

Civil Discourse Project:

Fostering Student Leadership and Community Engagement through Undergraduate Research



The Brotherhood Initiative is a research-to-practice partnership that draws upon evidence-based approaches to promote academic success for undergraduate men of color at the University of Washington. The BI seeks to build a community of scholars that is equipped with the skills and knowledge to grow and succeed in college and beyond graduation. Our **“Student-Led” brief series** features topic overviews, student stories, and considerations for practitioners and student leaders working to promote and inspire student-centered approaches to critical issues impacting men of color in higher education.



Ethan Hagey

graduated from the University of Washington in 2026 with a B.A. in Law, Societies, and Justice and a B.A. in Psychology. He has worked in public service for former Assemblymember Phil Ting and for Senator Scott Wiener, as well as on research in mental health and democratic engagement with the Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts, Boston. Ethan currently serves as Executive Director of the Health Empowerment through Advocacy and Leadership (HEAL) Initiative. In the future, he plans to pursue law school and a career in public service focused on evidence-based health policy.

INTRODUCTION

Civil discourse, the practice of thoughtfully deliberating matters of public concern, is foundational to a healthy democracy. Importantly, the term “civil” here refers not to politeness, but to civic engagement: a commitment to public life and collective problem-solving. Yet on college campuses today, fostering civil discourse has become increasingly difficult. Students are navigating a landscape shaped by political polarization, competitive academic pressures, and the isolating effects of social media echo chambers. In this climate, opportunities for open, respectful dialogue across differences are not only limited but often undermined by the social and structural barriers that define many academic environments.

In response to these challenges, the Civil Discourse Project was launched in 2024 as a student-led project to explore and promote civil discourse at the University of Washington. Developed through a collaboration between the Brotherhood Initiative (BI) and Sisterhood Initiative (SI), two programs dedicated to advancing graduation equity and student success, the first phase of this project began with a travel experience to Speakers Corner in London and culminated with research presentations at the annual campus research symposium. Five undergraduate students led the inquiry, exploring how other students of color in the BI and SI experience, understand, and practice civil discourse at a large public university.

This brief profiles the story of Ethan Hagey and his work to learn more about where, how, and why undergraduate students engage in civil discourse, particularly students of color. Working alongside



Ethan's Story

I joined the Civil Discourse Project for a few reasons. I wanted to get more involved with the BI. I hadn't been out of the country at that point except for Canada, and then obviously I was interested in how to build spaces on campus where students feel like they can meaningfully engage with each other and hopefully become more critically informed about issues that are especially important right now. When I saw this opportunity, I thought it was really, really cool.

I knew that I had a lot to learn at the beginning of the project. The main thing that I remember as I was applying for the project relates to research skills and learning how to leverage lessons from international models for implementation back home locally. As the project progressed, I realized this was an opportunity for me to learn about qualitative work in the field, even as an undergraduate, and it was great.

Before the project, I guess I didn't have a formal definition of civil discourse. If I saw it on a piece of paper, I'd assume it means civil conversation between people that's respectful and open. Now, it's definitely become more nuanced. It's not just about being civil. It's also about having meaningful engagement with others where the measure of success is defined by mutual learning or understanding.



CDP students and staff visiting St. Paul's Cathedral in London, England

four fellow student leaders, Ethan engaged in participatory action research¹ to investigate experiences with and barriers to meaningful dialogue on campus. This project demonstrates how student-driven inquiry can produce nuanced insights and practical recommendations for fostering more inclusive, empathetic, and engaged communication on campus. Ethan's story illustrates how empowering students to lead research efforts can strengthen campus dialogue and support equity-centered change.

REIMAGINING STUDENT LEADERSHIP THROUGH UNDERGRADUATE RESEARCH

Undergraduate research offers a powerful avenue for students to deepen their learning and contribute to meaningful change in their respective fields. However, research experiences don't have to be one-size-fits-all. In the case of the Civil Discourse Project, undergraduate students were offered the opportunity to engage in research that positioned them as international knowledge seekers, leaders in community engagement, cultivators of community insight, and change makers regarding critical campus issues. As a research team, BI and SI student leaders were not only expected to be participants but also co-creators of knowledge – shaping questions, methods, and recommendations that reflect their lived experiences. In his story, Ethan shares what motivated him to take on this project, along with his aspirations and insights for advancing civil discourse in higher education.

EXPLORING CHALLENGES TO CIVIL DISCOURSE THROUGH EXPERIENCE, RESEARCH, AND ACTION

The Civil Discourse Project was designed to help undergraduate participants explore the challenges of inclusive dialogue through hands-on learning, research, and community engagement. The project began with a global experience in London, where students examined public discourse in culturally significant spaces and reflected on how identity and context shape civic engagement. Back on campus, they conducted qualitative research—including focus groups, surveys, and data walks—to understand how

¹ Participatory Action Research (PAR) is a collaborative approach to inquiry that positions those most affected by a social issue as co-researchers who guide the research questions, design, methods, and analysis in pursuit of action and social change. Emphasizing the cultivation of participant voice and shared responsibility, participatory research seeks to transform educational contexts and affirms education research's obligation to advance human development through research conducted with, rather than on, participants.

first-year Brotherhood and Sisterhood Initiative students experience civil discourse and to identify barriers and opportunities for improvement.

Building on these insights, students then designed and facilitated a community dialogue event that modeled empathy, curiosity, and respectful disagreement while addressing a timely issue. This phase of the project culminated in a public presentation at the 2025 University of Washington Undergraduate Research Symposium, where students shared their findings and recommendations for strengthening civil discourse on campus. Across all phases, the project emphasized iterative learning, critical reflection, and the transformation of insights into meaningful action.

SUPPORTING STUDENT-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

The Civil Discourse Project was supported by a team of student affairs staff and scholars that ensured student leaders had access to institutional resources, research expertise, and ongoing coaching for



Undergraduate researchers presenting CDP survey results at the 2025 UW Undergraduate Research Symposium

CIVIL DISCOURSE PROJECT OVERVIEW

Mission:

To engage and empower BI and SI student leaders in learning activities and community-based experiences that improve civil discourse at the University of Washington.

Learning Objectives:

By the end of this project, students will be able to:

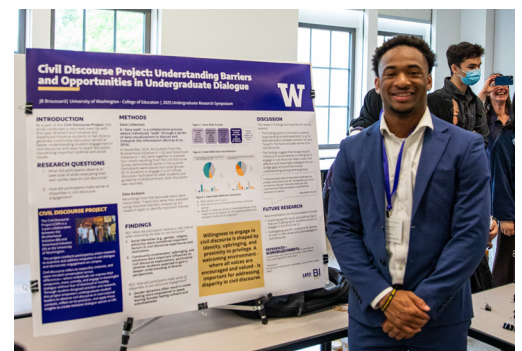
1. Identify and analyze the cultural, institutional, and structural factors that influence civil discourse in higher education
2. Work collaboratively to design and conduct a participatory action research study using qualitative methods
3. Plan and facilitate a community-based dialogue that applies research findings and offers a space for respectful disagreement

Project Phases:



“At the end of the day, showing openness to other people who have different backgrounds, different positions, encourages them to also return that transparency to you. And I think that builds an empowering conversation where you can be vulnerable and participate with meaningful recognition of both your lived experiences and ideas, and thereby build authentic relationships and critical thinking across differences through co-constructed learning.”

- Ethan Hagey



Undergraduate researcher presenting CDP data walk findings at the 2025 UW Undergraduate Research Symposium



Ethan's Story

There were a number of important learning moments over the course of the project. I think in one sense the project reinforced how important I think identity is for how people engage in civil discourse and opened me up to thinking about how multiple identities and intersectionality come into play in discourse spaces. I talked about this at the symposium, but a key insight for me is that identity serves not just as a barrier in these situations, but often an opportunity.

A point in the project where I felt challenged was during the focus group work. I had a little bit of experience administering surveys and looking at transcripts, but this is the first time where I had to take charge of it and not sit behind a grad student. And I guess what was really challenging is that I knew generally what I was looking for, but I didn't know how to identify codes and themes. I had to learn that the process is kind of iterative as you go, and it is important to be flexible and willing to pivot when things come up.

The chance to do applied research, not just creating the focus group questions, but also conducting them was a great experience. Learning was cumulative for students because we were so involved at every stage. I really like interdisciplinary and multi-method research now. I think that qualitative research obviously offers things that you just don't get when you're just looking at a bunch of numbers. And I like the idea of engaging with your participants, almost like you're not studying them. Rather, you're working with them to explore something. And I think the spirit of research from the project's perspective is different, and it was a joy to do, honestly.



Undergraduate researchers presenting CDP focus group findings at the 2025 UW Undergraduate Research Symposium

community rooted inquiry. Supporting student-led participatory action research (PAR) begins with recognizing students as co-creators of knowledge. PAR is a collaborative research approach that centers those most affected by an issue - in this case, undergraduate students - as active participants in every stage of the inquiry process². Rather than treating students as subjects of research, the Project approach to PAR invited student leaders to define the research questions, shape the methods, interpret the data, and apply the findings in ways that matter to the BI and SI communities.

For practitioners, effective support for PAR requires intentional scaffolding that balances student autonomy with developmental guidance. Because PAR emphasizes iterative learning and collective reflection, the student leaders were provided with structured opportunities for skill-building (e.g. workshops, one-on-one methods trainings, and collaborative planning sessions), while also affirming students' autonomy and agency in driving the shape and logistics of each phase in the project. This dual emphasis on rigor and independence not only strengthened the research process but also cultivated student self-awareness, leadership, and critical consciousness.

In Ethan's case, the support and resources provided by the project staff enabled him to learn new research skills, work through challenges, and take ownership over his work. In the quote on the left, he shares how the project deepened his understanding of identity in dialogue and taught him to embrace the iterative nature of qualitative research.

LEARNING ABOUT CIVIL DISCOURSE THROUGH PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Throughout the Civil Discourse Project process, student researchers were tasked with reflecting on what civil discourse is and isn't. In each phase of the project, the team engaged with data, conversations with each other, and interactions with their peers that continuously shaped their understanding of civil discourse. As student researchers reflected on their experiences, many shared how the project challenged their assumptions and expanded their understanding of what civil discourse requires. For Ethan, these insights emerged through data analysis and dialogue with peers. In the story on the following page, he describes how participatory action research not only built skills but also deepened his awareness of the cultural and institutional conditions that shape meaningful conversation.

2 McIntyre, A. (2008). Participatory action research. SAGE Publications, Inc., <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483385679>

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FOSTERING CIVIL DISCOURSE ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Drawing from the collective insights shared by Ethan and his fellow research team members, the following recommendations outline practical strategies for fostering respectful, inclusive, and meaningful civil dialogue on campus. These suggestions emphasize the dual responsibility of institutions and individuals: creating structured, accessible spaces for dialogue while encouraging students to engage with openness, empathy, and curiosity. Together, these recommendations provide actionable steps for faculty, staff, and students to build a campus culture where civil discourse is not only supported but actively practiced.

Recommendations for Faculty and Staff

- **Ensure civil discourse opportunities are accessible.** Institutions should establish spaces for civil discourse that are welcoming and relevant to students from a diverse range of backgrounds. These spaces should be co-created with students and faculty, and address barriers to participation through intentional timing, multiple transportation options, and providing food. Making these opportunities visible and approachable helps draw in students who might not otherwise engage.
- **Grow civil discourse opportunities through collaboration - not competition.** To help students step outside their comfort zones and engage with unfamiliar perspectives without fear of judgment, faculty should avoid practices that reduce discourse to a contest or competition for better grades and instead adopt practices that can foster open and respectful exchange of ideas (e.g., such as contract grading or collaborative projects).
- **Help spark curiosity and civil discourse through exposure to unexpected ideas and new perspectives.** Institutions should provide opportunities for students engage with unfamiliar ideas across disciplines by offering research symposiums and open panel discussions designed to feature a wide range of voices as well as interesting, overlooked, and emerging topics. Cultivating spaces that promote the exchange of ideas inspires discussion where everyone has something to learn.



One initial assumption I had going into the project was that a dedicated facilitator was necessary for civil discourse. However, the data we collected suggested that students wanted a different type of institutional support. The project helped me understand the role that institutions can play in helping to build discourse spaces. They can work with faculty and also students to create those spaces; build incentives for students to actually go to those spaces; and provide resources that reduce barriers to participation. Institutions should also articulate clear values for approaching these spaces, encouraging people to share and reminding them that this is really a space to have meaningful conversation for collaborative learning. Civil discourse is not a space to try and elevate yourself over someone else.

Students have a role to play too. But how do you create these civil discourse spaces on the fly when you're in between class periods or at the dining hall and you encounter someone across the table talking about something? I think it makes sense to approach each other with authenticity and productive language, like saying, "I want to share who I am" and being open to asking "who are you" and "why do you feel this way?". The institution plays an important role in providing opportunities and structured spaces for students, but sustaining intentional dialogue requires students to take an active role in fostering civil discourse across campus.

Ultimately, I've learned that "civil conversation" is not sufficient for "civil discourse." It can be polite but still one-sided and can lead to static dialogue rather than learning. Civil discourse involves dynamic dialogue and collaborative learning that demand participants play active roles in creating space for mutual engagement and understanding, beyond just keeping it "civil." One of our most striking findings was how inviting participants to share who they are and how their identities and experiences inform their positions on issues, even before formal dialogue begins, can increase comfort and authenticity.

So, civil discourse takes being conscious of not just others' issue stances, but also of the persons themselves, and connecting those dots together for more effective dialogue through active reflection – something our findings also show students of color are uniquely positioned to do.

Recommendations for Students

- **Step outside of your comfort zone.** Students should actively seek out conversations with people who are different from them, even when it feels uncomfortable. Doing so helps them grow, learn new perspectives, and better understand themselves. Attending campus events (e.g., public lectures, research symposiums, and project presentations) and informal discussions can be a powerful way to start.
- **Practice intentional listening and openness.** Approaching conversations with curiosity rather than judgment is key to civil discourse. Students should focus on understanding others' perspectives before responding with their own. This mindset shift can transform disagreements into opportunities for connection and learning. Students can lead by example by engaging respectfully and encouraging their peers to do the same.
- **Participate in and promote dialogue opportunities.** Students should help organize and participate in events like debate nights, fishbowl discussions, and workshops that promote - and model - civil discourse. Encouraging peers to join and making space for all voices can help build a more engaged and empathetic campus community.

Learn more

- Campus Compact (2024). *Dialogue and Deliberation Resources*. <https://compact.org/current-programs/dialogue-deliberation>
- Guzmán, M. (2022). *I never thought of it that way: How to have fearlessly curious conversations in dangerously divided times*. BenBella Books.
- Schwartz, L., & Ritter, D. (2019). Civil discourse in the classroom. *Academe*, 105(1), 26-30.

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REFLECTION QUESTIONS

For Institutional Leaders

1. *Where on campus do students currently feel most comfortable engaging in honest dialogue that may include disagreement? What conditions make those spaces work, and how can they be replicated elsewhere?*
2. *In what ways can we engage students as co-creators, not just participants, in the design, facilitation, and assessment of civil discourse opportunities? How can we expand their leadership and autonomy?*
3. *When conflict, discomfort, or heated moments arise, what support do we provide for students (and faculty) in navigating these moments productively, without defaulting to silencing or over-facilitation?*

For Students

1. *How am I encouraging peers to engage in civil discourse and step outside their comfort zones in ways that feel supportive rather than intimidating or patronizing?*
2. *Outside of structured events, how can I seek out and encourage civil discourse in informal spaces (e.g., hallways, dining halls, student org meetings)? What questions help initiate genuine connection rather than debate?*
3. *How do my lived experiences and personal values shape the way I show up in dialogue? How can I model transparency about my views in ways that invite others to do the same?*



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