

Civil Discourse and the University of North Carolina: Strong Civility, Culture of Collaborative Problem- Solving, and Inherent Dignity

Prepared by the UNC System Faculty Taskforce on Civil Discourse

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Executive Summary

Civics is more than learning facts about the US Constitution. Civil discourse is more than learning how to make pleasant conversation with someone of a different political perspective.

To address stakeholder queries and concerns about the status and approach of civil discourse education in the University of North Carolina System, and to help university leaders navigate the current “land rush” of civil discourse vendors and consultants, the UNC Faculty Task Force on Civil Discourse has compiled this report.¹

We begin [Section I](#) with an overview of why building skills in civil discourse ought to be a central part of the undergraduate experience. We then outline the challenges of defining “civil discourse” and recommend three research-based frameworks for civil discourse instruction and programming in the UNC System:

1. [Embrace strong civility, which directly engages difficult issues.](#)
2. [Foster a culture of collaborative problem-solving.](#)
3. [Respect the inherent dignity of all participants.](#)

In [Section II](#), we sketch the current state of civil discourse education in the University of North Carolina System in curricular and co-curricular spaces and provide select case studies.

[Section III](#) is a preliminary SWOT analysis for fostering civil discourse activities within the UNC System.

[Section IV](#) provides recommendations to stakeholders and leaders for the promotion of civil discourse and to scholars and partners for further research, including:

1. **Draw on faculty expertise** by engaging them to develop civil discourse programming instruction and in the vetting of any training materials being used at the college or institution level.
2. The System should share the guardrails in Section I but otherwise **have an expansive definition of civil discourse programming and education**. It should maintain/expand the community of practice currently underway through the Common Ground Collaborative.
3. Stakeholders should **make investments in core disciplines** related to civil discourse (Classics, English, Government, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Rhetoric, World Languages and Literature) rather than seek to set up shadow or parallel departments. These investments can take multiple forms, including course redesign and development grants, research grants in related areas, and longer-term funds for distinguished professorships and standard faculty lines in American democracy, American government and politics, American and world literature, the history of science and philosophy, civility

¹ For an overview of the interest in civil discourse programs, see Eric Kelderman and Francie Diep, “Everyone’s Starting ‘Civil Dialogue’ Programs: Will They Work?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 2 December 2025. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/everyones-starting-civil-dialogue-programs>; Graham Vysa, “Fostering Civil Dialogue” *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2026), 3-7. https://connect.chronicle.com/rs/931-EKA-218/images/FosteringCivilDialogue_ResearchBrief.pdf

and civil rights, comparative constitutionalism, moral philosophy, dialogue and debate, communication ethics, and/or political rhetoric.

[Section V](#) is an initial overview of teaching and programming resources related to civil discourse.

In 2027, we will issue a follow up report to account for the landscape analysis currently being conducted by Constructive Dialogue Institute, the activities of the UNC System's Common Ground Collaborative, and the re-launching of the UNC survey on dialogue and engagement in the classroom.²

² Comments and questions about this report can be directed to Robert Taber, chair of the faculty task force, at rtaber@uncfsu.edu.

How to Read this Report

Civil discourse is a sweeping topic, one tied closely to questions about the purpose and mission of public higher education, the reputation of universities, and what it means to teach students. As such, many scholarly fields have made contributions to what civil discourse is and how it can be taught.

To model the kind of evidence-based reasoning and argumentation we want our students to learn as part of building their own capacity for civil discourse and engaged citizenship, we have chosen to keep in this report the citations and discussion of the productive debates that have informed our analysis and recommendations.

You do not have to read this report from beginning to end; the hyperlinked Table of Contents at the start of this document makes it easier to jump to sections of interest.

Core audiences we have kept in mind while preparing this report include:

Faculty curious about the case for “civil discourse” (and what is meant by civil discourse, anyway)—see [Section I.B-D.](#)

Students or parents looking for what employers have to say about civil discourse skills—see [Section I.B.5.](#)

Community members and institutional stakeholders wanting examples of civil discourse work currently happening in the University of North Carolina System—see [Section II.](#)

Policymakers and university administrators seeking insight into strategies for fostering civil discourse programming—see [Section IV](#) before moving to [Section III](#) and [Section I.D.-E](#) for more detail.

Regardless of where you find yourself in relation to civil discourse, this report has something for you. We appreciate your interest in this vital topic.

I. Defining and Framing Civil Discourse

A. The Civil Discourse Task Force: Formation, Charge, and Approach

Stakeholder interest in enhancing the capacity and willingness of undergraduate students in the University of North Carolina System³ to engage in civil discourse and meaningful dialogue has increased over the last several years as a response to changes in technology and culture, the Covid-19 pandemic, political polarization, and questions about the purpose of post-secondary education.⁴ Related questions about students' civic knowledge and the importance of the liberal arts had previously prompted faculty action to advise UNC System leadership.

Across the winter of 2025-2026, Chair Wade Maki of the UNC Faculty Assembly suggested to the Assembly's officers and executive committee that stakeholder interest in civil discourse was continuing to grow. The idea of a faculty taskforce to identify curricular and co-curricular work on civil discourse already occurring on UNC campuses and best practices to foster more initiatives was presented and affirmed by the Assembly's executive committee, with Robert Taber of Fayetteville State University accepting responsibility to chair the taskforce.⁵ Its formation was then announced at the January 2026 Faculty Assembly meeting, with volunteers recruited from several UNC institutions.⁶ Discussions with System leaders led to this formulation of the taskforce's charge in February 2026:

³ In this report, "University of North Carolina" and "UNC System" are used interchangeably to refer to endeavors happening within and across the seventeen constituent institutions.

⁴ See, for example, Randy Ramsey and Peter Hans, "A Message from the Chairman and the President" *Higher Expectations: University of North Carolina System Strategic Plan for 2022-2027*, which comments that the "disruptions to public education [and] civic life...over the past few years have been enormous." <https://www.northcarolina.edu/wp-content/uploads/unc-system-2022-strategic-plan.pdf> [Accessed 8 June 2026]. Relatedly, universities in other states have started to hire "student expression specialists" to focus exclusively on student speech and free expression. Emma Whitford, "Universities Hiring Student Expression Specialists" *InsideHigherEd*. 17 June 2026. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/free-speech/2026/06/17/universities-hiring-student-expression-specialists> [Accessed 17 June 2026]. For calls for more civic education, see C&S, "61 College Presidents Unite to Advance Civic Preparedness and Uphold Free Expression on U.S. Campuses" 18 April 2024. <https://cands.org/61-college-presidents-unite-to-advance-civic-preparedness-and-uphold-free-expression-on-u-s-campuses/> [Accessed 19 June 2026] and American Council of Trustees and Alumni, "A Broadside for the Nation: Preparing College Students for Informed Citizenship" March 2026. <https://www.goacta.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Broadside-for-the-Nation.pdf> [Accessed 19 June 2026.]

⁵ Faculty participation in policy questions is an important feature of the UNC System's efforts to keep policies, procedures, and initiatives up-to-date and moving forward. The System's proactiveness has been touted as a national model. See Jenna Robinson, "UNC Isn't Waiting for Raleigh" *The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal* (15 June 2026). <https://jamesgmartin.center/2026/06/unc-isnt-waiting-for-raleigh/> [Accessed 17 June 2026.]

⁶ Members of the UNC Faculty Task Force on Civil Discourse during the 2025-2026 academic year: Robert Taber, History, Fayetteville State University (Chair); Ingrid Bego, Political Science, Western Carolina University; Stephanie Freeman, English, North Carolina Central University; Beth Moracco, Public Health, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Cliff Odle, Drama, North Carolina School of the Arts; Nashia Whittenburg, Social Work, North Carolina State University; Kenneth Zagacki, Communication, North Carolina State University.

Identify evidence-based curricular and co-curricular methods to strengthen undergraduate students' capacity and willingness to engage in civil discourse and dialectic thinking, including **establishing common ground across perceived differences, testing opposed hypotheses, analyzing and expressing ideas related to controversial topics, and engaging in constructive dialogue and reasoned debate across disciplines**. Arenas of particular interest include but are not limited to classroom discussions and related pedagogical activities, departmental and university programming, and student clubs. Additionally, suggest potential strategies and initiatives to support a culture of open discourse and constructive dialogue and foster the implementation of identified methods at UNC System institutions. An initial report should be completed and presented to System Office staff by mid-June 2026.

Conversations with faculty across UNC institutions and disciplines also surfaced substantial, good-faith concerns regarding what is meant by civil discourse, its value as part of the undergraduate experience, the potential for disproportionate burdens being placed on certain student populations, the connection between civil discourse programming and public trust in the university, and the risk of mission creep and additional mandates.⁷ After careful consideration of these questions, the task force decided that it was necessary to add preliminary sections addressing the necessity of promoting civil discourse along with definitions and frameworks for what we mean by "civil discourse."

This work is being done in parallel and conversation with the System Office's Common Ground Collaborative and the contracted work of the Constructive Dialogue Institute on behalf of the UNC System, but the UNC faculty taskforce members are the authors of this report. At no point did we use generative AI to draft or revise this report.

B. Why Civil Discourse?

The scope of the public university has increased steadily in the sixty years since Clark Kerr coined the term "multiversity" to describe the fragmented nature of institutions trying to meet a wide spread of demands.⁸ The task force therefore began its work by making sure that the promotion of civil discourse is aligned with the University of North Carolina's public purpose as originally defined by the people of North Carolina and in its current mission and strategic plan.

1. The Mission of the University of North Carolina

When the legislature of North Carolina convened in November 1789 to charter the first public university in the United States, they saw their "indispensable duty" to "consult the happiness of a rising generation, and endeavor to fit them for an **honorable discharge of the social duties of life**, by paying the strictest attention to their education" (*emphasis added*).⁹ President Bill Friday, grappling with student

⁷ The Task Force acknowledges that there are broad philosophical questions about what is meant by good citizenship and how this varies under different types of governments. For the purpose of this report, we are looking at civil discourse as preparation for citizenship in the United States of America, which is a constitutional democratic republic, shortened hereafter as "Constitutional democracy." For an overview of these questions, see Jack Crittenden and Peter Levine, "Civic Education" *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/civic-education/> [Accessed 19 June 2026].

⁸ Clark Kerr, *The Uses of the University* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1963), 6.

⁹ North Carolina General Assembly, "Act Establishing the University of North Carolina, 1789." *Laws of North Carolina*. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/unc/unc01-08/unc01-08.html> [Accessed 8 June 2026.]

protests over the Vietnam War and calls to close the University, emphasized that it is the job of the faculty and all who work as part of the University to help our students build on the base they received from their prior education, “to broaden [their knowledge], to deepen [their] understanding of our society, to qualify [themselves] for a useful and meaningful life.” In this, President Friday reminds, “No institution should seek to impose upon a student any preconceived dogma.”¹⁰

The University of North Carolina was redefined by the legislature two years later as a multicampus university “dedicated to the service of North Carolina and its people” and given the following mission:

...to discover, create, transmit, and apply knowledge to address the needs of individuals and society. This mission is accomplished through instruction, which communicates the knowledge and values and imparts the skills necessary for individuals to lead responsible, productive, and personally satisfying lives; through research, scholarship, and creative activities, which advance knowledge and enhance the educational process; and through public service, which contributes to the solution of societal problems and enriches the quality of life in the State. In the fulfillment of this mission, the university shall seek an efficient use of available resources to ensure the highest quality in its service to the citizens of the State.

From “an honorable discharge of the social duties of life” to having the skills necessary “to lead responsible, productive, and personally satisfying lives” and “[contributing] to the solution of societal problems” and “[enriching] the quality of life in the State,” we see in the history and mission of the University of North Carolina several elements that underline the importance of fostering civil discourse as part of our work. As President Peter Hans observed when the University of North Carolina established the Foundations of American Democracy requirement, “Preparing a rising generation for the rights and responsibilities of self-government was exactly what North Carolinians had in mind when they created the University.”¹¹

2. Civil Discourse as Preparation for Citizenship

In the first essay of what’s now known as *The Federalist Papers*, Alexander Hamilton observed:

It has been frequently remarked, that it seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of [people] are really capable or not, of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend, for their political constitutions, on accident and force.¹²

The cultivation of reflection and choice, or, in President Friday’s words, the preparation of students for a “useful and meaningful life,” can take many forms. Two distinct approaches are seen in the approaches of Robert Hutchins, who emphasized “structured discussions” of a canon of texts identified with “the West,” and John Dewey and his successors, who prefer the cultivation of a broader set of critical thinking

¹⁰ Bill Friday, “President’s Report, 1969-1970,” [May 1970]. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/presidents-report-1969-1970/3701287?item=4940859> [Accessed 4 May 2026].

¹¹ Peter Hans, Remarks to the UNC Board of Governors, 25 January 2024. <https://www.northcarolina.edu/apps/bog/doc.php?id=67860&code=bog>. Accessed 31 March 2026.

¹² Alexander Hamilton, “Federalist No. 1” (“General Introduction” For *The Independent Journal*). <https://guides.loc.gov/federalist-papers/text-1-10> [Accessed 9 June 2026].

skills and collaborative approaches to problem solving.¹³ It is this latter approach that has emerged as the more typical approach in the UNC System, with “general education” or “core curriculum” distribution requirements along with provision of upper-level elective courses ensuring education in breadth and majors and minors in a set discipline to provide education in depth, but it is worth noting that both approaches envision an undergraduate experience that goes beyond narrow training for a particular job or career.

This work has also had a shifting place in American colleges and universities.¹⁴ As seen in the original charter of the University of North Carolina with its emphasis on the state’s “indispensable duty” to prepare the rising generation “for an honorable discharge of the social duties of life,” the leaders forged by the American Revolution saw “knowledge, morality, and civic action to be thoroughly interconnected.”¹⁵ Many universities, public and private, from the emergence of the United States until the 1860s, had a set curriculum of Latin, Greek, mathematics, public speaking, the natural sciences, moral philosophy, and physical education that were presumed to lead to moral and intellectual virtues helpful for civic leadership.¹⁶ The Morrill Federal Land Grant Act of 1862, the Agricultural College Act of 1890, and an increasing adoption of a model of the research university first developed in Germany that emphasized specialization, academic freedom to protect and nourish expertise grounded in free inquiry, and practical application of scientific discoveries led to significant shifts in the university curriculum. While some educators argued that the mental discipline generated by work within a set scholarly field would be sufficient to fulfill moral and civic goals, by the mid-20th century a new consensus emerged: students would best be able to nurture freedom and democracy if they all completed courses in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Many of the required humanities courses were designed as interdisciplinary introductions to “Western civilization,” a term that gained new currency in the opening years of the Cold War, with the express purpose of “nourishing a common culture and sense of citizenship.”¹⁷

Even as universities promoted “Western civilization” courses, a change in the sciences and then other disciplines to view themselves as “morally neutral” led to further separation between academics and civic and moral education. As disciplines in the humanities and social sciences came to view disconnection from civics as a sign of “professional maturity,” required “Western civilization” and “great books” courses also transformed into classes in history and literature.¹⁸ University administrators

¹³ Anne Colby et al., *Educating Citizens: Preparing America’s Undergraduates for Lives of Moral and Civic Responsibility*. Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 24.

¹⁴ These next three paragraphs are a very brief overview that simplifies sweeping educational policy debates and curricular changes that manifested differently at public and private institutions around the country but together highlight how civics education became largely the responsibility of academic staff rather than faculty. They should not be taken as the taskforce recommending a return to the curriculum most common prior to the US Civil War, which would not be appropriate for a public university system in the 21st century.

¹⁵ North Carolina General Assembly, “Act Establishing the University of North Carolina.”; Colby, *Educating Citizens*, 26.

¹⁶ Colby, *Educating Citizens*, 26.

¹⁷ Colby, *Educating Citizens*, 27-31.

¹⁸ These changes are much debated within the disciplines, as experts decide their own standards of practice. Many faculty at public research institutions, for example, see doing research that serves the people of their state as a core part of their mission. For example, the UNC School of Government defines its mission thus: “to improve the lives of North Carolinians by engaging in practical scholarship that helps public officials and citizens understand and improve state and local government.” “About,” UNC School of Government. <https://www.sog.unc.edu/about/mission-and-values> [Accessed 15 June 2026].

addressed these changes by placing more of the burden for civic and character formation onto extracurricular programs and activities.¹⁹

These transformations happened in tandem with a greater emphasis on science, technology, engineering, and mathematics courses as a more certain pathway into the workforce and as the fields that would contribute to national competitiveness in the global economy. Sixteen years ago, at the depth of the Great Recession, the philosopher Martha Nussbaum warned policymakers that this well-meaning quest for national prosperity was leading to such a strong emphasis on science, technology, and engineering that governments and universities were undercutting other fields that helped students learn how to navigate and refresh our constitutional democracy, such as the humanities and arts. In Nussbaum's view, grounding in fields such as history, literature, philosophy, foreign languages, sociology, and the fine and performing arts help students be ready to shoulder the burdens of being citizens in a thriving democracy by:

- Building students' ability to see the world from the viewpoints of others, including people often presented as "less than" or unworthy of consideration.
- Seeing their own moments of weakness, helplessness, and ignorance as opportunities for cooperation, reciprocity, and growth rather than shame.
- Fostering concern for the well-being of other people, both in their own communities and beyond.
- Undercutting students' dismissiveness of people from other backgrounds and the tendency to see fellow neighbors and citizens as "lower" or "contaminating."
- Learning true things about people of other races, religions, genders and sexualities, and national origins, and people with disabilities and neurodivergent traits, to undercut stereotypes.
- Accepting accountability for their own decisions and responsibility for their actions as a member of society.
- Deliberately teaching and reinforcing critical thinking, including "the skill and courage" to speak up and promote dissenting viewpoints.²⁰

Finally, according to civics education data, Americans' knowledge of core civics facts hit a low point one decade ago. Several initiatives have helped revive civics education in high schools and undergraduate programs.²¹ While such knowledge about the United States' founding documents and system of

¹⁹ Colby, *Educating Citizens*, 31-32.

²⁰ List paraphrased from Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 45-46. The hazard of college students focusing so much on "career skills and credentials" that they neglect the general education requirements that remain that could help them prepare for citizenship is also outlined in Colby, *Educating Citizens*, 40.

²¹ Amy Gutmann has argued that civic education is an urgent form of social reproduction and has placed a strong emphasis on K-12 schools to do much more on this front, as she views the civic formation of children as ideally shaped by a combination of the child's parents, other citizens, and educational authorities. See Gutmann, *Democratic Education* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1987). For a broad overview of suggested approaches to civic education in K-12 schools, see Crittenden and Levine, "Civic Education" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2013/entries/civic-education/> [Accessed 19 June 2026].

government is not the totality of civil discourse or what young adults need for leadership in a constitutional democracy, it is striking that the steering committees of CivxNow and Educating for American Democracy had to engage in civil discourse to determine what should be included in civics education.²²

3. Civil Discourse and Self-Leadership

Given these barriers to the dialogue that is necessary for civil discourse and the other social, technological, economic, and political problems students see around them, students can assume that these challenges are insurmountable, that a college degree is purely a business transaction to obtain better-paying employment, and that systems are rigged against them. While this cynicism is not a new development in American culture, it cuts against the mission of the University of North Carolina to impart to students “the skills necessary for individuals to lead responsible, productive, and personally satisfying lives.” The emergence of “disordered passivity,” marked by extreme aversion to risk, is not due solely to the structure of education in K-12 schools or our colleges, but the undergraduate experience—specifically, engagement in civil discourse activities—can provide avenues for meaningful engagement.²³

Students moving from disengagement to passive observation to engagement in civil discourse activities can also be understood as these students building their capacity for self-leadership, an essential condition for executives, entrepreneurs, managers, and other professional and community leadership roles. Self-leadership, as conceived by Charles C. Manz, goes beyond self-management (the completion of necessary tasks) to focus on the overall well-being and flourishing of the individual. Much of the recent scholarly literature on self-leadership addresses how individuals, working within systems or large organizations, can still take ownership of the processes by which they make decisions that are within their control, a development that increases their productivity, sense of satisfaction, and creativity while reducing stress and the development of unethical or “dark triad” behavior.²⁴ While a full assessment of the literature on self-leadership and higher education is beyond the scope of this report, it is worth noting the importance of optimism, motivational awareness, behavior regulation and direction, and self-

²² Danielle Allen, “Nothing Beats Polarization Like Civics Education” *The New York Times*. 17 May 2026. [Accessed 15 June 2026.] <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/17/opinion/civic-education-return.html> Also worth noting is James Traub’s articulation of “dispositions” that students need to acquire to achieve what Danielle Allen calls “participatory readiness,” including “tolerance for difference, the capacity to listen, the negotiating skills that help us bring people with unlike views to agree on a common course of action.” See Traub, *The Cradle of Citizenship: How Schools Can Help Save Our Democracy*, as excerpted by *The Harvard Gazette*. 19 February 2026. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2026/02/excerpt-from-the-cradle-of-citizenship-by-james-traub/> [Accessed 17 June 2026]. Also notable: increasing civics education is broadly popular across partisan and generational lines. See Stephanie Perry and John Lapinski, “Poll: Americans Believe They Aren’t Being Taught Enough About Democracy” *NBC News*. 20 June 2026. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/politics-news/poll-americans-believe-arent-taught-enough-democracy-rcna350900> [Accessed 21 June 2026].

²³ For “disordered passivity,” see Yuval Levin, “The Changing Face of Social Breakdown” *The Dispatch*. 16 November 2021. <https://www.aei.org/op-eds/the-changing-face-of-social-breakdown/> [Accessed 9 June 2026]. For the connection between the bleak worldview, education, and civic engagement, see Robert Pondiscio, “The Most Important Civics Lesson Schools Can Teach.” *The Next 30 Years*. 25 November 2025. <https://thenext30years.substack.com/p/the-most-important-civics-lesson> [Accessed 6 April 2026]. For a discussion of these same themes in higher education, see Frank Bruni, “Teaching in an American University is Very Strange Right Now.”

²⁴ Michael G. Goldsby et al., “Self-Leadership: A Four Decade Review of the Literature and Trainings” *Administrative Sciences* Volume 11, Issue 1. 4 March 2021. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3390/admsci11010025>

reflection in the development of an individual's self-leadership as these concepts are also present in many of the civil discourse activities discussed below.²⁵

4. Civil Discourse and Durable Skills for the Workplace

While an emphasis on “workplace ready” skills led to a de-emphasis of civics and civil discourse in undergraduate curricula and life, surveys of employers demonstrate a clear need. Surveys of hiring managers and corporate leaders conducted by such organizations as the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) and the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) consistently report that employers value general, “human,” and “durable” skills over narrow technical training.²⁶ UNC System students presently learn many of these skills through humanities and social science curricula.

The most highly regarded skills include problem-solving, critical thinking, effective communication, teamwork, and digital competency. More specifically:

- Critical thinking and problem-solving, often considered together, concern the ability to analyze information and apply complex problem-solving skills to real-world challenges and scenarios.
- Effective communication, identified by 90% of employers as a top priority, refers to both oral and written communication and, more particularly, to the ability to convey messages clearly and persuasively. Active listening and strong interpersonal communication skills are frequently associated with effective communication.²⁷
- Teamwork refers to collaborative interaction among members of teams or groups—the skills required to work cohesively in diverse teams and to manage conflict or disagreements productively.
- Digital competency, also known as “digital and AI literacy,” includes training in information technology, data analytics, and basic AI competencies.
- Related to each of these skill groups is what some employers call “adaptability and initiative”—the ability to demonstrate leadership, a strong work ethic, and the flexibility to adapt to change.

These same surveys also show that employers are concerned that recent graduates are unprepared to apply these skills in the workplace. For example, while surveys reveal that 81% of employers view oral

²⁵ Uwe Napiersky and Stephen A. Woods, “From the Workplace to the Classroom: Examining the Impact of Self-Leadership Learning Strategies on Higher Educational Attainment and Success” *Innovations in Education and Teaching International* 55 (4): 441-49 (2018). DOI: 10.1080/14703297.2016.1263232; Michael B. Harari, “Self-Leadership: A Meta-Analysis of Over Two Decades of Research” *Journal of Occupational and Organizational Psychology* 94 (4): 890-923 (2021). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/joop.12365>

²⁶ Ashley P. Finley, “The Career-Ready Graduate” *American Association for Colleges & Universities*. 2023. <https://www.aacu.org/research/the-career-ready-graduate-what-employers-say-about-the-difference-college-makes> [Accessed 16 June 2026]; National Association of Colleges and Employers, “Job Outlook 2025,” January 2025. <https://naceweb.org/docs/default-source/default-document-library/2025/publication/research-report/2025-nace-job-outlook-jan-2025.pdf> [Accessed 16 June 2026.]

²⁷ See, especially, Workplace Intelligence, “College Graduate Skills Study.” 2024. <https://workplaceintelligence.com/college-graduate-skills-study/> [Accessed 16 June 2026.]

communication as very important, only 49% believe that recent graduates are highly prepared in that area.²⁸

Any one of these skills, or a combination of them, could help students become more civil communicators—another general skill valued by employers seeking workers from diverse backgrounds with differing perspectives. For example, in the process of learning and practicing effective communication in interpersonal, team, or group contexts, students might improve their ability to communicate ideas respectfully, demonstrate active listening and empathy, and seek mutual understanding and collaborative problem-solving while allowing for disagreement without hostility or coercion.

5. Civil Discourse and Public Trust in Higher Education

Declining public trust in higher education is an often-cited reason for the need for wholesale reforms, spurring conferences, research reports, and a variety of policy proposals.²⁹ Confidence rebounded last year after a decade-long decline, with 75% of Americans saying that they have “a great deal,” “quite a lot,” or “some” confidence in higher education.³⁰ That said, among the 23% of Americans who expressed “very little” confidence in higher education, the leading reason (38% of “very little,” 9% of the total sample) was a perception of colleges and universities pushing a political agenda.³¹

In response to these critiques, many universities—including the University of North Carolina—have adopted “institutional neutrality” policies based on the Kalven Committee’s report to the University of Chicago. Formulated during the Vietnam War and rising scrutiny of universities’ relationship with the Selective Service, the Reserve Officer Training Corps, and other connections between American universities and the military-industrial complex, the Kalven Committee notably did not say that it was the job of universities to make everyone comfortable. Indeed, it explicitly states that because university’s mission “is the discovery, improvement, and dissemination of knowledge” and that it will inquire and scrutinize “all aspects and all values of society,” a university “faithful to its mission will provide enduring

²⁸ Finley, “The Career-Ready Graduate,” 24.

²⁹ An exhaustive list is beyond the scope of the report, but two recent conferences of note are the American Enterprise Institute’s “A New Academic-Social Contract,” held 28 May 2026 at the Institute’s headquarters in Washington, DC and “Higher Education at the Crossroads: Reckoning with the Rise of Illiberalism,” which was sponsored by the American Association of College and Universities and Duke University’s Kenan Institute for Ethics at Duke on 22 and 23 May 2026. See also, Julia Adams, Beverly Gage, et al., *Report of the Yale Committee on Trust in Higher Education*, Yale University, 10 April 2026. <https://president.yale.edu/sites/default/files/2026-04/Report-of-the-Committee-on-Trust-in-Higher-Education.pdf> [Accessed 15 June 2026] and Tomiko Brown-Nagin, Julie A. Reuben, Keith E. Whittington, et al., “Intellectual Diversity and the Mission of Higher Education” Radcliffe Institute, 5 May 2026. <https://www.radcliffe.harvard.edu/news-and-ideas/intellectual-diversity-and-the-mission-of-higher-education> [Accessed 15 June 2026].

³⁰ Jeffrey M. Jones, “U.S. Public Trust in Higher Ed Rises from Recent Low” *Gallup*. 16 July 2025. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/692519/public-trust-higher-rises-recent-low.aspx> [Accessed 15 June 2026.] Note that declines in public trust have occurred in tandem across multiple sectors, including churches/organized religion, banks, the US military, the Supreme Court, and Congress. See Gallup, “Confidence in Institutions” <https://news.gallup.com/poll/1597/confidence-institutions.aspx> [Accessed 21 June 2026]. Social scientists disagree on the extent to which this decline is due to secular cycles, with Peter Turchin (*Ages of Discord*, 2016) emphasizing demographics and Robert Putnam (*The Upswing*, 2020) emphasizing political culture.

³¹ Jones, “U.S. Public Trust in Higher Education,” July 2025.

challenges to social values, policies, practices, and institutions.”³² What the Kalven Committee articulated, however, is that “the instrument of dissent and criticism is the individual faculty member or the individual student.” The university’s role, therefore, is “to sustain an extraordinary environment of freedom of inquiry and maintain an independence from political fashions, passions, and pressures.”³³ Thus, the University of North Carolina is committed to maintaining neutrality at the institutional and subdivision level while reaffirming academic freedom of faculty and students and the distinct but related rights of free speech and expression as enshrined in the US and North Carolina constitutions.³⁴

Indeed, more detailed research has identified a “movable middle” consisting of nearly half of all Americans, whose trust in higher education can be strengthened, including through the promotion of civil discourse efforts. Three-quarters of all Americans believe that one of the most important contributions colleges could make is to “help students become critical thinkers and informed citizens,” a slightly higher percentage than “prepare students to succeed in their careers” or “find cures for cancer and other diseases.” Nearly two-thirds of Americans see it as very important that colleges “increase healthy and respectful political debate” and “empower faculty members to use their expertise to benefit society.”³⁵

The University of North Carolina has clear opportunities and starts with an advantage, as “local flagship state universities” are the most trusted among types of institutions of higher education, with 74% of Americans trusting them “a great deal” or “somewhat.” Regional public universities are not a listed category, but “local community colleges” were the second-most trusted category, with 69% of Americans trusting them “a great deal” or “somewhat,” suggesting that regional public universities are at a similar level of trust. Potential action items for universities as identified by survey respondents include organizing service projects to help the local community, hosting workshops or forums to discuss community priorities and find solutions, sponsoring public events or community town halls to talk about tough issues from a wide variety of perspectives, and showing students how to vote and make their voices heard in government. The most trusted messenger on civic issues is a professor who studies the topic.³⁶ The task force notes that many of our universities, including staff and faculty as appropriate, are already engaged in projects along these lines.³⁷ To identify which activities are civil discourse, we must define it.

³² Harry Kalven, Jr. et al., “Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action.” 11 November 1967. https://provost.uchicago.edu/sites/default/files/documents/reports/KalvenRprt_0.pdf [Accessed 16 June 2026].

³³ Kalven, “Report on the University’s Role in Political and Social Action.”

³⁴ University of North Carolina Board of Governors, *The UNC Policy Manual*, “300.8.5: Equality Within the University of North Carolina” 23 May 2024, particularly sections IV, V, and VII. <https://www.northcarolina.edu/apps/policy/doc.php?type=pdf&id=147> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

³⁵ C&S, “Trust in Higher Education Starts Local.” May 2026, slides 4, 12, 13. <https://cands.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/CS-Trust-in-Higher-Education-Starts-Local-FNL.pdf> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

³⁶ C&S, “Trust in Higher Education Starts Local,” slides 18, 19, and 20.

³⁷ Yale University, after the release of its faculty report, streamlined its mission statement to remove references to leadership development or service. It is *not* the recommendation of this task force to engage in similar streamlining of the mission of the University of North Carolina. Leo Nyberg and Aria Lynn-Skov, “Yale, Following Report, Narrows its Mission Statement to Focus on Knowledge” *Yale Daily News*. 30 April 2026. <https://yaledailynews.com/articles/yale-following-report-narrows-its-mission-statement-to-focus-on-knowledge> [Accessed 16 June 2026.]

6. The Technological and Social Challenge to Civil Discourse

Several challenges to civil discourse and related aspects of education have emerged across the past twenty years. Social media—the foundation of the “attention economy”—rewards content that promotes engagement, with outrage as the surest path to said engagement.³⁸ Camera-equipped smart phones increase the potential for surveillance by classmates, reducing student engagement in discussions and in-class activities and even faculty efforts to encourage critical thinking and the consideration of multiple perspectives.³⁹ These developments add further barriers to making the kinds of mistakes that are a necessary part of the learning process.⁴⁰

Over the last four years, the emergence of large language models that use natural language processing to generate text and images (GenAI) has only heightened the need for our students to learn how to evaluate claims, particularly given GenAI’s problematic-yet-persisting combination of confidence and hallucinations. We must therefore prepare our students to “govern the machines” as part of welcoming them into the “shared work of self-governance.”⁴¹ And even when GenAI provides factual information, students—and all of us—need the capacity to put this information into effective, actionable context. In other words, we may be awash in “intelligence” but need wisdom and discernment.⁴²

Generative AI in its current state is particularly damaging to the dialogue portion of civil discourse. Most AI platforms operate on a “freemium” model to accrue market share and are thus designed to agree with the user. A recent analysis of eleven leading large language models found the models to be 50% more sycophantic than friends, colleagues, or family members, harming users’ willingness to accept responsibility for their behavior and endeavor to repair relationships.⁴³ The Constructive Dialogue Institute has found that even in a classroom setting, while custom-designed generative AI as a skill-

³⁸ William J. Brady et al., “How Social Learning Amplifies Moral Outrage Expression in Online Social Networks” *ScienceAdvances* Vol. 7, Issue 23 (13 August 2021). DOI: [10.1126/sciadv.abe5641](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abe5641). The research on whether algorithms increase this dynamic is more mixed. See Hannah Metzler and David Garcia, “Social Drivers and Algorithmic Mechanisms on Digital Media” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* Vol. 19, Issue 5 (19 July 2023). DOI: [10.1126/sciadv.abe56](https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abe56). For a perspective on what social media means for leadership development, see Aaron Pomerantz, “Beyond Blaming the Algorithm: Reclaiming Leadership from Social Media Outrage” *Leadership Lab* (20 November 2025). <https://doerr.rice.edu/leadership-lab/leadership-lab-beyond-blaming-algorithm-reclaiming-leadership-social-media-outrage> [Accessed 8 June 2026].

³⁹ Gavin Escott, “The Classroom, Caught on Camera” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 10 December 2025. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-surveilled-classroom> [Accessed 9 June 2026]; Cameron Conaway, “Confronting Cringe Culture in the Classroom” *Harvard Business Impact*. 30 April 2026. <https://hbsp.harvard.edu/inspiring-minds/confronting-cringe-culture-in-the-classroom> [Accessed 9 June 2026].

⁴⁰ Youki Terada, “The Mistake Imperative—Why We Must Get Over Our Fear of Student Error” *Edutopia*. 19 November 2020. <https://www.edutopia.org/article/mistake-imperative-why-we-must-get-over-our-fear-student-error/> [Accessed 9 June 2026].

⁴¹ Danielle Allen, “Education and Its Public Purposes” *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 14 May 2026. <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/allen-education-public-purposes> [Accessed 20 May 2026]. For a prominent example of GenAI hallucinations and the need for verification, see Benjamin Mullin, “Book on Truth in the Age of A.I. Contains Quotes Made Up by A.I.” *The New York Times*, 19 May 2026. <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/05/19/business/media/future-of-truth-ai-quotes.html> [Accessed 20 May 2026].

⁴² Hank Green, “The AI Question that No AI Person Asks” *VlogBrothers*, 24 April 2026. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o9Vbvp4awQU> [Accessed 28 April 2026].

⁴³ Myra Cheng et al., “Syncophantic AI Decreases Prosocial Intentions and Promotes Dependence” *Science*. 391 (6792) (2026). DOI: 10.1126/science.aec8352.

building “coach” has the potential to help students, even with custom design, using AI programs as conversation partners “[carries] serious risks” while not yet showing “clear skill-building benefits” in learning how to engage in constructive dialogue.⁴⁴

C. Challenges in Defining Civil Discourse

As one task force member commented, “trying to define civil discourse reminds me of Potter Stewart. No one can define it, but we all know it when we see it.” To bring us closer to a definition suitable for setting a strategic direction for the University of North Carolina, this section looks at previous attempts at defining “civil discourse” and scholarship around “civility” and “dialogue,” providing a scholarly foundation for the suggested frameworks.

1. Previous Attempts at Definition

According to the Center for Ethics and Human Values (CEHV) at Ohio State University, civil discourse is “the practice of deliberating about matters of public concern with others in a way that seeks to expand knowledge and promote understanding.” Civil does not mean mere politeness; instead, it refers to the idea of civic-mindedness or being “oriented toward public life.” Civil discourse includes such behaviors as practicing mutual respect, building civic trust, and identifying common ground on matters of public concern. The CEHV recognizes civil discourse as a critical component of democratic citizenship, as a compliment to but not a replacement for bargaining.⁴⁵ Like the University of North Carolina, the CEHV believes that civil discourse is a key aspect of democratic citizenship “that universities are designed to promote” and that “many of the privileges that universities enjoy, such as the principle of academic freedom and the protections of faculty tenure, are granted with the understanding that they are necessary for expanding knowledge and promoting understanding, and with the expectation that they will be used with those aims in view.”

The CEHV also provide the “4C’s of Civil Discourse,” which encourage individuals to to be “curious” (seeking to understand), “charitable” (giving the benefit of the doubt), “conscientious” (speaking truthfully), and “constructive” (aiming for solutions). Similarly, the National Conflict Resolution Center has developed “The Code of Civil Discourse,” which supplies particular rules for public debate and meetings, such as adhering to time limits, avoiding personal attacks, and focusing on policy rather than insults⁴⁶. Likewise, the Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse recommends what it calls the “3-Part Exchange” framework for civil discourse: holding individuals accountable for their voice, remaining curious about other perspectives, and respecting the humanity of others.⁴⁷ These approaches to civil discourse, along with the various practices they recommend, are explored by the different theorists described in the next sections. This exploration informs the frameworks and recommendations later in this report.

⁴⁴ Ryan W. Carlson, “Can AI Teach Dialogue Skills to College Students?” *The Constructive Dialogue Institute*. March 2026. <https://s3.us-east-2.amazonaws.com/craft-cdi/uploads/Can-AI-Teach-Dialogue-Skills-CDI-White-Paper.pdf> [Accessed 10 June 2026].

⁴⁵ Center for Ethics and Human Values, “What is Civil Discourse?” <https://cehv.osu.edu/civil-discourse-citizenship-0/what-civil-discourse> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁴⁶ National Conflict Resolution Center, “The Code of Civil Discourse” <https://ncrconline.com/mediation-conflict-resolution/the-code-of-civil-discourse/> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁴⁷ Padnos/Sarosik Center for Civil Discourse, “Home Page” <https://www.gvsu.edu/civildiscourse/> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

2. Civil Discourse as Civility

One way to define civil discourse is “civility,” a concept that has been extensively examined in sociological literature for decades.⁴⁸ Philosophers have made distinctions between two conceptions of civility: Civility understood either as simple tolerance or as active affirmation of the goals and values pursued by others⁴⁹; polite and political civility⁵⁰; formal and substantive civility⁵¹; civility of etiquette and liberal civility⁵²; civility as an ethical concept and civility as a political concept⁵³; “civility as politeness” and “civility as responsiveness”⁵⁴; and between “mere civility” and “more robust conceptions.”⁵⁵ The basic idea of these distinctions lies in the difference between superficial compliance with social norms (thin civility) and a deeper commitment to moral and political principles based on respect for others (thick civility).⁵⁶

This distinction between types of civility is articulated in Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” a document every UNC undergraduate now learns about as part of the Foundations of American Democracy requirement. Dr. King is addressing the concerns of his fellow clergymen, who were questioning the wisdom of protesting the laws upholding racial segregation in Birmingham, Alabama. As he explains, he has “almost reached the conclusion” that the “great stumbling block” in ending legal segregation is those “who prefer a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” Elsewhere in the letter, Dr. King also provides an important guide for addressing perceived injustice, a process that begins with “a collection of facts to determine whether injustices exist” and then negotiation before moving to self-purification and direct action.⁵⁷

The importance of recognizing and accepting a more robust form of civility and the urgency of making the United States’ constitutional form of government more representative of all citizens was further expressed in Malcolm X’s speech “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Given two weeks before Dr. King wrote the “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” in the context of the US Senate filibustering the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the speech warns that the country faces a choice: either inclusion in the constitutional democracy or

⁴⁸ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959). Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: The History of Manners*. Translated by Edmund Jephcott. New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

⁴⁹ Richard C. Sinopoli, “Thick-Skinned Liberalism: Redefining Civility.” *American Political Science Review* 89(3): 612–620 (1995), especially p. 612.

⁵⁰ Cheshire Calhoun, “The Virtue of Civility.” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 29(3): 251–275 (2000), especially p. 255.

⁵¹ Richard Boyd, “The Value of Civility?” *Urban Studies* 43(5–6): 863–878 (2006), especially p. 864.

⁵² Michael J. Meyer, “Liberal Civility.” *Social Theory and Practice* 26(1): 69–93 (2000), especially p. 71.

⁵³ Derek Edyvane, “Civility as Politeness.” *Political Studies* 65(2): 343–356 (2017), especially 345.

⁵⁴ Anthony Simon Laden. 2019. “Civility and Democratic Engagement.” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 36(2): 106–125 (2019).

⁵⁵ Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 159.

⁵⁶ Aurélia Bardon, Matteo Bonotti, Steven T. Zech, and William Ridge “Disaggregating Civility: Politeness, Public-Mindedness and Their Connection.” *British Journal of Political Science* 53(1): 308–325 (2023).
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S000712342100065X>

⁵⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail.” April 1964.
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/sites/default/files/general/Letter%20from%20Birmingham%20Jail%20MLK.pdf> [Accessed 17 June 2026]. “Self-purification” in this context means training one’s body and mind to withstand insults and physical assaults and remain non-violent.

facing an armed uprising by citizens whose rights were being denied or being left unprotected by the majority.⁵⁸

These arguments, along with the decolonization movements of the 1950s-1970s, have influenced the study of civility in intercultural and multicultural contexts, as well as investigations of “moral exclusionary” communicative practices and hate speech. To guard against the latter two, many of the communication ethics perspectives taught in communication ethics classes in the UNC system tend to promote particular criteria or guidelines for ethical communication, including reciprocity, respect for differing viewpoints, nonjudgmentalism, honesty, avoiding stereotyping, and freedom from harm.⁵⁹ Some notable theoretical perspectives include Christians and Traeber’s concept of “worldview pluralism,” Chen and Starosta’s “reciprocity ethic,” Kale’s “human nature ethics,” Cortese’s discussion of the “socio-cultural limits of morality,” Elliott’s “communicating across cultural differences,” Opatow’s theory of “moral exclusion,” and Altman’s speech act theory of hate speech.⁶⁰

Specifically, a number of theorists cited in UNC system university classes have examined civil discourse in the context of U.S. race relations and controversies over gender. In *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education*, Danielle Allen argues that Americans must overcome deep-seated interracial distrust by replacing it with a “citizenship of political friendship.” She offers the concept of “political friendship” as a goal of civil discourse: instead of relying solely on formal laws, citizens should adopt political friendship, which entails building trust with strangers even in the face of persistent, “fossilized” distrust. She employs as her case study the situation following the Brown v. Board of Education decision, when American democracy struggled—and, she would argue, still struggles—with race-based mistrust, what she refers to as “the dark side of the democratic soul.” Allen argues that people must promote and practice certain “habits of interaction,” or what might be called civil discourse: daily, face-to-face interactions among strangers that become the “real meat” of citizenship and are essential for strengthening democracy.⁶¹

Likewise, feminist theorists who advocate for the “ethic of care” perspective, typically investigated in communication ethics or gender studies courses, have also developed influential approaches to understanding civil discourse, morality, and interpersonal relationships. These scholars emphasize the importance of relationships, empathy, and contextual understanding in ethical decision-making. According to this “ethic of care” framework, caring involves “all activities we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible.”⁶² This perspective places less emphasis

⁵⁸ Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” 3 April 1964. *Teaching Literacy Through History*

https://www.gilderlehrman.org/sites/default/files/inline-pdfs/ballot_or_bullet.pdf [Accessed 17 June 2026].

⁵⁹ For a general overview, see R. L. Johannesen, *Ethics in Human Communication* (6th ed.). (Long Grove, Illinois: Waveland Press, 2008).

⁶⁰ Clifford G. Christians and Michael Traeber, eds., *Communication Ethics and Universal Values* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 1997); Guo-Ming Chen and William J. Starosta, “A Review of the Concept of Intercultural Awareness” *Human Communication*, vol. 2, 1998-1999, pp. 27-54; S. H. Kale, “Human Nature, Ethics and Marketing” *European Journal of Marketing*, 28(1), 6–15 (1994); Anthony J. Cortese, *Ethnic Ethics: The Restructuring of Moral Theory*. (Binghamton: State University of New York Press, 1990); Deni Elliott, *Ethics in the First Person: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Practical Ethics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1995); Susan Opatow, “Moral Exclusion and Injustice: An Introduction” *Journal of Social Issues*, 46:1 (1990), 1–20; Andrew Altman, “Liberalism and Campus Hate Speech: A Philosophical Examination” *Ethics* 103:2 (1993), 302–317.

⁶¹ Danielle Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

⁶² Joan Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 103.

on detached rationality and abstract notions of justice and instead focuses on how ethical principles are practiced in everyday life.⁶³ Care ethics also rejects rigid moral rules in favor of responsiveness to particular situations, relationships, and lived experiences, extending concern to both public and private contexts and even to non-human life.⁶⁴ Furthermore, ethic of care theorists examine how caring is either supported or undermined within social and public institutions. Important characteristics associated with caring that can be translated into forms of civil discourse include attentiveness, empathy, reciprocity, responsibility, competence, responsiveness, nonjudgmental attitudes, and a willingness to nurture others.⁶⁵

Finally, it is worth emphasizing that Amanda Ripley in her book *High Conflict* distinguishes “high conflict,” the kind of implacable enmity and score-settling that degrades personal and community relationships, from “good conflict.” In defining “good conflict,” Ripley draws directly from civil rights leader John Lewis’ conception of “good trouble,” explaining that:

Good conflict is a force that pushes us to be better people...but it does not collapse into caricature. We remain open to the reality that none of us has answers to everything all of the time, and that we are all connected. We need healthy conflict in order to defend ourselves, to understand each other, and to improve. These days, we need much more of it, not less.⁶⁶

Because what distinguishes “good conflict” from “high conflict” includes active listening, avoiding “score-settling” and “us vs. them” mindsets, being mindful of cognitive biases and the causing of social pain through rejection or exclusion, meaningful dialogue is a crucial part of civil discourse.⁶⁷

3. Civil Discourse as Dialogue

As the above section makes clear, the purpose of civility is to enable dialogue, or the meaningful interchange of ideas. Contemporary scholarship on the importance of dialogue and debate in civic life has been shaped by the foundational work of Jürgen Habermas and John Rawls, who had differing approaches to deliberative democracy. Habermas’s theory of the public sphere positions open, rational-critical debate as central to democratic legitimacy, emphasizing communicative action and inclusive

⁶³ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1993); Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁶⁴ Nel Noddings, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*.

⁶⁵ Rita C. Manning, *Speaking from the Heart: A Feminist Perspective on Ethics* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1992); Julia T. Wood, *Who Cares? Women, Care, and Culture* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994).

⁶⁶ Amanda Ripley, *High Conflict: Why We Get Trapped and How We Get Out* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2021), 3-4. See also *High Conflict*, Chapter Seven, the Author’s Note, and the appendixes for a detailed discussion of “good conflict.” The task force notes that the critiques that can generate “good conflict” do not have to come from a particular part of the political spectrum, nor be thought of as “political” or “partisan” at all.

⁶⁷ Ripley, *High Conflict*, Chapter 3. In that chapter, Ripley also discusses “conflict entrepreneurs,” who gain money or influence through creating or maintaining “high conflict” situations and the corrosive nature of state complicity in violence. Two potential benefits of civil discourse education as outlined in this report are the teaching of “habits of mind” to make students less susceptible to conflict entrepreneurs and modeling forms of active citizenship that do not depend on high conflict. Addressing the kind of political corruption that leads to state complicity in violence is beyond the scope of this report, but political scientists have found that increased voter turnout can structurally reduce corruption. See Bruce Bueno de Mesquita and Alastair Smith, *The Dictator’s Handbook: Why Bad Behavior is Almost Always Good Politics* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

participation.⁶⁸ Rawls, by contrast, introduces the concept of public reason, arguing that democratic discourse should be guided by principles that all citizens can reasonably accept.⁶⁹ Ongoing debates between these traditions highlight tensions between procedural fairness and substantive justice in civil discourse.⁷⁰

Other scholars are increasingly recognizing the limits of rational argument models—for instance, that not all participants possess equal argumentative skills and that rational debate or traditional social advocacy (e.g., marches, demonstrations) are not appropriate in every context.⁷¹ Others have begun to investigate how civil discourse operates under conditions of polarization, digital media, and asymmetrical power. Research on online discourse, for example, shows that platform design and interaction norms significantly shape whether communication becomes deliberative, civic, or demagogic in tone.

Another important development of concern to UNC system faculty and students is the rise of contentious public interactions, including those involving student groups and organizations such as Turning Point USA. These encounters often display surface features of civil discourse while simultaneously veering into confrontation, raising important questions: At what point does dialogue devolve into intimidation, harassment, or violence? When does civil discourse break down? To what extent are participants morally obligated to engage with viewpoints they consider racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise objectionable? At what points are practitioners of civil discourse no longer ethically obligated to tolerate what they consider extremist views that they perceive as threatening to their well-being? Ultimately, questions like these may expose the limits of civil discourse in contemporary society and even in university settings.

A related issue is how and the extent to which any definition, analysis, or specification of civil discourse becomes, in practice, a tool used to stifle marginalized voices and to enforce conformity while squelching dissent. There is a long history of this happening, and it infuses many calls for civility and civil discourse "codes" currently. A robust line of scholarship has addressed this matter in legal studies, communication studies, history, and in other disciplines, some of which is discussed below. Consequently, we advise that initiatives related to the UNC System's Common Ground Collaborative work should acknowledge and incorporate this aspect of civility, as we do in the proposed frameworks.⁷²

Scholars also point out how unhelpful and facile the "agree to disagree" platitude is. Most dialogically-rooted approaches to civil discourse—that is, efforts to understand and practice civil dialogue as a kind of assertive but respectful conversation—frame issues as inherently open-ended. Even if no clear resolution, solution, or redress is in sight, the key goal is to continue the dialogue because opportunities always arise for greater understanding. The same model holds true, *mutatis mutandis*, for formal debate.

⁶⁸ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (T. Burger & F. Lawrence, Trans.) (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989).

⁶⁹ John Rawls, *Political Liberalism* (Ithaca: Columbia University Press, 1993).

⁷⁰ Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Boston: MIT Press, 1993).

⁷¹ Joshua J. Frye and Steven R. Goldzwig, *Rhetoric and Democracy in a Post-Truth Era* (New York: Lexington Books, 2024); Steven R. Goldzwig, "Demagoguery, Democratic Dissent, and 'Re-visioning' Democracy," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 9:3 (2006), 471- 478; Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁷² A useful metaphor for information that can be difficult for the recipient to hear but should nonetheless be considered "civil dialogue" is the old story of a person warning the rest of their town of an incipient mudslide. Occupied with their own daily tasks, the townspeople first ignored and then attacked the person trying to raise the warning, blaming them for becoming increasingly agitated. Or, in other words, part of respecting the inherent dignity of all participants involves deliberately choosing *not* to shoot the messenger.

While the decision that a debate works toward offers closure, it does not promise finality. Debate "resolutions" are resolved provisionally with the outcome of each round or event, but the larger goal of all participants should be to preserve the opportunity to continue debating as new information becomes available. This is similar to a Bayesian approach analogous to the "pragmatic" model of knowledge production once described by C.S. Peirce and the "conjecture/refutation" theory of scientific inquiry championed by Karl Popper.⁷³

Another way of thinking about this issue—one that has increasingly occupied the attention of argument scholars such as Justin Eckstein from "[Insight Debate](#)"—a nonprofit that works with organizations (e.g., high schools, colleges) to improve educational experiences and outcomes through effective communication within and across campus communities—is the distinction between what might be called "exhausted" discourse and "concluded" discourse. There are certainly moments when institutions must act despite persistent disagreement, though it seems less certain that such moments represent the end of dialogue. Even where a decision has been reached, the underlying conversation often remains open to revision, critique, and renewed engagement. In that sense, the "agree to disagree" formulation invokes a finality that has not occurred. Productive disagreement need not culminate in consensus, though it should preserve the possibility that participants continue learning from one another and reconsidering their positions as circumstances and evidence evolve.

We further acknowledge that theorists from Political Philosophy complicate purely rational models of civil discourse. Communitarian theorists such as Michael Sandel and Michael Walzer—whose theories are examined mostly in political science classes—argue that discourse is always embedded in cultural, historical, and moral contexts, emphasizing the role of shared values and community in shaping dialogue.⁷⁴ These perspectives reinforce the idea that civil discourse cannot be entirely abstract or detached from lived experience.

Recently introduced in some communication courses is the work of Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, along with Sally Miller Gearhart. They have exposed the limits of traditional public speaking models for engaging in rational and civil discourse. Such models, they claim, are often one-way and tend to reproduce the suspicion associated with public speaking—what Gearhart describes as public speaking's "underlying intent to change people and things," or to "convert" audiences to a speaker's opinions and direct how they should think.⁷⁵ Foss and Griffin instead propose an "invitational" approach to public speaking grounded in feminist principles like safety, equality, and mutual understanding.⁷⁶ The invitational approach shares many commonalities with various civil discourse models—namely, its emphasis on the goal of communicative exchanges: To achieve understanding rather than persuasion.

⁷³ Peirce and Popper are each, in their own way and not without controversy, responding to Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's theories of the dialectic and the advancement of knowledge. In recent decades, historians have paid increasing attention to how "events on the ground" can also inspire (or force) new meanings of political/philosophical terms and open new possibilities. See, for example, Henry Heller, "Hegel, Haiti and Revolution: The Post-Colonial Moment" *Third World Quarterly* (41):8 (2020): 1442–61.

⁷⁴ Michael J. Sandel, *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982); Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice: A Defense of Pluralism and Equality* (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

⁷⁵ Sally Miller Gearhart "The Womanization of Rhetoric" *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2(2), 195–201 (196).

⁷⁶ Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, "Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric" *Communication Monographs*, 62:1 (1995), 2–18.

Emerging research often covered in UNC system university courses with a civil discourse component also highlights the epistemic dimension of civil discourse: the extent to which communication is grounded in evidence, truth-seeking, and knowledge production. Epistemic democratic theory emphasizes that democratic systems are not only evaluated by their fairness but also by their capacity to produce knowledge-accurate outcomes.⁷⁷ Similarly, theories of epistemic democracy argue that more inclusive and participatory deliberation can enhance the collective intelligence of democratic decision-making.⁷⁸ Studies of parliamentary and political speech suggest that evidence-based reasoning is positively associated with stronger democratic governance and higher deliberative quality.⁷⁹ These findings reinforce the idea that civil discourse is not only ethical but also epistemological—doing civil discourse well improves societies’ production and evaluation of knowledge within democratic communication systems.⁸⁰

A particularly promising theoretical approach to civil discourse, recently introduced in communication courses at NC State and that incorporates some of the above points of view, is offered by William Keith and Robert Danisch in *Beyond Civility*.⁸¹ These theorists, who study public argument and advocacy, define civil communication not as mere politeness, but as a robust practice of engagement aimed at managing deep disagreement while maintaining mutual respect and promoting democratic equality. Their model emphasizes relationship-building in the public sphere and problem-solving across social and political divides.

Keith and Danisch distinguish between “weak” civility—politeness for its own sake—and “strong” civility, which directly engages difficult issues in pursuit of inclusive and equitable dialogue. They propose three tests for strong civility:

- The Corrosion Test: Engage others with the expectation of future interaction.
- The Degradation Test: Avoid discourse that diminishes oneself.
- The Comfort Test: Reflect on the positionality of all participants.⁸²

Like many deliberative models, their framework emphasizes “democratic necessity”: civil communication is essential for reducing power imbalances and fostering equality among participants. At the same time,

⁷⁷ David M. Estlund, *Democratic Authority: A Philosophical Framework* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁷⁸ Hélène Landemore, *Democratic Reason: Politics, Collective Intelligence, and the Rule of the Many* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁷⁹ Jürg Steiner et al., *Deliberative Politics in Action: Analyzing Parliamentary Discourse* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Andre Bächtiger et al. (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Deliberative Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁸⁰ John S. Dryzek, *Deliberative Democracy and Beyond: Liberals, Critics, Contestations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Jürgen Habermas, *The theory of Communicative Action: Reason and the Rationalization of Society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

⁸¹ William Keith and Robert Danisch, *Beyond Civility: The Competing Obligations of Citizenship* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2020).

⁸² All three tests are discussed in Keith and Danisch, *Beyond Civility*, Chapter 5.

they distinguish genuine civility from “pseudocivility,” in which norms of politeness are used to suppress dissent.⁸³

In short, Keith and Danisch present civil communication as a paradoxical but necessary tool for navigating—rather than avoiding—conflict in democratic life. Their work highlights persistent challenges for civil discourse initiatives. First, outcomes such as consensus or even “agreeing to disagree” often fall short of theoretical expectations, reflecting long-standing critiques of deliberative democracy as overly idealistic.⁸⁴ Second, some issues may resist civil resolution altogether. That being said, the existence of seemingly-intractable problems does not prevent civil dialogue about them nor the solving of other challenges. Thus, the first recommended framework is:

Civil discourse programs and instruction should emphasize strong civility.

D. Civil Discourse as a Culture of Collaborative Problem-Solving

Proposed definitions of civil discourse programming or instruction are as varied as the definitions outlined above. They range from service-learning to sharing “stories of self” to Lincoln-Douglas style debates about topics of the day.⁸⁵ These approaches all have merit, but a valuable insight comes from conceptualizing students as fellow citizens. To be a citizen in a constitutional democracy, among other responsibilities, is to be “tasked with making prudential decisions about things that must be done in common.”⁸⁶

Part of the disorientation students experience as they move into higher education for the first time—regardless of the age at which they do so—is that their previous classroom experience has generally focused on “learning answers,” but higher education also involves “learning to love the questions.”⁸⁷ Leaning into this uncertainty by welcoming students as fellow travelers in collaborative pursuit of both

⁸³ Keith and Danisch, *Beyond Civility*, Chapter 1. Figure 1.1, captioned “Pseudocivility in action,” is a cartoon in which a robed member of the Ku Klux Klan calls for the death of African Americans, Jewish people, and gay people. A listener says this statement is hateful, describes the KKK member’s message as racist and unwelcome, and concludes with an abbreviation that includes a profanity. The KKK member replies, “Your incivility prevents meaningful dialogue.”

⁸⁴ Iris Marion Young, *Inclusion and Democracy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁸⁵ Many of these programs can be connected to fostering a culture of collaborative problem-solving. A robust list of resources for faculty and staff is included in Section V of this report. For the importance of debates, see the James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal’s “Blueprint for Reform: Civil Discourse” <https://jamesgmartin.center/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Blueprint-for-Reform-Civil-Discourse-3.pdf> [Accessed 17 June 2026].

⁸⁶ Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey, “Civic Thought: A Proposal for University-Level Civic Education” *American Enterprise Institute*. December 2023, p. 5. <https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Civic-Thought-A-Proposal-for-University-Level-Civic-Education.pdf> [Accessed 16 June 2026]. By “citizens,” the task force includes all students matriculated or with special visiting status at a particular UNC campus, regardless of immigration or national citizenship status.

⁸⁷ Lara Schwartz, *Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in Classrooms and Life* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024). Loren Pope’s classic book *Colleges That Change Lives* outlines five traits of institutions that do particularly well with undergraduate students: “faculty and students work closely together, learning is collaborative rather than competitive, students are involved in their own education, there is much discussion of values, and there is a sense of family.” Pope, *Colleges That Change Lives*, Revised Edition. (New York: Penguin, 2000), 1. Pope, in one of his far-seeing moments, discusses on pages 18 and 19 how leaning into these attributes also prepares students for a world with artificial intelligence.

answers and better questions, including “as co-owners of the institution’s public purpose,” roots civil discourse programming in purpose and meaning.⁸⁸

The other benefit of defining civil discourse as “a culture of problem solving” is it provides avenues for training students in constructive dialogue or reasoned debate without making them form or disclose their own personal views on contentious social issues to their classmates, professors, or AI-enabled software.⁸⁹ Solving problems also requires students to practice identifying and marshaling evidence in support of their points and, importantly, provides space for them to identify, admit, and address gaps in their knowledge, a critical skill for professional and civic life.⁹⁰ Therefore, the second framework the Task Force proposes is:

Root civil discourse work in a culture of collaborative problem-solving.

E. Civil Discourse and Inherent Dignity

Chair Wendy Murphy of the UNC Board of Governors has previously expressed important concerns about undergraduate students’ well-being, including the potential consequences of a “culture of achievement at any cost.”⁹¹ The task force members share Chair Murphy’s concerns about “promoting academic perfection as the only path to self-worth,” and the need to recognize students’ “resilience and character in the face of challenges.”⁹² While recommendations on how to maintain academic standards while encouraging intellectual risk, innovation, and humility are beyond the scope of this report, the task force sees student well-being as crucial for successful engagement in civil discourse.⁹³

⁸⁸ Jeremy C. Young et al., *The Trust Agenda: A Framework for Advancing Public Trust in Higher Education*. American Association of Colleges and Universities (June 2026), 34. <https://dgm81phhvh63.cloudfront.net/content/user-photos/Research/PDFs/The-Trust-Agenda-Report-Digital.pdf> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁸⁹ For the dissenting view that undergraduate students should rather be introduced to “tensions,” largely through the study of literature and history, see William Deresiewicz, “Most Academic Research Should Stop” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 18 June 2026. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/most-academic-research-should-stop> [Accessed 18 June 2026]. The task force does not view “living with tensions” as exclusionary from “solving problems” as Deresiewicz does. While we accept his points about the need for an emphasis on faculty skill-building in instruction and small class sizes, much of the essay devolves to caricature and ignores the professional development many faculty engage in regularly. Nor is engaging in research antithetical to high-impact teaching.

⁹⁰ Hollis Robbins, “The Noxiousness of Civic-Discourse Programs” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 23 December 2025. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/the-noxiousness-of-civic-discourse-platforms> [Accessed 16 June 2026]; Note that the creators of Sway, which Robbins specifically criticizes, responded in detail about how the application protects student privacy, both in regards to what the professor and the platform learn about the student’s views. See Aisha Baiocchi, “Can an AI Tool Help Students Disagree Better?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 30 January 2026. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/can-an-ai-tool-help-students-disagree-better?sra=true> [Accessed 17 June 2026]. Yael Sidi and Rakefet Ackerman, “Opting Out as an Untapped Resource in Instructional Design: Review and Implications” *Educational Psychology Review* 36(1), 2024. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10648-024-09879-w>

⁹¹ As quoted in Kate Denning, “Is Achievement Obsession Harming NC University Students?” *Carolina Public Press*. 7 April 2026. <https://carolinapublicpress.org/75188/is-achievement-obsession-harming-nc-university-students/> [Accessed 16 June 2026].

⁹² Denning, “Is Achievement Obsession Harming NC University Students?”

⁹³ The Carolina Public Press article includes useful discussions from Chapel Hill faculty member Ethan Hutt on the hazards of higher average grades and the UNC System Office’s Shun Robertson on how Carolina Connect is intended to reduce high school students’ anxiety around college admissions. It is worth noting that the North Carolina School of Science and Mathematics—part of the UNC System and ranked by Niche as the top public high

Surveys have also found concerns among particular groups of students regarding civil discourse and dialogue. The Knight Foundation, for example, found that Black or African American students have consistently reported the greatest difficulty in using their free speech rights “without consequence.”⁹⁴ That same survey found a significant gap between white students, who “tend to favor allowing all types of speech on campus” and Black, Hispanic, and Asian students, where a “decisive majority” (85%) of Black students “agree that hate speech should not be allowed on college campuses.” Half of all Black college students reported feeling uncomfortable—and 20% of these students reported feeling unsafe on campus—because of “something someone else said about “their race, ethnicity, or religion.”⁹⁵

The 2022 survey of free expression and constructive dialogue in the UNC System, which looked at student attitudes at eight UNC campuses, found interesting variation at the campus level. The three campuses with the highest population of minoritized students (NC Central, UNC Greensboro, and UNC Pembroke) showed the lowest levels of student concern about classmate opinion or rates of self-censoring.⁹⁶ When these respondents are broken out by student race (“white, not multi-racial,” “all others”), students who identify among “all others” at NCCU, UNCG, and UNCP continue to show the lowest rates of worry about student opinion or social media, and among the lowest rates of worry about professor opinion or code of conduct or self-censoring.⁹⁷ Notably, these three campuses also had the lowest percentage of students reporting that they “had too few opportunities for constructive engagement.”⁹⁸

Further complicating efforts to foster civil discourse, a research report done for the National Institute for Civil Discourse in December 2022 evaluated how familiar different populations were with various terms used in civil discourse initiatives and whether they had a positive or negative association with the term. While the youngest respondents (ages 18-34) had overall more negative associations with almost every term, differences were sharpest for “civility,” which was seen negatively by 12% of young adults and seen positively by only 44% of them. Of the tested terms, “diversity,” “unity,” and “common ground” were

school and the number three overall high school in the country—does not rank its students so that they focus more on their education than optimizing their grade point average.

⁹⁴ “College Student Views on Free Expression and Campus Speech 2024” *The Knight Foundation*. July 2024, 6..

https://legacy.knightfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Knight-Fdn-Free-Expression-2024_072424_FINAL-1.pdf [Accessed 17 June 2026.] Black students as a whole reported substantially more difficulty in exercising their free speech rights than Republican, Independent, or Democratic-identified students or students of any gender or other racial or ethnic group.

⁹⁵ “College Student Views on Free Expression,” *The Knight Foundation*, 10. Findings for Asian, Hispanic, and multiracial students were “in line with” the percentage of Black students who felt this way. Note that the survey asked two distinct questions, one about hate speech and one about allowing all types of speech on campus.

⁹⁶ Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, and Mark McNeilly, *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue in the University of North Carolina System* (17 May 2022), 15. https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22160/2022/05/FECD_Report_5-17-22.pdf [Accessed 17 June 2026].

⁹⁷ Ryan et al., *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue*, 21. “Among” = three of the lowest four across the eight campuses surveyed. Insofar this finding is more than statistical noise, it is not because these campuses are politically homogenous. The samples from UNC-P and NCCU had the lowest rates of students identifying as liberal and among the highest for students identifying as moderate. UNC-P had the second-highest rate of students self-identifying as conservative and the highest of students as “undefined.” Ryan et al., 8. All three campuses also had lower rates of classes where politics come up “directly” or “indirectly.” Ryan et al., 10.

⁹⁸ Ryan et al., *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue*, 24.

viewed positively by the most young adults, but acceptances of these terms had tremendous variation based on respondents' political affiliation, religion, and race or ethnicity.⁹⁹

Grappling with the well-founded concern for student well-being among our leaders and the results of these surveys and wanting to help the University of North Carolina fulfill its mission, the Task Force developed its third proposed framework for civil discourse work in the UNC System:

Civil discourse efforts should uphold the inherent dignity of all participants.

Indeed, groups such as the Dignity Index (dignity.us) have charted not only how “language rooted in contempt” fuels division, but how language “rooted in dignity” helps overcome division and end “high conflict.”¹⁰⁰

Upholding the inherent dignity of all participants also mitigates many of the concerns students have about engaging in dialogue across difference:

- That appeals to “civility” will be used to stifle dissent or different perspectives (as discussed above and below).
- That their own right to be on campus or be part of civil society will be questioned (a clear violation of the “respecting inherent dignity” framework).
- “Heckler’s vetoes” or attempts to hijack class sessions or activities “to be heard.”

The Task Force also views upholding the inherent dignity of all participants as a principle that is aligned with President Peter Hans’ comments on the relationship between free expression and diversity:

“Diversity and free expression enhance one another, and our universities must honor both. We can’t learn from one another if we’re not free to speak — and eager to listen. We can’t benefit from diversity unless we have the opportunity to share our life experiences and worldviews with confidence that they’ll be heard and respected.”¹⁰¹

These are not idle words. As mentioned above, concerns about people in power using “civility” to mask injustice and discrimination have deep historic and social roots. Around the turn of the 20th century, university and political leaders in the United States engaged in a deliberate ideological project to promote ideas and images of post-Civil War “Reconciliation.” This reimagining, inspired by nationalist

⁹⁹ Sarah Kersting-Mumm “Branding Civility: What Terms to Use and Avoid When Designing Messages for Specific Audiences” *National Institute for Civil Discourse*. December 2022. <https://nicdresearch.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2022/12/NICD-Branding-Civility.pdf> [Accessed 5 April 2026].

¹⁰⁰ Samantha Ball et al, “The Dignity Index: Utah Pilot Project Technical Summary” *Kem C. Gardner Policy Institute* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, January 2023). <https://d36oiwf74r1rap.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/DignityIndex-Jan2023.pdf?x71849>. [Accessed 17 June 2026]. Notably, just using the Dignity Index to code politicians’ speech led participants to reflect on their own use of contemptuous and dignified language, prompting them to change their own behavior (page 3).

¹⁰¹ Peter Hans, “Peter Hans on Diversity and Free Expression,” as quoted in *PublicEdWorks*, 20 April 2023. <https://publicedworks.org/2023/04/peter-hans-on-diversity-and-free-expression/> [Accessed 17 June 2026].

desires for unity, deprioritized questions of civic equality and equal standing before the law, especially—but not only—for African Americans, and slowed the implementation of civil rights laws and rulings.¹⁰²

The mission of the University of North Carolina, however, stands in stark contrast to this ideological framework that left Jim Crow unchallenged for decades. As stated in the UNC Code (100.1.100.3):

Admission to, employment by, and promotion in the University of North Carolina and all of its constituent institutions shall be on the basis of merit, **and there shall be no unlawful discrimination against any person on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, age, disability, genetic information, or veteran status.**¹⁰³

This report therefore notes any practices or programs that deliberately engage in unlawful discrimination or may inadvertently do so.¹⁰⁴ As the studies and historical events discussed in this and preceding sections make clear, appeals to “civility” have often also stifled dissent and allowed discrimination to continue unchecked, both of which undermine the mission of the University of North Carolina.¹⁰⁵

We are additionally mindful that greater fulfillment of the ideals expressed in the Declaration of Independence was not inevitable, but rather the result of hard work by previous generations of North Carolinians and other Americans.¹⁰⁶ We likewise have responsibility to the present and future of our students, state, and nation. Or, as Thomas Jefferson observed, “The tree of liberty must be refreshed

¹⁰² Peter Novak, *That Noble Dream: The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), especially chapter 3; Nina Silber “Reunion and Reconciliation, Reviewed and Reconsidered.” *The Journal of American History* 103, no. 1 (2016): 59–83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48560051>. This weaponization of “civility” was sadly not limited to the early 20th century or the national stage. For a local example still within living memory, see William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980). As Chafe puts it, “Civility was...a way of dealing with people and problems that made good manners more important than substantial action” (page 8). This history has led some scholars to reject the term “civility” entirely. See Alex Zamalan, *Against Civility: The Hidden Racism in Our Obsession with Civility* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021). Zamalan prefers the term “civil radicalism” (pages 9–11).

¹⁰³ University of North Carolina, “Establishment, Incorporation, and Composition of the University of North Carolina: Equality of Opportunity in the University” *UNC Code and Policy Manual*. <https://www.northcarolina.edu/apps/policy/doc.php?type=pdf&id=54>. Accessed 29 March 2026. Emphasis added.

¹⁰⁴ If/when the congregation of students with shared identities should be promoted, encouraged, or allowed by the University is outside the scope of this report. How students form their sense of self in relation to others has a vast scholarly literature; one starting point is Beverly Daniel Tatum, *“Why Are All The Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?”: A Psychologist Explains the Development of Racial Identity* (Basic Books, 1997).

¹⁰⁵ Karen Grigsby Bates, “When Civility is Used as Cudgel Against People of Color” *NPR*. 14 March 2019. <https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2019/03/14/700897826/when-civility-is-used-as-a-cudgel-against-people-of-color> [Accessed 16 June 2026.]; Allison Hawn, “The Civility Cudgel: The Myth of Civility in Communication” *Howard Journal of Communications* (31):2 (2020), 218–230. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646175.2020.1731882>

¹⁰⁶ For an example of an uncritical presentation of the “unfolding umbrella” metaphor as a summary of US history, see Patricia J. Gumpert, *Academic Fault Lines: The Rise of Industry Logic in Public Higher Education* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 68–69.

from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants,” which we take as a metaphorical call to promote the skills our students need as citizens in a constitutional democracy.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ Thomas Jefferson to William Stephens Smith, 13 November 1787.

<https://www.monticello.org/encyclopedia/tree-liberty-quotation> (Accessed 31 March 2026). Note that this letter was composed as a response to the news of Shays’s Rebellion and also offers thoughts from Jefferson about the recently concluded Constitutional Convention.

II. Civil Discourse and the University of North Carolina: Current Status

Efforts to promote civil discourse are already occurring at every constituent institution in the University of North Carolina. This section provides an overview of work that faculty and staff are already leading, including prior research on the status of civil discourse within the University of North Carolina, along with suggestions of complementary programs and curricula that could be adopted.

A. Previous Research

The most notable previous contribution to understanding the status of civil discourse within the UNC System was the survey conducted by Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, and Mark McNeilly. This survey, conducted by a “politically diverse” team of researchers and receive feedback from students at eight UNC System campuses, came to four clear conclusions:¹⁰⁸

1. Faculty generally do not push political agendas in class; most students report no change in their political leaning during their undergraduate experience.
2. Students largely self-censor because of fears of the reactions of their peers; most students think that taking disruptive action against speakers with whom they disagree is inappropriate, though not an insignificant number think it is appropriate.
3. Conservative students are more worried than moderate or liberal students about the opinion of fellow students or their professors, are more likely to engage in self-censoring in class,¹⁰⁹ and are more likely to say campuses have “too few opportunities for constructive engagement.”¹¹⁰
4. Students across the political spectrum want more opportunities to engage with those who think differently.¹¹¹

As this research team looked at the profile of students who were the most politically engaged, they found that these students were the less likely to consider other perspectives and more likely to hold stereotypes of people they perceived as opponents. The research team further hypothesized that this

¹⁰⁸ List adapted from Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, and Mark McNeilly, “Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue in the UNC System,” 1.

¹⁰⁹ One of the most valuable aspects of Ryan et al.’s survey is how it accounts for frequency of experience. The question about “self-censoring” is about whether a student has self-censored “more than once” in the 36% of randomly-chosen classes where politics had come up more than “never.” Conservative students answering “yes, have self-censored more than once” ranges from 27% of these students at UNC Pembroke to 49% at UNC Asheville. For moderate students, it ranges from 12% of these students at North Carolina Central to 26% at Appalachian State. For liberal students, it ranges from 8% of these students at UNC Greensboro to 13% at UNC Asheville. Ryan et al., “Free Expression,” 19.

¹¹⁰ The ranges are closer together on this question. Conservative students wanting more opportunities for constructive engagement ranges from 50% at UNC Pembroke to 76% at UNC Asheville. For moderate students, the range is from 38% at UNC Pembroke to 61% at UNC Asheville and UNC Chapel Hill. For liberal students, the range is from 41% at UNC Asheville to 57% at UNC Wilmington. Ryan et al., “Free Expression,” 24.

¹¹¹ As discussed above, these figures are lower for respondents from NC Central and UNC Pembroke. While more research is needed, it is the hypothesis of the task force that clarifying to the students that “constructive engagement” includes respect for the inherent dignity of all participants might increase student desire to participate. Other lines of inquiry could involve the proportion of commuter students or students over the age of 21, or unique characteristics of being at a Minority-Serving Institution.

dynamic makes political engagement less appealing to students who are not “confident partisans.”¹¹² This finding further underscores the risk of viewing civil discourse programming or instruction as *requiring* partisan debate or making students hold or express particular views on current social issues.

A vision of civil discourse rooted in collaborative problem solving, by contrast, still requires engaging with multiple perspectives, including perspectives that are diverse along methodological, disciplinary, or experiential lines, and prepares students for the responsibilities of citizenship, but does not have to be as closely tied to partisan debate. This vision is in line with the 2025 report, “A Liberal Arts-Based Education as Fundamental Career Readiness,” which highlights the connection between the “engaged liberal arts” and participatory citizenship. Students who receive a broad undergraduate education are “more likely to participate in civic activities and contribute positively to their communities.”¹¹³

Indeed, while there is progress to be made, we find that deliberate instruction in civil discourse, through the classroom and in co-curricular endeavors, is happening across the UNC System.¹¹⁴

B. Curricular Endeavors

1. Overview of civil discourse in the University of North Carolina classroom

Civil discourse is taught and practiced across the University of North Carolina System in a wide range of departments and through multiple academic and co-curricular platforms.

Many political science departments offer full courses dedicated to both the theory and practice of civil discourse, particularly in the context of political deliberation. Similarly, communication departments provide coursework in areas such as argument and debate, advocacy, public speaking, conflict resolution, and ethical communication. These courses emphasize civil discourse across diverse contexts, including political, interpersonal, group, organizational, intercultural, and—more recently—the digital and social media landscape. Philosophy faculty also play a crucial role in introducing students—most of whom are not philosophy majors—to the basics of testing opposed hypotheses and dialectic thinking, particularly at institutions like Fayetteville State that require every student to take a philosophy course.¹¹⁵

These pedagogical approaches are closely aligned with the broader tradition of deliberative democracy, which emphasizes dialogue, participation, persuasion, and the transformation of preferences through reasoned exchange (Habermas, 1989; Rawls, 1993). At its core, this tradition treats democracy not

¹¹² Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, and Mark McNeilly, “Moving Past Free Expression Theater” *Inside Higher Ed*. 13 June 2022. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2022/06/14/promote-free-speech-build-trust-among-students-opinion> [Accessed 17 June 2026.]

¹¹³ Toby King et al., “A Liberal Arts-Based Education as Fundamental Career Readiness,” a report prepared on behalf of the UNC Faculty Assembly by the 2024-2025 “Make the Case” workgroup, April 2025, 25. [Liberal Arts and Career Readiness](#) [Accessed 17 June 2026.]

¹¹⁴ This is a preliminary report and the following section is an initial sketch. If faculty or staff have case studies they would like to share, they are encouraged to reach out to the task force’s chair at rtaber@uncfsu.edu.

¹¹⁵ Fayetteville State requires all undergraduate students entering with fewer than 60 credit hours to take either PHIL 110 - Critical Thinking or PHIL 220 - Introduction to Logic to fulfill the “Reasoning Skills - Critical Thinking” core curriculum requirement. Fayetteville State University, “Undergraduate Core Curriculum” <https://acalog.uncfsu.edu/content.php?catoid=26&navoid=2473&hl=Core+Curriculum&returnto=search> [Accessed 18 June 2026.] Civil discourse and core curricula requirements are discussed more in the next section.

merely as voting or preference aggregation, but as an ongoing communicative process in which citizens justify claims to one another.

In psychology programs, one can find different psychological approaches to civil discourse, including Jonathan Haidt's "moral foundation theory," which argues that differing political views stem from different moral foundations (e.g., care, fairness, loyalty, authority). Civil discourse, from this perspective, requires recognizing these underlying, often unspoken, values to reduce distrust.

Instruction in civil discourse, however, is not confined to explicitly content-driven courses. Across disciplines such as science, engineering, and agricultural sciences, students encounter civil discourse both directly—through science communication courses—and indirectly, as they learn to present and discuss controversial topics (e.g., climate change, evolution, reproductive biology) with a range of public audiences. This reflects a broader shift toward viewing communication as an essential civic and professional competency.

Some of this instruction relies on very accessible, practice-oriented texts such as *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most* and *The Ancient Art of Thinking for Yourself*. While these works provide practical tools and relatable contexts, some faculty might find them overly simplified relative to more theoretically rigorous models.

By our estimates, however, the courses that teach versions of civil discourse at most UNC system universities share a commitment to rational models of argument, often rooted in classical traditions associated with Aristotle and Cicero. Modern deliberative theory draws heavily on Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment thinkers such as Immanuel Kant and John Stuart Mill, as well as American pragmatists like John Dewey, all of whom emphasize reason, autonomy, and public justification in democratic life (Dewey, 1927/1954; Kant, 1784/1996; Mill, 1859/2003).

2. General Education in the University of North Carolina

Several UNC institutions also include general education or core curriculum requirements that focus on civil discourse or are closely related to the ideas of collaborative problem-solving, inherent dignity, and/or civic engagement. Some of these required courses are integrated directly into fulfilling the "Foundations of American Democracy" requirement, as is the case with the North Carolina School of the Arts' "Critical Dialogues" course. In that class, students engage a broad variety of texts from the classical period (or earlier) to the present, including examples from around the world. Students are encouraged to be "artist-citizens" who are "active conversation partners" with these documents.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁶ North Carolina School of the Arts, "Course Descriptions: Critical Dialogues" <https://www.uncsa.edu/summer/summer-college-online-program/course-descriptions.aspx> [Accessed 17 June 2026.]

Fayetteville State University, UNC Chapel Hill, and UNC Greensboro also have general education requirements related to reflective civic engagement. FSU describes civic engagement as “acting upon a sense of responsibility to the common good in our communities...an FSU education should help shape students’ ethical values, moral reason, their readiness to accept personal and social responsibility, and their preparation for responsible citizenship.”¹¹⁷ Similarly, Chapel Hill’s “Ethical and Civic Values” courses are designed to help students “develop their capacity to think carefully and critically about how to make and justify private and public decisions.”¹¹⁸

Also notable are UNC institutions that require interdisciplinary work late in a student’s education or emphasize problem-solving as a student learning outcome. UNC Asheville requires its students to complete a “senior-year seminar” in which students “assume the role of global citizens to address an issue...of current and future importance to the world at large.” The course description describes how students will be expected “to integrate the knowledge they have acquired through their major with the broader perspectives provided in their core curriculum courses,” which is why the course is scheduled for the student’s senior year.¹¹⁹ At Winston-Salem State University, “problem solving” is one of four student learning outcomes across the core curriculum, and “civic education” and “moral and ethical reasoning” are two of six “curricular themes.”¹²⁰

Finally, first-year writing courses—sometimes described as “informational literacy”—also help students develop skills important for engaging in civil discourse, including how to think through a given work’s audience and purpose, how to structure evidence-based arguments, and how to pursue lines of inquiry.¹²¹ As UNC Wilmington describes this component of their general education requirement, it is:

Designed to foster students' abilities to **read critically** and **express their ideas clearly in written work**. Courses in this component should encourage students to develop their own recursive writing processes that incorporate **collecting, analyzing and evaluating information**; planning; drafting; **substantive revision**; and **peer review**. The analytical reading, research, and writing skills learned in courses from this component provide the basis for students to succeed in a significant number of other courses throughout their university careers, **in their communities**, and beyond.¹²²

¹¹⁷ Fayetteville State University, “Current Core: Ethics Rationale” https://www.uncfsu.edu/academics/colleges-schools-and-departments/undergraduate-core-curriculum-review/current-core#Ethics_Rationale [Accessed 17 June 2026]. FSU appears to be unique among UNC institutions in requiring all students to take at least one Philosophy course to fulfill a “critical thinking” requirement.

¹¹⁸ University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, “Ethical and Civic Values” <https://catalog.unc.edu/undergraduate/ideas-in-action/ethical-civic-values/> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹¹⁹ UNC Asheville, “SYS 478 - Senior Year Seminar” https://catalog.unca.edu/preview_course_nopop.php?catoid=22&coid=66879 [Accessed 17 June 2026].

¹²⁰ Winston-Salem State University, “General Education Requirements” <https://www.wssu.edu/academics/general-education/general-education-requirements.html> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹²¹ UNC Chapel Hill has “English Composition and Rhetoric” as part of its “[First-Year Foundations](#)” curriculum. North Carolina A&T requires students to complete two semesters of “[Ideas and Their Expressions](#).”

¹²² University of North Carolina Wilmington, “Composition” <https://uncw.edu/myuncw/academics/advising/us/faculty/curriculum/foundation/composition> [Accessed 21 June 2026]. Emphases added.

Importantly, first-year writing courses are also among the smallest classes new students take, which enables them to get to know those classmates better and, ideally, receive more personal feedback from their instructor.

3. How Accreditation Has Promoted Civil Discourse

For the last several years, institutions renewing their accreditation through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) had to develop and complete a “Quality Enhancement Plan.”¹²³ The QEP is supposed to emerge out of an institution’s “ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation processes” and dedicate resources and the “broad-based support of institutional constituencies” toward improving student success or specific learning outcomes.¹²⁴ Five UNC institutions have current Quality Enhancement Plans that build many of the same skills as civil discourse programming.

UNC Pembroke faculty and leadership did a deep dive into the scholarly literature on student engagement and developed a QEP centered on creating high-impact “capstone experiences” where students have to connect outside experiences with the academic knowledge they have gained from multiple university courses, including connections “across disciplines, perspectives, fields of study.” As part of these capstone courses, students are also expected to adapt this information so they can apply it to new situations. Finally, they reflect on the capstone process and the decisions they made.¹²⁵ All of these steps are directly applicable to constructive dialogue / civil discourse.

Similarly, NC State’s QEP focused on high-impact practices focused on connecting classwork with the real-world and integrating students’ new knowledge with their post-college plans. While NC State allows students to choose from a list of 116 curated experiences, each is rooted in at least one of five types of high-impact areas: early cohort, professional, scholarly, community, and global.¹²⁶ One of the “community” experiences has students from the College of Education undergo training and then facilitate NC State’s “Dining With Democracy” events. To be ready to welcome members of the general public who are coming to campus with the express purpose of engaging with neighbors of different backgrounds and perspectives over a meal, students have to develop conflict resolution and mediation skills, critical thinking, cultural competency, and public leadership skills.¹²⁷

Particularly notable is Appalachian State’s QEP “Pathways to Resilience,” which is designed to help students who are concerned about conservation, environmental protection, and climate change become

¹²³ The accreditation landscape is changing rapidly. Under President Stephen Pruitt, SACS is undertaking a comprehensive review of its principles of accreditation, including determining “next steps” for the Quality Enhancement Plan that “might include modification, elimination, continuation, or a new approach.” The Commission on Colleges and Universities, DBA the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges, Inc., “Principles Review” <https://sacscoc.org/principles-review/> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹²⁴ The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, *Resource Manual for the Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*, 4th ed. (2024), 59. <https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2024/02/2024-POA-Resource-Manual.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹²⁵ UNC Pembroke, “QEP Executive Summary 2020-2025.” <https://www.uncp.edu/about/quality-enhancement-plan.html> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹²⁶ NC State, “Find Your High-Impact Experience” <https://provost.ncsu.edu/institutional-effectiveness/qep-packways/> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹²⁷ NC State, [Posted to website - Packways Recognized HIEs; “Dining With Democracy” https://sites.ced.ncsu.edu/wolfden/dining-with-democracy/](https://sites.ced.ncsu.edu/wolfden/dining-with-democracy/) [Accessed 18 June 2026].

involved in interdisciplinary problem solving. Curricular and co-curricular activities sponsored by the QEP help students integrate insights from engineering, natural science, social science, and humanities disciplines to prepare them for the responsibilities of leadership in this interdisciplinary space.¹²⁸

4. Other Notable Examples from UNC Classrooms

One of the most significant developments in fostering civil dialogue in UNC classrooms has been the expansion of the College Debates and Alliance, a partnership between ACTA, Braver Angels, and Bridge USA. Thanks to generous support from the Barnes Family Foundation, the Lee Barnes Campus Debate Fellowship provides support to student and faculty fellows. Together, these fellows organize debates and civil discourse workshops, which can occur as part of a scheduled class or as a special campus event. As reported by the program manager, all sixteen of the UNC System's universities now have fellow teams and the program has conducted more than 320 debates and dialogues, engaging more than 7,000 students.¹²⁹

History, public policy, and related courses have also used *Reacting to the Past* materials. These are intensive case studies / historical roleplays where each student takes on the identity of a distinct historical figure for several class sessions. Before the roleplay, class sessions provide the students with the context for the case study and allow them to analyze key relevant opposing texts. For example, prior to the French Revolution roleplay, students familiarize themselves with both Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "First Discourse: On the Moral Effects of the Arts and Sciences" and Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*.¹³⁰ The students then convene as the French National Assembly, where they have to propose and debate laws, make and break political alliances, take votes on legislation, and respond to the consequences of their characters' actions. Students who have done previous *Reacting to the Past* activities have reported that the curriculum makes them pay closer attention in class, polish their oral presentation and debate skills, and enhance their ability to find common ground.¹³¹ Twelve of the available case studies focus on science policy.¹³²

Instructors have also created a variety of "icebreaker" activities that help students establish common ground across perceived differences. For example, Emily Brier, in her ENGL 101 Writing & Rhetoric classes at Western Carolina University, has her students ask each other a series of questions to create a "superhero" style origin story. As students tell each other what it's like on their planet, what formed their moral compass, their arch nemesis and kryptonite, what makes them different, and what future they want to build, not only do they find points of commonality but this simple act of vulnerability creates bonds that are then built upon for the rest of the semester.¹³³

¹²⁸ Appalachian State, "Pathways to Resilience" <https://resilience.appstate.edu/> 18 June 2026. For a full list of disciplines and departments that have participated in this initiative so far, visit App State, "Climate Course (Re)Design Institute." <https://resilience.appstate.edu/faculty/course-re-design-institute/> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹²⁹ Kayla Johnston, "Investing in Civil Discourse: Barnes Family Foundation's Impact in North Carolina." 8 June 2026. <https://www.goacta.org/2026/06/investing-in-civil-discourse-barnes-family-foundations-impact-in-north-carolina/> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹³⁰ Jennifer Popiel, Mark C. Carnes, and Gary Kates, *Rousseau, Burke, and Revolution in France, 1791*, 2nd edition. (New York: WW Norton, 2015).

¹³¹ *Reacting to the Past*, "Home." <https://reactingconsortium.org/> [Accessed 18 June 2026].

¹³² *Reacting to the Past*, "STEM Games." <https://reactingconsortium.org/games/stem> [Accessed 18 June 2026.]

¹³³ Emily Brier, "Making Introductions for Community Building in First-Year Classrooms" UNC Common Ground Collaborative, UNC Charlotte, May 2026.

Successful incorporation of civil discourse concepts into the classroom often requires regular reflection from the instructor on what skills are appropriate when and the amount of scaffolding needed for particular activities, especially if the instructor is moving beyond “turnkey” civil discourse programs or materials. Nicholas Triplett, an Education faculty member at UNC Charlotte, has experimented with self-facilitated deliberations to help teachers-in-training think more deeply about concepts such as justice and fairness. Accustomed to running classroom deliberations with 20 first-year students meeting in a face-to-face format himself, a switch to online graduate courses of 60 students required a pivot. The students spent the first three weeks learning about deliberation and then spent two weeks at a time learning about a particular topic before groups of 4-5 students each recorded a live deliberative conversation on Zoom.¹³⁴

The UNC School of Government plays a crucial dual role in providing nonpartisan, expert advice to local officials and preparing graduate students in public administration. Charles Szypszak has found that case law is a very useful avenue for introducing his students to major questions of public ethics. The adversarial nature of court cases, with each side making claims and then providing evidence in support of their perspective, allows the students to analyze and discuss how questions of public ethics are decided in practice.¹³⁵

Curricular spaces can also be created for engaging in traditionally co-curricular activities to broaden access to them. Such is the case for the Model United Nations course at UNC Pembroke. Over 50% of Pembroke students receive Pell grants, many are commuters, over the age of 25, and/or work multiple jobs while in school. These students are the least likely to participate in co-curricular programs. So UNC Pembroke’s Political Science program created PLS 2060, a course to introduce students to Model UN and prepare them to attend the Southern Model United Nations. Students who complete the course often join UNCP’s Model UN club, where they continue to build their skills in taking into account a broad range of perspectives, collaborative problem solving, and reasoned debate.¹³⁶

C. Co-Curricular Endeavors

Co-curricular endeavors focused on civil dialogue and related skills occur in a broad variety of ways across UNC System institutions. This section focuses on a few general areas as a guide for further research and identifies certain best practices.

1. Formal Institutional Support

Many campuses have a dedicated office for community engagement and/or service-learning. A particularly robust example is Western Carolina’s “Center for Community Engagement and Service-Learning,” which also works in areas of civic engagement and helping WCU fulfill its regional mission. The Center helped develop a resource library for faculty wanting to engage in community-engaged pedagogy and research.¹³⁷ Staff train student facilitators in different dialogue methods, including Living Room

¹³⁴ Nicholas Triplett, “Teaching Students to Engage Across Difference” UNC Common Ground Collaborative, UNC Charlotte, May 2026.

¹³⁵ Charles Szypszak, “Case Law as Raw Material for Teaching Ethics in Public Administration” *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 21 June 2021. DOI: 10.1080/15236803.2021.1935193

¹³⁶ Josiah Marineau, “Fostering Dialogue and Debate through Model United Nations” UNC Common Ground Collaborative, UNC Charlotte, May 2026; Correspondence, Josiah Marineau to Robert Taber, 18 June 2026.

¹³⁷ Western Carolina Library, “Community Engaged Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship: Home”

<https://researchguides.wcu.edu/service-learning/home> [Accessed 18 June 2026.]

Conversations and the L. E. A. R. N. Dialogues developed at William Peace University. The Center also encourages student engagement by offering the Spark Community Engagement Award for student participation in direct service, civic involvement, philanthropy, and awareness and advocacy. Having students select which dialogues they want to and making the standards for the awards clear and nonpartisan keeps the Center's efforts well-within the bounds set by the System's institutional neutrality policy.¹³⁸

Additionally, human resources offices and other administrative units regularly offer workshops and seminars on conflict resolution, conversation management, and related skills. These programs—available to students, faculty, staff, and administrators—extend the teaching of civil discourse beyond formal curricula and into the broader institutional culture.

2. Mapping Co-Curricular Activities on Civil Discourse

Student clubs and organizations can have uneven track records of engagement. UNC institutions, however, are required by law to provide Constitution Day programming that is often directly related to civil discourse. Many campuses, in addition to BridgeUSA chapters, also have debating societies and/or conversation clubs that work with students to sharpen their skills in engaging in reasoned debate, expressing ideas related to controversial topics, and holding constructive dialogue. UNC Chapel Hill recently created the Civil Communication living/learning community.¹³⁹

The Task Force's initial examination of the co-curricular landscape did notice one gap: student leadership in interfaith dialogue and bridge-building. Despite the increasing secularization of young generations—a trend that may have stalled with current young adults—many UNC System undergraduates bring cherished religious and spiritual beliefs and practices with them to campus life.¹⁴⁰ Activities such as those sponsored by InterfaithAmerica, where religious, secular, and spiritual students do community service together and then participate in structured dialogues to better understand one another, fit within civil discourse and do not violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ For more on the Spark Awards, see https://www.wcu.edu/learn/academic-enrichment/center-for-service-learning/service-learning-for-students/spark_program.aspx [Accessed 18 June 2026.]

¹³⁹ Carolina Housing, "Civ Comm" <https://housing.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1433/2025/07/civ-comm-rlp-flyer.pdf> [Accessed 18 June 2026.]

¹⁴⁰ For a detailed analysis of these trends, see Ryan Burge, "The Religion of America's Young Adults" *Graphs About Religion*. 26 September 2024. <https://www.graphsaboutreligion.com/p/the-religion-of-americas-young-adults> [Accessed 18 June 2026.]

¹⁴¹ InterfaithAmerica provides fellowships where students learn how to become interfaith bridge-builders on their home campus. See <https://www.interfaithamerica.org/sectors/higher-education/students/> for more. For an example of an interfaith institute at a public university, see the Sylvia and Richard Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University in Michigan: <https://www.gvsu.edu/interfaith>. Institutions of higher education were identified as important partners in the 2023 National Strategy to Combat Antisemitism and the 2024 National Strategy to Combat Islamophobia and Anti-Arab Hate. See <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/U.S.-National-Strategy-to-Counter-Antisemitism.pdf>, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/National-Strategy-Doc.pdf>

3. Best Practices for Co-Curricular Support

The Free Expression & Constructive Dialogue Task Force at UNC Charlotte has been particularly active in the co-curricular space since it formed in 2022. Benefiting from a supportive Chief Academic Officer and Board of Trustees, including an annual budget, they have had the opportunity to experiment. Some of the best practices they have discovered:

- Buy-in from senior administration, faculty, and students is crucial. A well-supported and visible champion among the faculty can become a point-person for learning resources, faculty onboarding, and ideas.
- Mini-grants to bring in speakers, provide food for events, support student travel, or allow faculty to engage in professional development help.
- Campus-level faculty learning communities can be generative sources of ideas.
- Committees of only faculty are not the best predictors of student interest in a particular speaker or dialogue, especially at a commuter-heavy campus, unless it is tied to a specific course. Faculty can develop an initial list of three or four possible topics and have students vote.
- If doing a high-stakes event involving students, such as a debate between the College Republicans and College Democrats, it helps to have a set topic and to work with the students ahead of time on keeping their emotions in check.¹⁴²

A core takeaway: universities should not leave civil discourse work, even the co-curricular aspects, to just Student Affairs. A supported, cross-cutting team that includes faculty and has open channels of communication with senior administrators in Academic Affairs (and Public Safety and other relevant University divisions) can help generate strong programming.¹⁴³

¹⁴² List adapted from Matt Metzgar, “How to Integrate Constructive Dialogue Across Campus” UNC Common Ground Collaborative, UNC Charlotte, May 2026.

¹⁴³ Or, as two UNC faculty have recently put it, we should “eat our own dog food” and engage faculty expertise in developing civil discourse programming. See Andrew J. Perrin and Christian Lundberg, “With DEI Training, Higher Ed Made a Lot of Mistakes. Now We’re Repeating Them.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 13 April 2026. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/with-dei-training-higher-ed-made-a-lot-of-mistakes-now-were-repeating-them> [Accessed 18 June 2026.]

III. Fostering Civil Discourse: Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats

This section provides a preliminary SWOT analysis on fostering civil discourse on UNC campuses.

A. Strengths

The UNC System has five core strengths on which it can draw:

1. A spread of institutions.

Our seventeen institutions, from the coast to the mountains, vary in size, mission, disciplinary focus, and level of degrees offered. This is a strength if we allow faculty and campus-level leaders to innovate, finding mission-derived solutions that work for them. These can be comparatively small moves, such as UNC Pembroke creating a course dedicated to Model UN participation, or larger institutional commitments, such as UNC Charlotte's Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue Task Force.

2. Commitment from state-level leadership and outside partners.

Elected leaders from across the political spectrum are interested in helping students be more careful consumers of information and participants in our constitutional democracy. This interest is reflected in the UNC Board of Governors. Outside partners, including the Barnes Family Foundation, the Constructive Dialogue Institute, the Fred Rogers Institute, the College Debates and Discourse Alliance, Heterodox Academy, the Aspen Institute, InterfaithAmerica, Resetting the Table, the Dignity Index, and CommonGround USA, provide funding and/or programming for students, faculty, and campus leaders to learn how to build dialogue across difference. Davidson College and William Peace University, both national leaders in this area, are located within our state, making partnerships easier to foster.

3. The quality and dedication of System faculty and staff.

Every UNC institution is blessed with dedicated, highly-qualified faculty and staff. Over one hundred faculty, many of whom were technically off-contract, attended the Common Ground Convening in Charlotte in May 2026 to learn from each other about how to teach the tools needed for civil discourse; a similar number applied for course development/re-design grants.

An example of faculty initiative and dedication to the mission of the public university: after the development of the Foundations of American Democracy requirement, eleven faculty from UNC Chapel Hill's Department of History developed *Foundations of American Democracy: A Critical Documents Reader*, published by UNC Press and available at a low cost.¹⁴⁴

4. Dense, walkable communities.

Living in dense, walkable communities tends to make people more open and curious about those around them. Our campuses are such places. We should lean into the strength of our institutions as "third

¹⁴⁴ W. Fitzhugh Brundage et al., *Foundations of American Democracy: A Critical Documents Reader* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2025). From the book description: "Reading the founding documents of the United States and understanding their historical context can help us to consider vital questions about governance and democracy in present day America. In *Foundations of American Democracy*, the 250-year evolution of democratic republicanism is examined through the lens of twenty-one critical documents from our nation's past."

places” and deliberately create opportunities for our students to encounter and get to know each other. These are the “easy” conversations that can lead to friendship and become its own form of bridge-building. They also provide a foundation for more difficult discussions.¹⁴⁵ Leaning into our campuses as built environments that naturally create meaningful interactions between students, and between students and faculty, also helps foster student success more broadly.¹⁴⁶

5. Increasing emphasis on quality instruction in undergraduate programs.

The under-preparation of doctoral candidates as educators of undergraduates is a regular gripe in the higher education press, but the UNC System and individual campuses are taking steps to emphasize a culture of teaching excellence.¹⁴⁷ At the System level, allowing special (fixed-term) faculty to be eligible for teaching awards and encouraging campuses to provide these faculty members with multi-year contracts recognizes the important work they do in the classroom.¹⁴⁸ The System has also recently implemented a new teaching effectiveness policy that includes regular peer assessment and instructor self-reflection. Universities are supposed to offer and encourage professional development and use these assessments to help faculty improve their teaching effectiveness.¹⁴⁹

Many campuses had already taken steps to improve undergraduate instruction. Centers for Teaching and Learning regularly provide pedagogy workshops, and some—such as UNC Wilmington—provide a year-long course for new faculty to help them improve as teachers.¹⁵⁰ Additionally, faculty at several campuses have earned certification from the Association of College & University Educators in Effective College Instruction, Effective Online Teaching Practices, and other areas.¹⁵¹

B. Weaknesses

Certain trends within the UNC System can weaken the impact of civil discourse initiatives.

¹⁴⁵ James E. Ryan, “In Praise of Easy Conversations” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 3 June 2026. <https://www.chronicle.com/article/beware-the-civility-industrial-complex> [Accessed 18 June 2026]. We note that foreign language courses often involve such conversations.

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Chambliss and Christopher Takacs, *How College Works* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2014), 159-161.

¹⁴⁷ For just one example, see Deresiewicz, “Most Academic Research Should Stop,” which largely ignores the role of the employing institution in assisting new faculty members improve their craft. For the UNC System’s policies on ensuring effective training of and teaching by graduate student instructors, see *The UNC Policy Manual*, “[Guideline on Training, Monitoring, and Evaluating Graduate Teaching Assistants](#)” (400.3.5.1[G]), 14 November 2017.

¹⁴⁸ *The UNC Policy Manual*, “[Policy on Teaching Awards](#)” (400.3.6[R]), 14 October 2025, III.C; “[Regulation on Faculty Workloads](#)” (400.3.4[R]), 14 October 2025, III.C.

¹⁴⁹ *The UNC Policy Manual*, “[Teaching Effectiveness in the University of North Carolina](#)” (400.3.1), 25 January 2024, IV.

¹⁵⁰ University of North Carolina Wilmington, “New Faculty Teaching Academy” <https://uncw.edu/myuncw/academics/cte/communities/teaching-academy> [Accessed 21 June 2026].

¹⁵¹ A comprehensive survey of ACUE certifications earned by UNC System faculty is beyond the scope of this report. A brief online search has confirmed the participation, at minimum, of faculty from Fayetteville State University, North Carolina Central University, UNC Charlotte, and UNC Greensboro. See, for example, UNC Greensboro, “UNCG Recognizes First Effective College Instruction Cohort” *Campus Weekly*. 5 September 2023. <https://www.uncg.edu/campus-weekly/uncg-recognizes-first-effective-college-instruction-certification-cohort/> [Accessed 21 June 2026].

1. Emphasis on identifying and measuring metrics

While assessment is important, an over-emphasis of measurement (ie, “how much did *this event* change student views?”) increases the friction of developing initiatives. There are also indications that one of the most common measurement instruments—the Dogmatism Scale developed by Milton Rokeach in 1960—actually just measures students’ political views rather than the growth of their capacity for civil discourse.

2. A need to engage and strengthen core departments

While turnover of full-time faculty in the UNC System is low, the deprioritization of the liberal arts outlined in [Section I](#) has had a cascading effect in the humanities and social science disciplines that can best contribute to civil discourse programming.

As laid out in the [Appendix](#), departments that carry the bulk of responsibility for teaching first-year, core curriculum courses tend to be over-represented among the lowest paid full-time faculty, most notably in English and the Arts. Additionally, the sense of doom in the Humanities is perhaps overstated: the decline in the absolute number of baccalaureate degrees with “first majors” in English, History, and Foreign Languages (including Classics) in the UNC System across the past 20 years has been gradual—less than 1% per year—while Philosophy has increased undergraduate degree production. Political Science has also increased by a cumulative 15% over the last 20 years.¹⁵²

We suspect, though we do not have the data to confirm, that the combination of a “job-ready” focus and the number of graduates in these fields either slowly decreasing or slowly increasing while total undergraduate degree production increased by 66% has led to Academic Affairs leaders at the campus level deprioritizing these fields when allotting budget lines for tenure-track and fixed-term faculty. The status of these fields in the funding model, especially at our regional campuses, could also have led to a hollowing out of these departments. Further research is needed.

Additionally, longstanding rules capping supplemental pay for faculty at 20% of their base salary can lead to Humanities faculty focusing on work outside of the System.¹⁵³ A Lecturer in English making \$31,500 could only earn \$6,300 in supplemental pay across the academic year before hitting the cap.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵² See the Appendix for numbers by field, broken out by two-digit CIP and six-digit CIP. The UNC System Data Dashboard only counts “first” majors, leading to some Humanities faculty wondering if they are disproportionately represented among “second” majors. Data on student credit hour production and enrolled students from any major is only available by two-digit CIP, by semester, and back to Fall 2016. Student credit hour production in the humanities is falling slightly faster than the number of enrolled students, suggesting that students who are enrolled in humanities courses might have shifted to lighter courseloads overall. This is likely due to two overlapping trends: the introduction of online degrees in these fields aimed at learners over the age of 25 and traditional-age students taking fewer courses per semester due to work obligations and wanting to protect their mental health. Campuses are responding in a variety of ways, including FSU’s emphasis of a 12-12-6 model, to keep students on track for a four-year graduation.

¹⁵³ To address these concerns, the UNC System recently repealed the 20% cap on supplemental pay; this was done by devolving the decision to the campus level, where some campuses reimposed it. *The UNC Policy Manual*, “[Supplemental Pay Policy for Employees Exempt from the Human Resources Act](#).” (300.2.13) 25 January 2024; Fayetteville State University, “[Supplemental Pay](#)” (501.16) 26 June 2025.

¹⁵⁴ While extreme, we note that in 2025, \$31,500 was the base salary for *five* Lecturers in English at UNC Greensboro. This salary is almost \$10,000 less than the starting pay for K-12 teachers in North Carolina. State Board

We are aware that the UNC System is limited in how much it can address salary, compensation, and faculty hiring patterns; we mention these dynamics only to raise awareness of potential stumbling blocks in further engaging Humanities and Political Science faculty in civil discourse instruction and programming.

3. Dependence on outside vendors to deliver results

From Banner to EAB to Lightcast to Watermark to Canvas, UNC System schools have turned to outside companies to help us track data, fulfill compliance demands, and enhance the student experience. The use of third parties is not, by itself, a weakness. The hazard comes if we make a hasty choice or oversee a slapdash implementation to “check the box” or maximize delivery of “civil discourse” activities to the highest number of students without doing quality assurance.¹⁵⁵

4. Online education

The expansion of asynchronous and semi-synchronous online degree programs has opened the benefits of a UNC education to more North Carolinians, especially our part-way home learners. These online formats, however, are challenging environments to build meaningful class communities, never mind engaging in civil discourse. There are some promising approaches, though many require at least some level of synchronicity in student activities.¹⁵⁶

C. Opportunities

The task force identified several opportunities for the UNC System and its institutions, some of which are already underway.

1. New courses and course redesigns

Engaged and empowered faculty often adjust their courses or design new ones to meet student needs and interests. Offering stipends to faculty willing to incorporate civil discourse activities into their redesign, as the Common Ground Collaborative is doing, is a comparatively low-cost way to introduce more civil discourse activities in multiple departments on multiple campuses simultaneously. There are also emerging studies in the science of teaching and learning that can be incorporated into pedagogical training to help faculty make their classrooms more conducive to civil discourse.¹⁵⁷

of Education, “North Carolina State Salary Schedules: FY 2025-2026”

<https://www.dpi.nc.gov/documents/fbs/budget/fy26webschedulespdf/download> [Accessed 22 June 2026].

¹⁵⁵ This point and a related one that civil discourse skill-building cannot be divorced effectively from learning disciplinary content are discussed further in [Section VI](#). For the hazards of leaning on poorly-vetted outside vendors rather than faculty with expertise to provide the training, see Perrin and Lundberg, “[With DEI Training, Higher Ed Made a Lot of Mistakes. Now We’re Repeating Them.](#)”

¹⁵⁶ See, for example, the discussion in Section II of how Nicholas Triplett has small groups of students record Zoom meetings in which they deliberate a key topic related to the course content.

¹⁵⁷ Peter Felten, Rachel Forsyth, Kathryn A. Sutherland, “Building Trust in the Classroom: A Conceptual Model for Teachers, Scholars, and Academic Developers in Higher Education” *Teaching & Learning Inquiry* Vol. 11 (2023). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.20343/teachlearningu.11.20>

2. Connecting civil discourse to career preparation and student well-being

Increasing attention is being paid to student well-being as a wrap-around ethic of student affairs rather than a task just for the counseling center to tackle. Folding civil discourse skill-building into career services or set-aside device-free spaces is another way to help students have the conversation and analysis skills they need to navigate life during and after their undergraduate experience.¹⁵⁸

3. Trainings for Campus Leaders

Several organizations offer professional development for campus leaders interested in civil discourse. Notably, these trainings are also designed to help campus leaders engage in civil discourse in their own professional lives, including in running public meetings, engaging a broad array of stakeholders, address issues related to academic freedom and free speech, and fostering welcoming campus.

While the task force has not yet vetted these trainings, some we have identified through our research include:

- Resetting The Table: Train-the-Trainers Intensive for Leaders in Higher Education ([overview; interest form for upcoming cohort](#)).
- Dignity Index: [Higher Education page](#), with overview of offerings and contact form for more information.
- Convergence: [Learning Lab for Higher Education](#) (includes embedded contact form).

4. New Assessment Tools

Because the recent push for civil discourse has been occurring for a few years, organizations have been developing new assessment tools. One of the most-referenced by civic dialogue organizations is the Social Cohesion Impact Measurement, which is explained here:

[Goals & Measurement Program + Resources — Listen First Project](#)

5. Potential Research and Funding Partners

Our initial look at the broader civil discourse landscape also identified potential research and funding partners. The Civic Health Project focuses on “massively scalable, technologically-driven solutions to bridge divides, foster civil discourse, and strengthen social cohesion worldwide.”¹⁵⁹ They serve as a hub for several other [research projects and initiatives](#), including the Social Cohesion Impact Measurement.

One of the most prolific social science research teams focused on civil discourse is More in Common, the organization behind the “Hidden Tribes” report.¹⁶⁰ One of their most recent reports looks at how

¹⁵⁸ For more on the connection between training career center staff in de-escalation, broadening the responsibility for student well-being, and the rise of “device-free” spaces on campus, see Joshua Bay, “Can Colleges Actually Build Student Well-Being?” *Inside Higher Ed*. 4 June 2026. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/student-success/health-wellness/2026/06/04/can-colleges-actually-build-student-well-being> [Accessed 23 June 2026].

¹⁵⁹ Civic Health Project, “About.” <https://www.civichealthproject.org/about> [Accessed 23 June 2026].

¹⁶⁰ More in Common, “Hidden Tribes.” 2018. <https://hiddentribes.us/> [Accessed 23 June 2026].

Americans feel about different civic terms.¹⁶¹ Reports that are particularly germane for faculty and staff wanting to develop civil discourse reports include “Listening Across Difference” and “Shared Ideals, Divergent Realities.”¹⁶²

D. Threats

In addition to the problems discussed in Section I, the Task Force identified the following key outside threats to creating a thriving environment for civil discourse across the UNC System:

1. Over-emphasis on ROI; deprioritization of core disciplines.

Students, parents, and stakeholders want to make sure that the cost of a college education will work out for graduates. “Return on investment” and other “output”-based evaluations of higher education are increasing in popularity, as are strategic realignments based on “workforce demand.”¹⁶³ As Wil Del Pilar explains, however:

“These cuts are falling hardest on the very fields that help us understand the world, question power, preserve and understand culture, and prepare students for careers in teaching, counseling, healthcare, and public service.”¹⁶⁴

The UNC System will need to think carefully about how to navigate this national trend while investing in the fields crucial for civil discourse and public service.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ More in Common, “What Americans Think of Words Like ‘Democracy’ and ‘Authoritarianism’ in These Times” February 2026. <https://moreincommonus.com/publication/what-americans-think-of-words-like-democracy-and-authoritarianism-in-these-times/> [Accessed 23 June 2026.]

¹⁶² More in Common, “Listening Across Difference” 27 June 2025. <https://moreincommonus.com/publication/listening-across-difference/> [Accessed 23 June 2026]; More in Common, “Shared Ideals, Divergent Realities” 9 June 2025. <https://moreincommonus.com/publication/shared-ideals-divergent-realities/> [Accessed 23 June 2026].

¹⁶³ Joe Killian, “New Study Looks at ‘Return on Investment’ of a UNC System Education” *NC Newsline*. 16 November 2023. <https://ncnewsline.com/2023/11/16/new-study-looks-as-return-on-investment-of-a-unc-system-education/> [Accessed 23 June 2026]. Wil Del Pilar, “What Happens When States Decide Which Knowledge Matters” *The EDU Ledger*. 2 June 2026. <https://www.theeduledger.com/views/article/15826062/what-happens-when-states-decide-which-knowledge-matters> [Accessed 23 June 2026]. As noted by President Peter Hans in the *NC Newsline* piece, the 2023 ROI study could not include our best-performing undergraduates from the NC School of the Arts, as it did not track people who moved out of state. It also did not track federal employees, including active-duty members of the US Armed Services or those who enlisted after graduation.

¹⁶⁴ Wil Del Pilar, “What Happens When States Decide Which Knowledge Matters”

¹⁶⁵ For a critical view of the emphasis of metrics in higher education governance, see Allen Espinosa et al., “The Tyranny of Compliance in Higher Education” 12 October 2025. *PhilStar* <https://www.philstar.com/news-commentary/2025/10/12/2479344/tyranny-compliance-higher-education>. For the ways a “transactional” framework of higher education has eroded universities’ ability to fulfill their missions, see Samuel J. Abrams, “AI Didn’t Break the University: It Revealed What Was Already Broken” *RealClearEducation*. 31 May 2026. https://www.realcleareducation.com/articles/2026/05/31/ai_didnt_break_the_university_it_revealed_what_was_already_broken_1185867.html

2. Sense of crisis or scarcity among faculty, staff, and students.

One of the most significant threats to having more faculty and students engage in civil discourse work is their perception of scarcity. Scarcity is the perception of not having enough to meet needs and wants - not enough money, not enough time, not enough support, not enough knowledge.¹⁶⁶ The importance of that perception is also emphasized in the popular concepts of a “culture of scarcity” and the “scarcity mindset”: both refer to general societal and individual perceptions that there is never enough of anything and we are all competing for in a zero-sum game for limited resources.¹⁶⁷ Experimental and observational research has documented that experiencing scarcity results in diminished cognitive flexibility and cognitive control, impaired decision-making, increased feelings of competition and stress, an attentional focus on the scarce resource, and a tendency to focus on immediate rewards rather than to delay gratification.¹⁶⁸ These factors are likely to limit the ability to choose to productively engage in civil discourse.

3. Cognitive offloading, including inappropriate removal of rigor

“Cognitive offloading” is a phrase that has gained purchase with the spread of generative AI. While the rise of every new technology leads to the disappearance of certain skills, regular use of generative AI in the workplace has been associated with a hollowing out of core abilities, including in computer science and medicine.¹⁶⁹

Having more people engage in cognitive offloading is part of the core business strategy of OpenAI, the makers of ChatGPT. As famously stated by OpenAI CEO Sam Altman, “We see a future where intelligence is a utility, like electricity or water, and people buy it from us on a meter.”¹⁷⁰ While there are some use cases for generative AI, we see encouraging dependence on it as antithetical to the mission of the University of North Carolina.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁶ Anuj K. Shah, et al., “Some Consequences of Having Too Little” *Science* 338, 682-685 (2012) DOI: 10.1126/science.1222426; Anuj K. Shah, Sendhil Mullainathan, Eldar Shafir, “An exercise in self-replication: Replicating Shah, Mullainathan, and Shafir (2012),” *Journal of Economic Psychology* 75(A), (2019); M. De Sousa, A. H. Peterman, and C. L. Reeve, “An Initial Model of Scarcity” *Qualitative Psychology*, 5(1), 59–76 (2018) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1037/qap0000077>

¹⁶⁷ Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly: How the Courage to be Vulnerable Transforms the Way We Live, Love, Parent, and Lead* (Avery, 2012); Sendhil Mullainathan and Eldar Shafir, *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much* (New York: Times Books, 2013).

¹⁶⁸ Isabel Barbosa and Elizabeth Real de Oliveira.. “From Scarcity to Abundance: Reimagining Workplace Culture and Its Impact on Cognitive Function and Well-Being.” *Journal of Workplace Behavioral Health*, March 2026,, 1–22. DOI: 10.1080/15555240.2026.2632809; Lijie Zhang et al., “Impact of a Scarcity Mindset on Proactive and Reactive Cognitive Control: The Role of Motivation and Cognitive Ability” *Psychophysiology*, 62(3), e70001 (2025). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/psyp.70001>; Shah et al, “An Exercise in Self Replication.”

¹⁶⁹ Mariana Lenharo, “Is AI Ruining Our Skills? Early Results Are In—And They’re Not Good” *Nature* 18 June 2026. <https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-01947-1> [Accessed 21 June 2026].

¹⁷⁰ Thibault Spirlet, “Sam Altman Says AI Will Eventually Be Sold Like Electricity and Water — By Companies Like OpenAI” *BusinessInsider*. 13 March 2026. <https://www.businessinsider.com/sam-altman-ai-utility-electricity-water-openai-2026-3> [Accessed 21 June 2026].

¹⁷¹ Metering the general public’s access to AI-derived “intelligence” is fundamentally different from, for example, a business paying Bloomberg or Politico for industry-specific reporting. We also see it as counter to some of the best aspects of the American tradition: free public libraries and schools and low-cost public colleges and universities, so that everyone can have good opportunities to pursue an education.

Another form of cognitive offloading, one that civil discourse efforts can counter, is the assumption that all viewpoints or claims are equally valid regardless of evidence. While there are many times it is appropriate to allow for different perspectives and hear everyone out, part of “reasoned debate” is to require the provisioning of evidence.¹⁷² Different civil discourse activities will require different standards of rigor, and as outlined in “[Civil Discourse as Dialogue](#),” the phrase “agree to disagree” often should be replaced with more conversation.¹⁷³

4. Fear and over-compliance

The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) recently raised alarms about an increase in faculty self-censorship in their classroom and research.¹⁷⁴ While ensuring compliance with federal laws and regulations is a critical part of university leadership, some faculty and some campus leaders will *over* comply. By “over comply,” we mean they will engage in practices that harm the educational experience for students because they are unsure what the applicable federal or state laws, or System policies, are.¹⁷⁵ Some System policies that should not curb students’ academic experiences but could if faculty over-comply include:

- Institutional Neutrality, as laid out in the Equality Policy
- Political Activities of Employees
- Academic Freedom

It is worthwhile to engage with faculty and staff involved in civil discourse education and programming to make sure they understand the different bounds for their work and do not self-censor in a way that harms the student experience or the service they provide to North Carolina.

5. Structural gaps and changes in university operations

There will always be emerging issues in university operations and strategy that can pose a threat to civil discourse programming. Here are three that emerged during the preparation of this report:

¹⁷² For example, the Commission for Public Higher Education’s evidentiary guidance for “Intellectual Diversity” notes: “‘Reasonable ideas’ should be defined by faculty within the discipline in question. Every idea is not reasonable, sound, or relevant for discussion in a college or university classroom. For example, pursuit of intellectual diversity does not require faculty in the geological sciences to give audience to the assertion that the Earth is flat.” Commission for Public Higher Education, “Evidentiary Guidance for Accreditation Standards” 11 May 2026. <https://cphe.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/FINAL-CPHE-EVIDENTIARY-GUIDANCE-20260511.pdf> [Accessed 21 June 2026].

¹⁷³ Defining the parameters, benefits, and downsides of relativism in moral philosophy is well beyond the scope of this report.

¹⁷⁴ Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, “Silence in the Classroom” December 2024. <https://www.fire.org/sites/default/files/2024/12/Faculty-Report-2024-Final.pdf> [Accessed 23 June 2026].

¹⁷⁵ Alliance for Higher Education, “Avoiding Overreach as a Leader Based on Legislation” <https://allianceforhighered.org/resources/avoiding-overreach-as-a-leader-based-on-legislation> [Accessed 23 June 2026]; Maggie Yan, “Higher Education is Over-Complying with White House DEI Ban, Say Educators” *Prism*. 26 March 2025. <https://prismreports.org/2025/03/26/dei-trump-universities/> [Accessed 23 June 2026].

- **Having suitable physical and informational infrastructure.** Campus buildings need to be properly maintained and libraries need to be well-enough resourced for students to engage with a wide variety of perspectives.¹⁷⁶ Classroom buildings need an adequate number of rooms with chairs/desks that can be repositioned as the day's lesson plan calls for, or with rooms with round tables to enable discussion but also enough wall-mounted screens that students facing away from the front can see presentations.
- **Changes in the accreditation landscape.** As discussed above, SACS' Quality Enhancement Plan has been a key driver of campus-wide initiatives toward high-impact learning, including activities that fall within civil discourse. If SACS eliminates the QEP requirement or if System campuses move away from SACS, this particular level will disappear.
- **90 credit hour degrees.** The adoption of 90 credit-hour baccalaureate degrees, especially a broad-based adoption, would necessitate either a reduction in core curriculum requirements or in the kind of upper-level courses that allow students to gain the perspective of additional disciplines, including disciplines vital to civil discourse education.

6. Fractured media landscape

Not only can campuses be silos, making it hard for campus leaders to know of all of the work faculty are doing, but the increasingly-fractured media landscape makes effective communication of campus events, initiatives, and achievements to the broader public more difficult. If part of the motivation for engaging in civil discourse programming is to restore trust with the public, then campuses will need to think about the avenues they might use to let the public know about what they are doing.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁶ One member of the task force experienced a weeks'-long delay in conducting the research for their portion of the report due to a bat infestation in their campus library.

¹⁷⁷ See, for example, between "importance" and "performance" in the C&S survey. C&S, "[Trust in Higher Education Starts Local](#)," slide 15.

IV. Fostering Civil Discourse - Recommendations and Paths Forward

In previous sections, we have reviewed the importance of encouraging civil discourse, discussed the challenges in defining what is meant by “civil discourse,” reviewed the current state of civil discourse instruction and programming at University of North Carolina campuses, and highlighted important strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats to continued efforts to foster civil discourse at public universities in North Carolina. This section provides key recommendations for policymakers and campus administrators wanting to promote civil discourse on our campuses and charts a path forward for further research by this task force, project partners, and other scholars.

1. Define “Civil Discourse” in a Broad but Meaningful Way

Building skills in civil discourse can take many forms and activities that focus only on one or two attributes of civil discourse can still have merit. Having a broad but meaningful definition of what civil discourse education and training look like also prevents institutions from placing too heavy of a hand on the end result.¹⁷⁸

2. Use the Three-Part Framework for Evaluation

As laid out in [Section I](#), the Task Force recommends a three-part framework or set of guardrails for evaluating whether a particular “civil discourse” approach prepares students to be more capable citizens in our Constitutional democracy. These frameworks are:

1. Civil discourse programs and instruction should emphasize **strong civility**, which directly engages difficult issues in pursuit of inclusive and equitable dialogue, rather than “politeness for politeness’ sake.”
2. Root civil discourse work in a culture of **collaborative problem-solving**, which helps provide purpose and meaning to the participating students and helps them appreciate that while not all problems have immediate fixes, some do.
3. Civil discourse efforts should uphold **the inherent dignity of all participants**. Closely related to strong civility, emphasizing the inherent dignity of all invites students from an array of backgrounds to participate in this important work and prevents the use of pseudocivility to shut down discussion or shun dissenting voices.

3. Respect Student and Faculty Agency to Better Promote Civil Discourse

Related to the ideas of self-leadership and preparation for citizenship explained in [Section I](#), recognizing and respecting the agency and academic freedom of students is crucial. Students who can make structured choices in their learning are more likely to engage with instructional content and feel a sense

¹⁷⁸ Sheldon Wolin warned that when those in power make specific determinations of what students need to learn, and how they should see themselves vis-à-vis the government, these determinations reflect the needs of the powerful rather than the needs of the students. Wolin, *The Presence of the Past: Essays on the State and the Constitution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 13; Crittenden and Levine, “Civic Education.”

of ownership over their achievement.¹⁷⁹ The importance of student choice for student learning and engagement, including opting-in to particular types of class or more rigorous class policies, holds true for college students as well, though classroom instructors need to be consistent within each class section and make sure such choices are still well-structured to prevent student perceptions of instructor apathy.¹⁸⁰ Choices should meet student interests and goals and not be too numerous or complex.¹⁸¹ Instructors can also improve student motivation by explaining the relevance of particular tasks or activities to students' goals and interests.

Recognizing, including, and incentivizing faculty to participate in civil discourse also invites their engagement. Faculty are well-positioned to use their expertise, creativity, and knowledge of their students to find and/or develop civil discourse activities and approaches that are strong fits for student needs and interests.

4. Recognize the dynamic relationship between course content and skill in civil discourse

Teaching civil discourse skills can fall into the same double-pitfall as teaching critical thinking. First, faculty can assume that delivering disciplinary content (often through lecture and assigned reading) is all that is needed for students to learn how to engage in civil discourse. Second, university administrators can decide that civil discourse can be separated entirely from academic departments, that students can learn how to do civil discourse through "skills-building" activities.

Both content delivery and discrete skills-building activities are necessary; neither is sufficient alone.¹⁸²

5. Invest in core disciplines related to civil discourse

Stakeholders should make investments in core disciplines related to civil discourse (Classics, English, Government, History, Philosophy, Political Science, Rhetoric, World Languages and Literature) rather than seek to set up shadow or parallel departments.¹⁸³ These investments can take multiple forms,

¹⁷⁹ A robust but readable overview for classroom instructors wanting to learn more is Mike Anderson, *Learning to Choose, Choosing to Learn: The Key to Student Motivation and Achievement* (Alexandria, Virginia: ASCD, 2016).

¹⁸⁰ Simon Cullen and Daniel Oppenheimer, "Choosing to Learn: The Importance of Student Autonomy in Higher Education" *Science Advances* (10):29. 2024. DOI: 10.1126/sciadv.ado6759; Catherine F. Brooks and Stacy L. Young, "Are Choice-Making Opportunities Needed in the Classroom? Using Self-Determination Theory to Consider Student Motivation and Learner Empowerment" *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (23): 1, 48-59 (2011).

¹⁸¹ Idit Katz and Avi Assor, "When Choice Motivates and When It Does Not" *Educational Psychology Review* (19):1, 429-442 (2006). The authors also draw on studies from K-12 contexts to argue that choice should be congruent with children's cultural values, specifically that children from highly collectivist cultures tend to disengage when instructed to make their own decision.

¹⁸² Robert Pondiscio, "The Knowledge Revival," *The Next 30 Years*. 23 January 2025.

<https://thenext30years.substack.com/p/curriculum-for-deep-thinking> [Accessed 20 June 2026]. Much of civil discourse depends on analysis, evaluation, or creation of material, which are the three highest levels of Bloom's taxonomy (revised), meaning students need the foundations of having remembered, understood, and applied the relevant content.

¹⁸³ While not the focus of this report, these investments will also improve student agency in their use and design of AI. See Erica Chito Childs, "Who Gets to Shape AI? Why Higher Ed Must Ground Emerging Technology in the Humanities" *The EDU Ledger*. 20 June 2026. [Accessed 21 June 2026].

<https://www.theeduledger.com/opinion/article/15828091/who-gets-to-shape-ai-why-higher-ed-must-ground-emerging-technology-in-the-humanities>

including course redesign and development grants, research grants in related areas, and longer-term funds for distinguished professorships and standard faculty lines. Potential research and teaching fields for these investments include, but are not limited to: American democracy, American government and politics, American and world literature, the history of science and philosophy, civility and civil rights, comparative constitutionalism, moral philosophy, dialogue and debate, communication ethics, and political rhetoric.

6. Use the System's Convening Power to Build a Community of Practice

The UNC System is already implementing this part of our recommendation, with the Common Ground Collaborative gathering at UNC Charlotte in May 2026 drawing over 120 faculty from across the state. With a breakfast and lunch provided by the System Office, faculty were able to spend the day learning from each other and outside experts on what civil discourse is and how it can be implemented in a wide variety of courses. The task force heard from many faculty members who started the day dubious about even the term "civil discourse" but left the gathering energized and prepared to do more.

We recommend the System continue these gatherings, at least in May 2027, and continue to foster a community of practice, perhaps by having a five-year rotation of different pedagogical topics, with civil discourse being one of them.¹⁸⁴

7. Draw on Best Practices to Communicate Civil Discourse Efforts to the Broader Community

Recent studies suggest key approaches universities should follow when communicating our work to the broader public. These include:

- Root the story in shared values, such as freedom, fairness, and strength.
- Include specific examples from the kinds of institutions where most American students are educated, especially our regional public universities.
- Avoid jargon and use accessible language.
- Enlist and, if needed, train Trustees, alumni, faculty, regional employers, and other constituencies and partners in telling the story of civil discourse on campus.¹⁸⁵

8. Continue to Research Civil Discourse within the UNC System

We see multiple areas for further research related to civil discourse in the UNC System:

- A more robust landscape analysis of civil discourse activities occurring in curricular and co-curricular spaces, including in Core Curriculum / General Education classes, upper-level classes,

¹⁸⁴ In our research for this report, we were struck by how much of the literature on civil discourse and preparing students for the responsibilities of citizenship seems to have come out in spurts before faltering about fifteen years ago. A five-year cycle for professional development and convening sustains faculty interest without allowing other important aspects of undergraduate (or graduate) instruction to fall by the wayside.

¹⁸⁵ List adapted from Young et al., "[The Trust Agenda](#)" *The American Association of College and Universities*, p. 35-37.

and as organized by Offices for Service-Learning, Community and/or Civic Engagement, and other divisions within Student Affairs.

- A more detailed analysis of the decline and comparative decline in humanities and political science majors and courses, including, if feasible, counts of second majors, the impact of decreasing courses-per-semester on enrollment, and effective campus-level strategies to increase enrollment.
- The development and refinement of assessment measurements, including landscape surveys, end-of-course surveys, and senior and alumni surveys, to measure student skill development in civil discourse.

V. Teaching and Programming Resources

This section provides an initial list of teaching, programming, and training resources on civil discourse for students, faculty, and campus leaders with short annotations. These resources are a starting point and may require additional vetting. The list is in alphabetical order.

[ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge](#) A structure for campus-level initiatives to scale civil discourse work.

[All Sides - Balanced News and Media Bias](#) | [AllSides for Schools](#) Includes lesson plans related to finding and verifying information through the media.

[Braver Education Community Network](#) A project by Braver Angels, the site includes a link to their curricular toolkit for colleges and its civic scholars council.

Builders, "[Education Resource & Action Guide](#)" (August 2024). A 38-page guidebook for high schools and colleges seeking to foster civil discourse and repair division.

[College Debates and Discourse Alliance](#) An initiative by the American Council of Alumni & Trustees, this page has links to their curricular toolkit and resources for faculty.

[Community Engaged Teaching, Learning, and Scholarship](#) A research guide from the Western Carolina University library.

[Conservation.us](#) Includes a list of films about people coming together across differences.

[Constructive Dialogue Institute](#) Includes programs for students, faculty, and campus leaders, along with campus-wide offerings.

[Dignity Index | Higher Education](#) Includes links to their higher education toolkit, list of offerings for students, faculty, and campus leaders, and an interest form.

[Discover StoryCorps](#) Recorded conversations around different topics.

Divided Community Project, [Leading a Community During a Time of Conflict](#). A how-to guide for local leaders navigating conflict and repairing cross-community ties. Open access.

Divided Community Project, [Symbols and Public Spaces Amid Division](#). A practical guide for local leaders on selecting public symbols and navigating divides around them. Open access.

[Divided We Fall TELEVISION](#) Two documentaries about the importance of listening.

[Integrating Civil Discourse Into the Curriculum \(ICDC\)](#) A pedagogical framework that uses Thinker and Sway to help students learn sound reasoning and civil dialogue together.

[L. E. A. R. N. Dialogues](#) A guide for helping students write dialogues and for instructors facilitating dialogues.

[Living Room Conversations](#) Conversation guides on over 150 topics. Four are available on their website without paying for a membership or creating a login.

National Institute for Civil Discourse, “[Engaging Differences: The Principles and Practices of Civil Discourse](#).” A useful, short overview of what civil discourse is and how to practice it. There is a [related video series](#).

[National Issues Forums Institute - Issue Guides](#) These are structured guides for creating deliberative dialogues around specific topics.

[The Political Classroom: Evidence and Ethics in Democratic Education](#) A 2016 book by Diana Hess and Paula McAvoy on incorporating civil discourse and other best practices when discussing political issues in high school classrooms.

[Reacting to the Past - Games](#) A list of the structured historical scenario role-plays published by the Reacting Consortium. Includes history, art, political science, and natural science topics.

[Social Trust Map](#) A human geography exhibit / research guide that introduces the concept of social trust and offers research guidance on analyzing and building social trust in local communities.

[Transformative Civic Education in Democratic Societies](#) A 2023 book edited by Paul E. Mabrey III on civic education in democracies around the world, including case studies involving adult learners.

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Appendix

A recent (2025) analysis of the 14,147 full-time UNC employees whose job category includes “instructor,” “lecturer,” or “professor,” found that among the 940 (6.6%) who earned less than \$60,000, 59% work in just five areas:¹⁸⁶

Field	Count	% of lowest paid
English and/or Foreign Languages	256	27%
History, Philosophy, Religion, or Political Science/Public Affairs	67	7%
Biological Sciences	63	7%
Mathematics, Statistics, Computer Science	59	6%
Visual, Fine, and Performing Arts	111	12%

Undergraduate Degree Production in the UNC System, 2005-2025 (Two-digit CIP Code) (First Majors Only)

Field (CIP code)	# of schools offering Bachelors degrees in 2005 (# of graduates)	# of schools offering Bachelors degrees in 2025 (# of graduates)	% decrease in graduates (2005-2025)
History (54)	15 (600)	15 (506)	-16%
English (23)	15 (863)	15 (738)	-14%
Foreign Languages and Linguistics (16) ¹⁸⁷	13 (293)	11 (268)	-9%
Philosophy and Religious Studies (38)	10 (188)	9 (155)	-19%
Area / Ethnic / Cultural / Group / Gender Studies (05)	4 (182)	7 (138)	-24%

¹⁸⁶ These figures should be taken as an approximation. In cases of overlapping department names, allotments were made to the department listed first. Figures taken from internal Faculty Assembly work product, based on UNC salary database. NCSSM instructors excluded from the data.

¹⁸⁷ While the number of degrees in Spanish (16.0905) and Romance Languages (16.0999) have had a sharp decline, Foreign Languages as a whole has been buoyed by growth in Japanese (16.0302), Linguistics (16.0199), and Foreign Languages and Literature (16.0101).

Undergraduate Degree Production in the UNC System, 2005-2025 (Six-digit CIP Code) (First Majors Only)

Field (CIP code)	# of schools offering Bachelors degrees in 2005 (# of graduates)	# of schools offering Bachelors degrees in 2025 (# of graduates)	% decrease or increase in graduates (2005-2025)
Philosophy (38.0101)	7 (97)	8 (112)	+15%
Religious Studies (38.0201)	4 (59)	6 (33)	-44%
Classics (16.1200)	3 (20)	3 (17)	-15%
Political Science (45.1001)	15 (812)	14 (937)	+15%

Enrollment by Student Credit Hour, Fall Semesters, 2016-2025 (Two-digit CIP Code)

Field (CIP code)	Enrollment by Student Credit Hour, Fall 2016	Enrollment by Student Credit Hour, Fall 2025	% decrease in Student Credit Hours (2016-2025)
History (54)	26,964	23,354	-13%
English (23)	36,285	30,727	-15%
Foreign Languages and Linguistics (16)	24,688	15,327	-38%
Philosophy and Religious Studies (38)	10,141	9,300	-8%
Area / Ethnic / Cultural / Group / Gender Studies (05)	13,054	7,348	-44%

Enrolled Students in the UNC System, Fall Semesters, 2016-2025 (Two-digit CIP Code) (All Majors)

Field (CIP code)	Enrollment by # of students in Fall 2016 (all majors)	Enrollment by # of students in Fall 2025 (all majors)	% decrease in # of enrolled students (Fall 2016- Fall 2025)
History (54)	1,946	1,725	-11%
English (23)	2,571	2,231	-13%
Foreign Languages and Linguistics (16)	1,747	1,115	-36%
Philosophy and Religious Studies (38)	729	691	-5%
Area / Ethnic / Cultural / Group / Gender Studies (05)	916	538	-42%