active listening in initial interactions. *International Journal of Listening*, 28(1), 13–31.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**

[Three Actions We Can Take Now to Heal Our College Campuses](#)

**Article:**

[How to Listen With Compassion in the Classroom](#)

**Podcast:**

[The Contagious Power of Compassion](#)





## Focus on Personal Stories

**Political differences can surface in classroom discussions, student group activities, campus events, or even casual conversations in residence halls. These conversations can quickly go off the rails, especially because stereotypes affect how we respond to people with political views different from our own—once we learn about some of their beliefs, we make many additional assumptions about them and see them in a more three-dimensional way. But research suggests that when we first get to know someone as a person—especially by recognizing shared emotional experiences—we’re less likely to dehumanize them and more likely to have constructive conversations, even across political divides.**

### VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Empathy** | Draws on: **Curiosity**



## FOCUS ON PERSONAL STORIES

# How to Do It

When you encounter someone who seems like their views differ from yours—perhaps because they’re wearing a College Republican pin or carrying an Abortion Access for All tote bag—it can be tempting to dig into a political conversation. But if you want to have a productive dialogue, you’ll be well-served by steering clear of politics and first learning more about them—and sharing more about yourself. You can start by asking questions that uncover stories and experiences. Learning about these stories helps people to develop feelings of connection even if they still disagree, which guard against the dehumanization and deeper hostility that can cause conflicts to spiral out of control and even lead to violence.

The organization The People’s Supper uses these discussion topics to bring diverse groups together to share a meal and get to know one another on a human level, before they talk about politics:

- “Tell us about a moment in which you’ve been made to feel unwelcome, or misunderstood.”
- “Tell us about someone from this community who makes you proud to call this place home.”
- “Share a story about someone you love but with whom you disagree about something.”
- “Tell us about a common misconception or belief people on the outside hold about your community.”



## FOCUS ON PERSONAL STORIES

# The Practice on Campus

At Brigham Young University, Jeff Glenn trains students by adapting guides from the organization [Living Room Conversations](#), to help facilitate structured dialogues on racism, abortion, and religious freedom from a place of personal stories. Trained students are invited into classes such as Foundations of Public Health and work with small groups of five to eight peers to share their experiences related to political and social issues.

Rather than debating policies, though, the students answer questions like: “How did you develop this belief?” or “Who influenced the way you see the world the most?” These prompts encourage students to focus on the personal experiences that shaped one another’s views, rather than reducing each other to opposing sides. By the end of these conversations, on surveys, students report feeling more connected to one another, more empathy, and greater confidence in having conversations with people who are different than them.



## FOCUS ON PERSONAL STORIES

# Where to Try It



### CLASSROOMS

A professor invites students to reflect on how issues like immigration or healthcare have affected their families or communities—not just as political topics but as lived experiences. For example, they can ask: “What’s a moment when a healthcare decision affected someone you care about?” This kind of question helps ground the discussion in shared emotions, rather than abstract positions.



### ADMINISTRATION

Before diving into a department meeting, start with a round where faculty or staff members pair up and share something non-political—a meaningful reflection about themselves, like “A moment I felt proud” or “A time I felt misunderstood.”



### GALLERIES AND MUSEUMS

Create an exhibition with a diverse group of campus artists focused on shared emotional experiences, like belonging or exclusion, and spotlight how their personal stories show up in their work.



### RESIDENCE HALLS

Organize a residents' potluck where students bring a childhood meal, eat together, and share memories.

## FOCUS ON PERSONAL STORIES

# Learn More

**SUPPORTING RESEARCH**

Broockman, D., & Kalla, J. (2016). Durably reducing transphobia: A field experiment on door-to-door canvassing. *Science*, 352(6282), 220–224.

McDonald, M. et al. (2017). Intergroup emotional similarity reduces dehumanization and promotes conciliatory attitudes in prolonged conflict. *Group Processes & Intergroup Relations*, 20(1), 125–136.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES****Article:**

[36 Questions for Increasing Closeness](#)

**Inspiration:**

[Pushing the Living Room Conversations Model to Its Boundaries](#)



# Practice Perspective Getting and Giving

**Different lived experiences and worldviews converge on college campuses. This diversity fuels learning, yet it can also spark misunderstandings. Research points to two complementary practices that can help. First, perspective-getting—asking open-ended questions and listening for the answer—produces more accurate insights than guessing what another person thinks and improves your attitudes toward the other person. Second, when people with less social power have the opportunity to give their perspective, they feel more positively toward the person listening to them. Encouraging both can transform everyday moments on campus into opportunities for understanding and connection across differences.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Empathy**, can also lead to **Compassion**

Draws on: **Patience** **Courage** **Curiosity**



## PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE GETTING AND GIVING

# How to Do It

### 1. Perspective-Getting

Invite the person to tell their story. Ask questions such as “What’s most important about this for you?” or “How has your experience shaped that view?” Listen without interrupting or formulating a rebuttal in your head. See our *Listen with Empathy* practice.

### 2. Perspective-Giving

Swap roles. Share your experience while they listen; this step is especially valuable when the speaker’s identity is often unheard on campus.

### 3. Notice

What shifted when you asked and listened, and when you were listened to?

#### TIP

Practice this first in low stakes settings, such as class role plays between students, to help develop the emotional and cognitive flexibility to apply these skills in higher stakes moments.

#### KEEP IN MIND

For members of groups with less social power, giving their perspective to a member of a higher-status group might do more to improve their attitudes toward that group.



## PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE GETTING AND GIVING

# The Practice on Campus

In her Cross-Cultural Communication classes at IE University and Universidad Rey Juan Carlos in Spain, Clare Cannon invites students to watch scenes from popular television dramas like *This is Us*. Many of her students are international, navigating diverse social and emotional realities in unfamiliar environments, and the classroom becomes a space not only to observe the characters on screen, but also to explore how differently each person interprets their behavior. Cannon asks students to look closely—at body language, tone, shifts in posture or silence—and to describe what they think each character is feeling. The goal isn't to get it "right," but to slow down and practice seeing the world from someone else's point of view.

In the following session, students give their own perspective by sharing which characters they identified with and how their understanding evolved. Some connect what they observed

to conversations they've had in their own lives. Others are surprised by how differently their classmates interpreted the same moment, as they *get* one another's viewpoints. These differences become the real lesson—revealing how our experiences and backgrounds shape what we notice and how we make sense of emotion.

Students often say the activity helps them feel more connected, both to the characters and to one another. Watching fictional characters move from avoidance to vulnerability helps them see that conflict isn't always a sign of division; it can also be an invitation to deeper connection. For many, it becomes a turning point in the course where they begin to realize that bridging differences doesn't just happen through well-intentioned theory. It begins with attention, imagination, and the willingness to see through someone else's eyes.

**PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE GETTING AND GIVING**

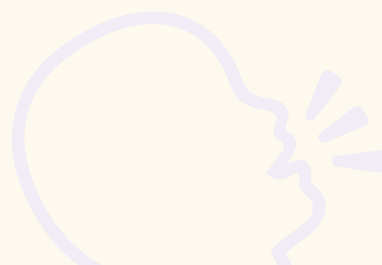
# Where to Try It

**CLASSROOMS**

Integrate into coursework by assigning a short “Day in the Life” essay, where students interview each other, giving their perspective, and getting their partner’s perspective. Then they write in the first person through their partner’s viewpoint.

**CLUBS AND EVENTS**

Host an event that centers speakers from underrepresented or less-heard backgrounds. Afterward, attendees reflect on what they heard and learned.





## PRACTICE PERSPECTIVE GETTING AND GIVING

# Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Bruneau, E. G., & Saxe, R. (2012). The power of being heard: The benefits of 'perspective-giving' in the context of intergroup conflict. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 48(4), 855–866.

Cannon, C.E. (2023). The science of bridging differences and the dialogic transformation of conflict: a case study from This Is Us. *Communication & Society*, 36(3), 53–70.

Eyal, T., Steffel, M., & Epley, N. (2018). Perspective mistaking: Accurately understanding the mind of another requires getting perspective, not taking perspective. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 114(4), 547–571.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
[What Happens When You Tell Your Story and I Tell Mine?](#)

**Podcast:**  
[How to Let In New Perspectives](#)





# Try Self-Distancing

Sometimes we get so caught up in our own thoughts and emotions that it becomes difficult to see someone else's point of view. One way to break that pattern is by shifting how you talk to yourself—using your name or third-person pronouns like “he,” “she,” or “they” instead of “I” when reflecting on a difficult situation. Research suggests that this technique, known as “self-distancing,” can help us better regulate our emotions and engage in difficult conversations with greater equanimity and less distress.

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Compassion** (especially toward self) | Draws on: **Intellectual Humility** **Patience**

## TRY SELF-DISTANCING

# How to Do It



Conflicts and disagreements are inevitable, whether in classroom debates, faculty meetings, or within student organizations. Self-distancing works by helping you create psychological distance between you and the feeling or experience you're going through.

For example, if your name is Leo, instead of saying, "I'm feeling so angry about this interaction with this administrator," you can ask yourself, "Why does Leo feel angry right now?" "What's driving that emotion and how might Leo want to respond?"

You may begin to notice that this simple change starts to reduce distress and allow you to respond thoughtfully rather than react impulsively, even in the heat of a disagreement.

Emotions can run high, which is exactly when self-distancing is most helpful—but also hardest to access. To build the habit, try it on your own first: journal about a recent conflict using your name instead of "I," or mentally replay the moment as if you were advising a friend. With practice, these small shifts in reflection can become habits you can draw on more easily when real tension arises.



**TRY SELF-DISTANCING**

## The Practice on Campus

Debra Austin teaches law at the University of Denver, including a class on regenerative leadership, where she encourages self-distancing in a number of exercises. For instance, after she explains the basics of self-distancing, she invites students to practice. They recall a recent low point—perhaps a disagreement or misunderstanding—

and apply the technique. She then invites them to write about that experience in detail—but in the third person, using their first name rather than first-person pronouns like “I.” Students find this odd at first, she says, but upon reflection they realize it gives them helpful distance on a situation rife with conflict or tension.



## TRY SELF-DISTANCING

## Where to Try It

**CLASSROOMS**

When students feel frustrated (e.g., during academic advising), encourage them to reflect on their situation as if they were giving advice to a friend in the same position.

**CLASSROOMS**

Utilize self-distancing before frustration kicks in. If students (particularly in a classroom setting) rehearse this practice in a low-stakes setting (journaling, classroom role-play, etc.), they'll be equipped if frustration kicks in, and therefore better avoid spirals of shame, blame, or defensiveness.

**ADMINISTRATION**

When tensions rise over institutional decisions, designate a moment where participants pause, take a breath, and reflect on the situation from the third-person.

**ADMINISTRATION**

When administrators and staff are sparring over policy decisions, remind them to practice self-distancing when things start to get heated.



## TRY SELF-DISTANCING

## Learn More



## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Grossmann, I., & Kross, E. (2014). Exploring Solomon's paradox: Self-distancing eliminates the self-other asymmetry in wise reasoning about close relationships in younger and older adults. *Psychological Science*, 25(8), 1571–1580.

Kross, E., Ong, M., & Ayduk, Ö. (2023). Self-reflection at work: Why it matters and how to harness its potential and avoid its pitfalls. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior*, 10(1), 441–464.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
Four Ways to Gain Perspective on Negative Events

**Article:**  
How to Get Some Emotional Distance in an Argument





# Understand Values

**When engaging with people who hold perspectives different from our own, it's important to recognize that their beliefs are often rooted in deeply held values, such as loyalty or fairness. On college campuses, understanding what values lie at the core of other people's beliefs—and framing discussions around those values—can make dialogue more constructive than if you present your beliefs and opinions solely in terms of the values that matter to you.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Empathy](#) | Draws on: [Curiosity](#) [Patience](#) [Intellectual Humility](#)



## UNDERSTAND THEIR VALUES

# How to Do It

Research on the practice of “moral reframing” suggests that people are more open to ideas and new perspectives when those ideas are presented in terms of the moral values that matter to them, such as care, loyalty, fairness, and respect for authority. Yet on campus, values often go unspoken in campus debates, classroom discussions, and student interactions. When conversations become tense or polarized, shifting the focus from what someone believes to why they believe it can lead to more meaningful exchanges and deeper understanding.

Start by asking open-ended questions to identify their underlying values, such as “What values guide your beliefs?” or “What experiences shaped those values?” Reflect on how their values align with or differ from your own.

The goal isn’t necessarily to agree with one another, but to understand what matters to them and how it informs their perspective. This has the added benefit of seeing people as holistic individuals beyond their partisan identity, in ways that may defy stereotypes.

This approach can also help you communicate your own views in ways that they find more understandable and compelling. A disagreement over campus speech policies, for instance, might stem from one person valuing fairness and another prioritizing care for those who are vulnerable. Recognizing and speaking to these values allows for more productive dialogue: Even if your argument doesn’t convince them, they will likely feel more respected if you make that argument in terms of the values that they hold dear.





## UNDERSTAND THEIR VALUES

# The Practice on Campus

When he was a student at Tulane University, Justin Turpan brought students with different political leanings to his campus's BridgeUSA events, a national organization that promotes dialogue across political views. Students often resisted bridging conversations, but Turpan learned Republicans' and Democrats' perspectives well enough to speak to their values. At BridgeUSA events, Turpan and his peers opened potentially contentious discussions by asking students to explain not only what they believed but why. That simple framing surfaced the values behind each stance.

This practice of understanding values helped BridgeUSA participants realize they often believed different things for similar reasons. During a gun-control discussion at Tulane, for example, a Second Amendment absolutist and a

student who supported banning firearm sales both grounded their positions in a shared goal: making their communities feel safe and secure. Naming those values helped students frame their perspectives in ways the other person could understand, which led to more positive, constructive conversations.

**“This achieves a conversation focused on the nuances and implications of political beliefs, where one can actually visualize the reasons behind another’s stance, rather than just chalking it up to someone else being crazy or uneducated or immoral.”**

*—Justin Turpan,  
Chapter Development Lead, BridgeUSA*





## UNDERSTAND THEIR VALUES

# Where to Try It



### CLASSROOMS

Instead of focusing on policy positions alone, encourage students to articulate how their values inform their stance on an issue.



### CLASSROOMS

In writing courses, ask students to practice moral reframing—constructing arguments in terms of the values of someone who disagrees with them.



### RESIDENCE HALLS

RAs can lead discussions in residence halls where students share a moment in their life that shaped an important personal value, perhaps particularly a value that relates to their living situation.



### CLUBS AND EVENTS

Train campus mediators to reframe conversations by surfacing underlying values rather than getting stuck in entrenched positions.



### CLUBS AND EVENTS

Facilitate “values discovery” dialogues in student organizations where members reflect on experiences that shape their core beliefs.





## UNDERSTAND THEIR VALUES

# Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Feinberg, M., & Willer, R. (2015). From gulf to bridge: When do moral arguments facilitate political influence? *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 41(12), 1665–1681.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 96(5), 1029–46.

Voelkel, J. G., Stagnaro, M. N., Chu, J. Y., Pink, S. L., Mernyk, J. S., Redekopp, C., ... & Willer, R. (2024). Megastudy testing 25 treatments to reduce antidemocratic attitudes and partisan animosity. *Science*, 386(6719), eadh4764.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**

[How to Have Hard Conversations on College Campuses](#)

**Exercise:**

[Interfaith America's Shared Values](#)

**Video:**

[How to Have Better Political Conversations](#)

**Video:**

[How to Make Hard Choices](#)





# Find Shared Identities

**Research suggests that when we identify our commonalities—without suppressing what makes us different—we become more generous, empathic, and helpful toward others. In one study, people who saw themselves narrowly, as fans of a specific soccer team, only helped fans of that same team. But when they embraced a broader identity, like being a soccer fan in general, they extended kindness more widely.**

**On college campuses, this insight has real power. Even when someone seems different from you, chances are you can find at least one meaningful identity you share—you might both be members of the same club, or the first in your family to attend college. Finding and emphasizing these shared identities can foster a sense of connection and reduce perceived divides.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Compassion](#) | Draws on: [Curiosity](#) [Intellectual Humility](#) [Patience](#)



## FIND SHARED IDENTITIES

# How to Do It

Before you meet with someone who seems different from you—or even during or after your interaction—make a list of the defining characteristics or identities that you might share. These could be:

- **Groups you both belong to.** Perhaps you both work in the same department or live in the same residence hall.
- **Identities that shape how you see yourself.** Things like first-gen students, Midwesterners, or children of immigrants might rise up to the list.
- **Values or beliefs you might share.** Maybe you are a part of different religious communities but both believe strongly in faith as a value. Maybe you disagree politically but are both actively engaged in civic life.

- **Life experiences or interests.** Maybe you both had a mentor that changed your life, or love binge-watching documentaries or spending time in nature.

You can make this list in your head, but it's even better to write it down. Then review and reflect:

- Do these defining characteristics or identities feel accurate? Are there any that are missing from the list?
- How do these shared identities make you see this person in a new light? If you're comfortable, talk with the other person about how your list impacts the way you see each other. Even one shared identity—especially one with emotional meaning—can become a powerful starting point for connection.

## FIND SHARED IDENTITIES

## The Practice on Campus

One thing that GGSC Senior Fellow Allison Briscoe-Smith heard from students while she was on the faculty at the Wright Institute in Berkeley, California, was a curiosity about spirituality and religious faiths different from their own. So she worked alongside other staff and faculty to create a space for students to connect around the shared identities of being people of faith.

They put together an in-person event series where they featured students and leaders of different faith traditions—like Judaism, Islam, Christianity, and Catholicism—to share the unique characteristics of their spiritual practices and also what they share with other religions. As part of those events, they invited students to not only reflect on their own faith identities but also to

connect with other students, explaining, “Even if you don’t practice the same traditions, remember your shared identity as people of faith.” Many of the participants were students of color, so Briscoe-Smith also reminded students that they shared other identities, too.

They had food at each event and began the session with prayer practice within the faith tradition they were focusing on. They also opened attendance to those who were faith-curious or unaffiliated. As a result of these efforts, Briscoe-Smith and her colleagues saw students of different faiths connect more deeply across campus, inviting and attending each others’ worship spaces, and showing up for one another in solidarity when one of the communities was experiencing a crisis.

## FIND SHARED IDENTITIES

## Where to Try It

**ATHLETICS**

Create a video campaign showcasing students, faculty, and staff from different backgrounds emphasizing their shared identity around their athletic sports team (e.g., “We’re Terps!” “We’re Ducks!”).

**CLASSROOMS**

Facilitate a “What We Have in Common” activity in classrooms, with students listing three meaningful identities they share before diving into deeper discussions.

**ORIENTATION PROGRAMS**

During orientation, facilitate small group discussions on dorm room floors where incoming students can reflect on shared identities, such as being first-gen students, artists, introverts, or fans of the same sports team—and reflect on how those shared identities make them feel more connected to one another.



## FIND SHARED IDENTITIES

# Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Levine, M., Prosser, A., Evans, D., & Reicher, S. (2005). Identity and emergency intervention: How social group membership and inclusiveness of group boundaries shape helping behavior. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 31(4), 443–453.

Nier, J. A. et al. (2001). Changing interracial evaluations and behavior: The effects of a common group identity. *Group Processes and Intergroup Relations*, 4(4), 299–316.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

#### Article:

[How Learning to Bridge Differences Can Help Students Succeed in College](#)

#### Podcast:

[W. Kamau Bell's Thoughts on Awkward Relationships and Bridging Divides](#)



# SHAPE

 | 

## How We Bring People Together

College campuses often provide exceptional opportunities to bring diverse groups of people together to learn, connect, and grow. Classes, clubs, events, dining halls, and athletics are all places where these connections can happen. But we know from research and experience that simply creating this kind of contact between groups isn't enough to ensure it's a positive or constructive experience. How we bring people together is just as important as whether they come together.

The practices in this final section offer strategies for shaping contact between groups so it has a greater chance of promoting understanding—of challenging biases rather than accidentally reinforcing them. Drawing on the science of intergroup contact, these practices are especially relevant to people who can bring together diverse individuals or groups on campus and shape the conditions for connection. Ultimately, we believe they can be applied at different levels of a campus, from one-on-one conversations to the design of campus-wide programs.



Create the  
Conditions  
for Contact



Focus on  
Solutions



Identify  
Common  
Goals



Make  
Bridging  
a Norm



# Create the Conditions for Contact

**Contact works best when it's intentional. Bringing members of different groups together can improve how they see and treat one another. Four evidence-based conditions make success more likely.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Compassion](#) | Draws on: [Intellectual Humility](#) [Courage](#) [Curiosity](#) [Patience](#)

## CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR CONTACT

# How to Do It



Think of two different groups that normally don't come into contact on campus. They may have different cultural backgrounds, religious or political beliefs, or life experiences. This might even be two groups that are in conflict.

Research suggests that relations between these groups can improve if they have more regular and positive interactions with one another. Before bringing the groups together, your chances of success will improve if you establish the following four conditions:

1. **The interaction should have the support of legitimate and relevant authorities.** This could be a residential advisor (for contact between dorm mates), a faculty member (for classroom disputes), or a senior member of the campus administration.
2. **The two parties should share a common goal.** If that goal isn't already apparent to them, it is worthwhile to help them identify and focus on it.

### 3. Create a sense of interdependence.

The parties should feel like they have a shared stake in meeting that goal, giving them incentive to cooperate.

### 4. Participants should have a sense of equal status.

For instance, if one group has more leverage or power over the other—either during the interaction or in their everyday lives—the interaction is likely to reinforce a sense of separateness rather than bridge their differences.

Not all four of these conditions need to be in place for the interaction to be fruitful, but researchers believe the more of them are, the better off you'll be. It's also wise to review with each group how you plan to address these four conditions and get their feedback on your approach. Make sure there's buy-in from both groups before you invite them to come together. Finally, create a space for reflection so that you can learn from each group's experience and refine it for the next time.



## CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR CONTACT

# The Practice on Campus



Deborah Donahue-Keegan co-leads Tufts Table, a Tufts University event offered every semester through the Office of the Vice Provost for Institutional Inclusive Excellence. This university-wide event brings staff, faculty, and students together over dinner for intentional, structured conversation about timely topics. A recent Tufts Table was called, "Beyond Polarization: The Power of Perspective."

At the beginning of each event, organizers establish a common goal—to connect and build understanding across differences. Attendees are asked to accept a set of community agreements that align with this purpose. To promote a sense of equal status, a student and a faculty or staff member co-facilitate at each table, conveying that student voices matter in these conversations.

Participants at each table are reminded that their voices matter equally—that despite their titles, their lived experiences provide valuable knowledge

that contribute to a deeper and richer learning experience, which also reinforces a sense of interdependence. The co-facilitators guide participants through dialogic theme-related prompts that are carefully created by the co-chairs and a committee consisting of students, faculty, and staff representatives.

Hundreds of participants attend (a free meal is always a great incentive). At first, the organizers thought that every Tufts Table needed to end with action steps, but realized that sometimes closure is not possible—and that creating a space for positive contact and reflection could be the goal itself.

**“Sometimes closure around a particular topic isn’t possible, but connection is enough. Being with each other is the outcome.”**

— Deborah Donahue-Keegan,  
Tufts University



## CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR CONTACT

# Where to Try It

**CLUBS AND EVENTS**

Host student-led “exchange events” across identity groups with support from administration. Campus organizations can collaborate to co-host discussions, meals, or service projects that bring together students from different political, cultural, or religious backgrounds to focus on shared problems they are trying to solve.

**RELIGIOUS/INTERFAITH**

Bring together two or more religious, spiritual or secular groups on campus (or in the community) to build relationships through a joint meal or service project, accompanied by discussion about shared values across diverse traditions (feel free to utilize Interfaith America’s [events](#) resources).

**ADMINISTRATION**

In campus-wide surveys measuring students' quality of life, ask about their number and quality of intergroup friendships, their openness to new ideas, and their willingness to collaborate with people unlike themselves.

## CREATE THE CONDITIONS FOR CONTACT

## Learn More

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Brar, M. D., Morales-Chicas, J., Morris, S., Rivera, I., & Cannara, R. (2025). Intergroup dialogue empowering action for transforming equity in higher education. *Education Sciences*, 15(1), 38.

Pettigrew, T. F., & Tropp, L. R. (2006). A meta-analytic test of intergroup contact theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 90(5), 751-783.

Zhou, S., Page-Gould, E., Aron, A., Moyer, A., & Hewstone, M. (2019). The extended contact hypothesis: A meta-analysis on 20 years of research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 23(2), 132-160.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
What Makes Good Interaction Between Divided Groups?

**Article:**  
Three Insights to Help You Build Bridges Across Differences





## Focus on Solutions

**When bringing people together across group lines, don't fixate on the identities they bring with them into the conversation—that might only reinforce divides. Instead, zero in on the issues affecting your campus and their ideas for solutions. Whether in debates on campus policies or meetings about the next five-year strategic plan, centering conversations on solutions rather than labels can lead to more collaborative outcomes.**

### VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Intellectual Humility** | Draws on: **Courage** **Compassion** **Patience**



## FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

# How to Do It

This is an especially useful activity to try when you're bringing together people from different, supposedly opposing groups. They might be inclined to focus on the other person's identity—she's a Republican, he's Muslim—and make all kinds of assumptions based on that label, putting themselves on edge before the interaction even begins. Whether you're facilitating or participating in this conversation, your goal is to transcend those assumptions and biases as quickly as possible, and instead surface the issues that actually matter to each person and the solutions that they have in mind.

First, start by understanding the issues and problems people would like to address. Everyone might have a different priority—for one person, it might be improving the kosher or halal options in the dining hall, for others it might be changing aspects of the academic

curriculum, the campus free speech code, or some of the security protocols for campus police—but it's important for everyone to voice their perspectives.

Then, start to get more nuanced and specific about those problems—for instance, ask questions like, "What in particular about the curriculum would you like to see change?" or "What aspects of free speech are most important to you on campus?" This breaks down broader issues into something more digestible.

Finally, invite suggestions for solutions to these problems. Talking about solutions can highlight how people from seemingly disparate groups are actually more aligned in their views than they might think. It can also build empathy across group lines as people more deeply appreciate one another's experiences and perspectives.



## FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

# The Practice on Campus

At Colorado State University, Martín Carcasson is a professor of Communication Studies and leads the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD), which trains undergraduate students in facilitation and civic dialogue. In effect, they learn how to guide people toward solutions to collective problems. In partnership with local governments and nonprofits, students help lead public forums on pressing issues like housing affordability and decarbonization by creating space for diverse people to weigh in and work through complex trade-offs together.

Rather than aiming for a “perfect” solution, students help participants react to a range of potential recommendations that reflect the varied values and lived experiences in the room. For example, in a collaboration with the Platte River Power Authority, which provides electricity to parts of Northern Colorado, students facilitated small group conversations at public events to gather input on how the agency could

best meet its 2030 decarbonization goals. By focusing on solutions, students can lead much more constructive dialogues amongst diverse groups of community members. After synthesis, they presented those findings to the authority’s Board of Governors, helping decision-makers understand the full landscape of community concerns and potential actions. The students not only learned real-world skills in deliberation and collaborative problem-solving, they saw the value of focusing on solutions as a practice to bridge differences effectively.

**“Employers want candidates who can engage across differences and facilitate complex decision-making processes. The skills they’re learning aren’t just good for civic life, they also prepare them for the workforce.”**

*—Martín Carcasson, professor and director of the Center for Public Deliberation, Colorado State University*

## FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

# Where to Try It

**DINING HALLS**

Host a “Solutions Fest” dinner where students propose solutions to issues affecting their campus, rather than a debate where they argue who is right or wrong.

**ADMINISTRATION**

In a faculty meeting, use solutions-based stories and case studies to anchor a conversation around how others have solved the problem you’re facing in your department or university.

**CLASSROOMS**

Group diverse students together on an activity or problem set where they have to work together to reach a solution. The experience should help them move past labels by working together to find a solution.

## FOCUS ON SOLUTIONS

## Learn More

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Mason, L. (2015). "I Disrespectfully Agree": The Differential Effects of Partisan Sorting on Social and Issue Polarization. *American Journal of Political Science*, 59(1), 128-145.

Sherman, S. (2011). Changing the world: The science of transformative action. In H. H. Knoop & A. Delle Fave (Eds.), *Positive Psychology as Social Change* (pp. 335-342). Springer.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
Why Bother Bridging Differences in College, Anyway?

**Article:**  
Three Steps to Finding Agreement on America's Toughest Problems



# Identify Common Goals

**When people from different backgrounds recognize that they share a goal, it becomes easier to work together, even when they disagree on other issues. On and across college campuses, there are often overlapping interests among administrators, faculty, and staff—whether it’s fostering an inclusive learning environment, improving mental health, promoting scientific inquiry, or strengthening campus safety. Identifying these shared objectives can help shift conversations away from division and toward collective action.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: **Compassion** | Draws on: **Courage** **Curiosity** **Empathy**

## IDENTIFY COMMON GOALS

# How to Do It

When bringing people or groups together across differences, a good place to start is by asking everyone to take a few minutes to write down their individual goals for the interaction and what they sense might be common goals shared among all members of the group. Then ask each person in the group to share their responses, and ask everyone else not to interrupt or respond to what the speaker is saying—they should focus only on listening.

If there isn't an overlapping goal, you can try to reframe what participants say into something broader that encompasses goals from multiple sides. For instance, in a debate over campus free speech

policies, one side may express the goal to protect student expression while the other wants to prevent intimidation or harassment of students—goals that can both be framed in a more expansive way as nurturing a supportive academic environment for all.

Once you identify common goals, work collaboratively to find practical steps to achieve those goals. Rather than debating abstract principles, focus on what concrete steps can be taken to make progress toward those goals. When discussions are anchored in shared goals, it's easier to move forward with a spirit of cooperation.

## IDENTIFY COMMON GOALS

# The Practice on Campus

At Sacramento City College, the Panther Cares program supports students navigating crises like food or housing insecurity, providing them with free produce and canned goods, 14-day hotel vouchers, and guidance to public services that they may not know how to access or navigate. What began as a small initiative run out of a cubicle in the library has grown into a dedicated on-campus center.

The program's strength lies in its grounding around a shared goal: helping students stay in school by meeting their most basic needs. That common purpose has united stakeholders across departments and roles, even when they've disagreed on implementation details like who the program should or shouldn't serve, or whether the resources could be spent elsewhere. Program supervisor Linda Delgadillo says that identifying and sharing this common goal deepens buy-in, addresses concerns, and helps them navigate conflict about

the program in a healthier way. She goes a step further and invites critics to the center to see how they're working toward the goal firsthand. Once they see it for themselves, the conversation often shifts from focusing on disagreements to wanting to be a part of meeting this goal, she said.

Panther Cares has also built bridges across the campus by inviting academic departments to host events at the center's outdoor patio space and normalizing conversations about student needs. The team, including nine student workers, regularly collaborates to improve offerings and destigmatize the challenges many students face. By anchoring conversations and decision-making in a clearly defined, widely shared goal—student retention and well-being—Panther Cares demonstrates how identifying common goals has united diverse groups on and off campus to make a real difference.

## IDENTIFY COMMON GOALS

# Where to Try It



### CLASSROOMS

When mediating conflict between two students, start the conversation by inviting them to identify a common goal that unites them.



### CLASSROOMS

Faculty members can suggest that their academic departments identify overarching goals at the start of the academic year. Then if conflicts arise between faculty over the course of the year, the department can refer back to the agreed-upon common goals for guidance and common reference points in working toward solutions.



### CLASSROOMS

Create group activities for a course that enable you to have students of different backgrounds work together toward a common goal, ideally so that they have to rely on one another to succeed. Focusing on their common goal should help them transcend their differences.

## IDENTIFY COMMON GOALS

# Learn More

### SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Sherif, M. (1958). Superordinate goals in the reduction of intergroup conflict. *American Journal of Sociology*, 63(4), 349-356.

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Article:**  
[Bridging the Gap: When Students from Two Very Different Campuses Find a Path to Understanding Each Other](#)



# Make Bridging a Norm

**Social norms exert a subtle but powerful influence on our lives: Research shows that when people believe a behavior is common and expected of them, they're more likely to engage in that behavior. This can be challenging for bridging differences on college campuses, a setting where louder, more divisive voices tend to attract more attention. However, there is solid evidence that when leaders effectively convey that bridging is the norm on their campus, they have a far-reaching influence on the entire community.**

## VIRTUES

Cultivates: [Empathy](#) | Draws on: [Courage](#) [Intellectual Humility](#) [Curiosity](#)



## MAKE BRIDGING A NORM

# How to Do It

One of the most reliable ways to spread social norms is through effective messaging—but not all messages work equally well. Fortunately, studies have identified several important communications principles that make messages more likely to influence our attitudes and behavior, including toward people different from ourselves. To make bridging differences a norm on campus, messages should:

### **Feel Relatable**

Students (and others) are more likely to embrace bridge-building if they see and hear from peers like them who have already tried to bridge differences—ideally, peers from their own particular social group.

### **Seem Plausible**

If people are asked to believe something that defies their experience—for instance, that it's always enjoyable to talk with someone who doesn't share their beliefs—they may become less likely to practice that behavior. One way to


convey that a behavior is becoming the norm is to suggest that it's gaining momentum—for example, explaining that “more and more” students are showing openness to other viewpoints.

### **Be Shared Publicly**

People are more likely to be influenced by messages about social norms when they know that others are receiving the same messages. So while it might seem effective to send pro-bridging messages to students individually, such as in a packet to incoming students before they arrive on campus, there will likely be greater impact from information delivered in social settings, like during a welcome address at orientation or on social media.

### **Speak to One's Identity**

Messages that promote bridging as a norm are more likely to resonate with people when they speak to a core part of their identity, such as their campus affiliation (“All Bruins keep an open mind”) or their religious faith.





## MAKE BRIDGING A NORM

# The Practice on Campus

An experiment at the University of Wisconsin-Madison—led by psychologists Sohad Murrar, Mitchell Campbell, and Markus Brauer—provides a textbook example of why and how to promote pro-bridging norms on a campus. In some classes, UW-Madison students watched a video in which fellow Madison students expressed (unscripted) how much they appreciated the diversity on their campus and said they enjoyed getting to know students from different backgrounds. In the video, scholars also shared research finding that, while some discrimination exists on campus, “most students on campus attempt to behave in a non-prejudiced and inclusive manner.” Students in other classes viewed a video on bias and micro-aggressions that didn’t mention what UW-Madison students actually think or do.

The researchers also put up posters on campus reporting that most UW-Madison students endorse diversity and try to behave inclusively, and they had a deputy

vice chancellor send an email to some students reporting that, according to the university’s most recent climate survey, most students are strongly committed to diversity.

Several weeks later, the researchers surveyed all students in the study about their attitudes toward other social groups on campus. Compared with the students who saw the video on bias or read a statement describing the university’s abstract commitment to diversity, the students who learned that openness to diverse groups is a social norm among their peers expressed more positive attitudes toward other social groups, rejected racism and discrimination more, and reported an increased sense of belonging on campus months later. The results suggest that when students learn that pro-bridging attitudes and behaviors are pervasive on their campus, particularly among fellow students, they are likely to follow suit—making bridge-building even more of a norm.



**MAKE BRIDGING A NORM**

# Where to Try It

**CLUBS AND EVENTS**

Start public events with statements expressing how most members of your campus are committed to constructive dialogue and bridging differences.

**ADMINISTRATION**

Produce campus media showing how bridge-building is practiced by diverse and prominent members of the campus community.

**ADMINISTRATION**

Tie university mission and vision statements to the values of bridging differences, suggesting that these values are core to what it means to be a member of the university's community.

## MAKE BRIDGING A NORM

## Learn More

## SUPPORTING RESEARCH

Murrar, S., Campbell, M.R. & Brauer, M. (2020). Exposure to peers' pro-diversity attitudes increases inclusion and reduces the achievement gap. *Nature Human Behavior*, 4, 889–897.

Sparkman, G., & Walton, G. M. (2017). Dynamic norms promote sustainable behavior, even if it is counternormative. *Psychological Science*, 28(11), 1663–1674.

Tankard, M. E., & Paluck, E. L. (2016). Norm perception as a vehicle for social change. *Social Issues and Policy Review*, 10(1), 181–211.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

**Inspiration:**

The Constructive Dialogue Institute has highlighted the power of social norms in its Perspectives training.

# Resources



# Initiatives for Bridging Differences in Higher Education

Bridging differences on campus can feel daunting, but countless organizations, programs, and leaders have been rising to this challenge for years. We have been honored to work with many of them through our [Bridging Differences in Higher Education Learning Fellowship](#), part of our [Bridging Differences program](#)

at the Greater Good Science Center. We encourage you to learn more about these valuable resources, which we have collected and [feature on the GGSC website](#). As you embark on your own efforts to bridge differences in higher education, we hope they serve as inspiration, guides, and even partners.

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