



Project Overview | Civil Discourse Project

Overview

Civil discourse—the practice of engaging thoughtfully across differing perspectives—is essential to fostering an inclusive and intellectually vibrant academic community. However, college environments marked by political polarization, rapid digital communication, and shifting social norms often leave students uncertain about how to participate in meaningful conversation. The University of Washington Civil Discourse Project (CDP) was established in 2024 as a student-led collaboration between the Brotherhood Initiative (BI) and Sisterhood Initiative (SI). The project engaged undergraduate leaders in a year-long investigation of how students, particularly students of color, experience dialogue on a large public campus, with the goal of using these insights to strengthen, expand, and encourage more meaningful discourse across the university community.

Connecting Global, Research, and Community Experiences

The Civil Discourse Project integrated multiple high-impact educational practices to enrich student learning and strengthen inquiry into civil discourse. Beginning with a global study abroad experience, students examined civic dialogue in international contexts before returning to campus to conduct undergraduate research grounded in their own communities. This work was complemented by a community-engaged dialogue event that allowed students to apply research insights in practice, and by a public scholarship component in which they presented their findings at a university-wide symposium. Together, these interconnected learning experiences provided a layered and developmental pathway that enhanced students' research skills, broadened their understanding of civil discourse, and demonstrated the value of experiential learning in addressing complex social issues.

Project Phases

June 2024 **International Learning Experience**

The project began with a five-day immersion in London, where students examined public debate in historically significant civic spaces. Participants witnessed a wide range of discourse practices and reflected on which forms promote clarity, connection, or community understanding.

Sept 2024-Feb 2025 **Campus-Based Research**

Upon returning to UW, students conducted a multi-method study with BI and SI participants. Using surveys, facilitated conversations, and observational activities, students analyzed when and why peers feel supported—or constrained—in sharing their perspectives.

April 2025 **Community Dialogue Event**

Students then designed and facilitated a discussion event for BI and SI members on a timely educational issue. This phase required students to translate research insights into practice by creating a supportive environment where participants could exchange ideas and engage in productive disagreement.

May 2025 **Public Scholarship**

The project concluded with the presentation of three research posters at the 2025 UW Undergraduate Research Symposium. Students learned to articulate their findings and implications for a broader audience, and consider how their research might inform programming and institutional decision-making.



Principles for Supporting Student-Led Participatory Inquiry

The Civil Discourse Project utilized a participatory action research (PAR) framework that positioned undergraduate students as co-researchers rather than research subjects. Staff offered guidance in methodological design, analysis, and project planning, while preserving space for students to direct the inquiry. This approach supported student development in multiple ways, including:

- Strengthening qualitative research competencies
- Building reflective practices that connect identity and inquiry
- Encouraging collaboration and shared decision-making
- Enhancing students' confidence in facilitating dialogue

By centering student voice and agency, the project affirmed the capacity of undergraduates to generate meaningful insights about institutional climate and communication practices.

Framework for Student-Led Leadership in Fostering Civil Discourse

Student leaders play a pivotal role in shaping campus culture and modeling the practices that support constructive dialogue. Drawing directly on insights generated through the project's year-long inquiry, the following framework outlines three core domains that capture the essential areas in which student leadership can strengthen civil discourse across the university community.

Designing Inclusive and Accessible Dialogue Spaces

Student leaders have a unique capacity to shape environments that invite broad participation and thoughtful exchange. Effective dialogue settings—whether formal programs or informal gatherings—are those in which participants understand the shared norms guiding conversation and feel confident that their perspectives will be respected. Through careful planning and attention to atmosphere, student leaders help peers move past hesitation and engage more fully in conversations about complex or unfamiliar issues.

Modeling Inquiry-Focused Engagement

Leadership in civil discourse begins with demonstrating a commitment to curiosity and reflective listening. When student leaders approach conversations with an intent to understand, rather than to persuade or compete, they set a tone that encourages others to do the same. This includes asking open-ended questions, acknowledging the experiences that shape differing viewpoints, and responding in ways that invite continued exploration.

Expanding Opportunities for Cross-Perspective Dialogue

The framework developed through the Civil Discourse Project will serve as a foundational component of the university's emerging Civic Health Initiative, a campus-wide effort to strengthen democratic engagement, shared understanding, and community trust. As the initiative expands, CDP student leaders and staff partners will collaborate with academic departments, student organizations, and institutional units to integrate the framework into existing programs and new campus-wide offerings. This includes incorporating the framework into leadership development curricula, embedding dialogue practices into first-year and cohort-based programs, and aligning it with initiatives that support student wellbeing and belonging.

Next Steps

The framework developed through the Civil Discourse Project will serve as a foundational component of the university's emerging Civic Health Initiative, a campus-wide effort to strengthen democratic engagement, shared understanding, and community trust. As the initiative expands, CDP student leaders and staff partners will collaborate with academic departments, student organizations, and institutional units to integrate the framework into existing programs and new campus-wide offerings. This includes incorporating the framework into leadership development curricula, embedding dialogue practices into first-year and cohort-based programs, and aligning it with initiatives that support student wellbeing and belonging.