

BLUEPRINT FOR REFORM

THE JAMES G.
MARTIN
CENTER
FOR ACADEMIC
RENEWAL

Civil Discourse

It's possible to disagree without being disagreeable.

—Sandra Day O'Connor

When people stop talking, that's when you get violence. That's when civil war happens because you start to think the other side is so evil, and they lose their humanity.

—Charlie Kirk

Why Is Civil Discourse Needed?

American college and university campuses are at risk of becoming echo chambers.

Many students are afraid to express their opinions because it's unclear how their professors and peers will receive them. As one student expressed, "It's safer to stay silent" when students perceive ideological homogeneity among their professors.¹ Data from the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) show that students are more likely to self-censor the more they believe they are out of line with their professors' views.²

A 2022 report analyzing eight UNC System schools provides numerous insights into the state of free expression in North Carolina. It found that students "have significant concerns about expressing political views on campus."³ Conservatives disproportionately express these concerns, but they are shared by students of other backgrounds, as well. The report also found that students "worry about the reactions of their peers more than those of faculty."

1 Clare Ashcraft, "The Harm of Student Self-Censorship: Why Universities Should Promote Diverse Thought," *Constructive Dialogue Institute*, August 28, 2023, <https://constructivedialogue.org/articles/the-harm-of-student-self-censorship-why-universities-should-promote-diverse-thought/>.

2 Kevin Wallsten, "College Students Are Self-Censoring to Fit In," *City Journal*, January 21, 2026, <https://www.city-journal.org/article/university-faculty-left-liberal-education-students>.

3 Timothy J. Ryan, Andrew M. Engelhardt, Jennifer Larson, Mark McNeilly, *Free Expression and Constructive Dialogue in the University of North Carolina System* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina System, August 21, 2022), https://fecdsurveyreport.web.unc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/22160/2022/08/FECD_Report_8-21-22.pdf

Regardless of whether fear of expression is driven by peer or faculty influence—or a combination of both—colleges have a duty to cultivate a hospitable atmosphere for heterodox viewpoints. One of the most effective ways they can do so is by encouraging and modeling civil discourse.

As George R. La Noue wrote in a 2021 Martin Center report, institutional policies that support free expression are an important first step toward promoting open dialogue on campuses.⁴ Nonetheless, they are insufficient. Universities must put their verbal commitment to viewpoint diversity into action. They can do so by providing forums in which debates on important policy issues can occur in a balanced manner that encourages diverse perspectives.

When handled well, disagreement can be an occasion for two parties to exercise understanding and humility. It can also produce fruitful insights. It can, however, also devolve into unproductive quarreling and, sometimes, into outright violence. The 2015 dispute over Halloween costumes at Yale University is an infamous example of students refusing to express differing views respectfully.⁵ And the untimely death of Charlie Kirk is a tragic example of what can happen when disagreement turns into violence.

Notable examples of programs promoting civil discourse exist. Colleges across the country have worked with the Campus Debates and Discourse Alliance of Braver Angels, the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, and BridgeUSA to facilitate respectful conversations on myriad topics. Braver Angels debates follow the parliamentary debate model, which helps participants remain respectful and grow in understanding of others' ideas. UNC-Chapel Hill's Program for Civil Discourse and School of Civil Life and Leadership and Duke University's Civil Discourse Project are campus-level examples of efforts to promote meaningful conversation across differences.

More work, however, needs to be done. Healing civic culture can be accomplished only through respectful and honest conversation. Students are hungry for such opportunities. All of America's colleges and universities must become bastions of gracious and civil dialogue.

4 George R. La Noue, *Political Reality on North Carolina Campuses: Examining Policy Debates and Forums with Diverse Viewpoints* (Raleigh, NC: James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, February 2021), <https://jamesgmartin.center/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Political-Reality-on-North-Carolina-Campuses.pdf>.

5 Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, "Halloween Costume Controversy," accessed April 2, 2026, <https://www.fire.org/research-learn/halloween-costume-controversy>

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Martin Center recommends that legislatures, university boards, and faculty governing committees take steps to improve academic transparency at public colleges and universities.

- Create and support programs dedicated to civil discourse. These programs should organize regular public-policy debates on an array of issues.
- Institute and facilitate post-debate discussions within student residences.
- Adopt a statement, such as the Chicago Statement, clearly affirming the value of free speech and the civil and free exchange of ideas.
- Provide a user-friendly public calendar of scheduled campus debates.
- Adopt a position of institutional neutrality on current debated issues. This will help ensure that students, staff, and faculty can ask questions and express views without pressure to conform to an official institutional stance.

Model University Policies:

- [The Chicago Statement](#)

Policymakers Should:

- Adopt legislation based on the [Campus Intellectual Diversity Act](#), which requires the organization and facilitation of debates on diverse issues on public college and university campuses.

Model Legislation

- The [Campus Intellectual Diversity Act](#) by Stanley Kurtz, Senior Fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center
- [Florida House Bill 931](#)

Further Reading

From the Martin Center:

- [“AI Meets Civil Discourse”](#) by Mark McNeilly (February 3, 2025)
- [“UNC’s School of Civic Life and Leadership Is Up and Running”](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (Apr 8, 2024)
- [“A Florida Bill to Promote Fairness on Campus”](#) by Jenna A. Robinson (May 5, 2023) [“Restoring Real Debate on College Campuses”](#) by Doug Sprei (May 3, 2023)
- [“The Public Discourse Program at UNC-Chapel Hill: Expanding Students’ Minds”](#) by Grace Hall (Jun 13, 2022)
- [“Political Reality on North Carolina Campuses: Examining Policy Debates and Forums with Diverse Viewpoints”](#) by George R. La Noue (Feb 17, 2021)

(continued on next page)

- “Teaching Students Civil Dialogue in a Culture Hostile to Free Speech” by Shannon Watkins (Jan 18, 2021)
- “Healing Civic Culture One Conversation at a Time” by Shannon Watkins (Nov 18, 2019)
- “UNC Board Steps Up to Defend Civil Discourse on Campus” by Jay Schalin (Sep 16, 2019)
- “Restoring a Great Intellectual Tradition to America’s Campuses” by George Leef (Aug 16, 2019)
- “An Ambassador of Civil Discourse” by Shannon Watkins (Jan 8, 2018)

Other Sources:

- *Silenced Stages: The Loss of Academic Freedom and Campus Policy Debates* by George R. La Noue
- [Heterodox Academy](#)
- [College Debates and Discourse Alliance](#)
- [Braver Angels](#)
- [BridgeUSA](#)
- [More In Common](#)

For More Information

For supplemental data or additional research on this topic, please contact the Martin Center by phone or email. You can reach us at 919-828-1400 or info@jamesgmartin.center.

To read more from the Martin Center about the importance of civics education, visit: <https://www.jamesgmartin.center/state/indiana>

About the Martin Center

The James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal is a private nonprofit institute dedicated to improving higher education policy. Our mission is to renew and fulfill the promise of higher education in North Carolina and across the country.

We advocate responsible governance, viewpoint diversity, academic quality, cost-effective education solutions, and innovative market-based reform. We do that by studying and reporting on critical issues in higher education and recommending policies that can create change—especially at the state and local level.

THE JAMES G. 
MARTIN CENTER
 FOR ACADEMIC RENEWAL

3200 Wake Forest Road, Suite
 210 Raleigh, NC 27609

919.828.1400

info@jamesgmartin.center

www.jamesgmartin.center