THE MILL INSTITUTE GLOSSARY

Introduction
The Mill Institute Glossary comprises key terms we use frequently in our framework and accompanying materials. We acknowledge that others may use these words differently. This glossary is not an attempt to create a definitive set of definitions; rather, we aim to make our own thinking explicit to our community of educators. Each entry includes a definition and an explanation in context to better represent how we use these terms and concepts.

A Note Regarding Certainty and Confidence
The concepts of certainty and confidence that run throughout this glossary are largely informed by the work of Ilana Redstone, most notably in *The Certainty Trap*. Click here to learn more about Ilana's work.

Suggestions
We have established this glossary as a living, breathing document, and we invite you to send us ideas for additional words or terms that may belong here. We also accept suggestions for modifying our definitions. As this glossary evolves, we welcome the opportunity to improve or clarify our ideas. Please send your ideas to mill@uaustin.org.

Assumption: *An idea, conclusion or association thought to be true regardless of evidence or proof.*

In Context: When a person is certain of something, they will make associations with that idea without conducting any research to see if that association is correct. Sample assumption: "Chester is unemployed; therefore, Chester is lazy." They assume unemployment implies laziness without knowing the precise reason Chester is unemployed.

Belief: *An idea or understanding one holds to be true. A person may have certainty or confidence in their beliefs.* (see *Certainty, Confidence)*

In Context: Depending on how this term is used, belief may imply a certainty, a conviction in something, or an opinion.

Certainty: *The conviction that a belief, value, or principle is 100% true. It leads to the idea that our claim requires no further investigation and that the assumption that got us there doesn't need to be stated explicitly. (*see *Confidence, Moving from Certainty to Confidence)*

In Context: A person who is certain will be unable or unwilling to entertain any ideas that conflict with their own. This often goes hand in hand with making assumptions about their opponent's motives or intent. (see *Assumption*)

Clarity: *1. Additional, more precise understanding of a topic, issue, or perspective; 2. A more generous or compassionate understanding of another person's perspective.*

In Context: One purpose of open dialogue is to achieve greater clarity of thought. Hearing other points of view and being open to new information allows for greater depth of understanding and/or generation of more knowledge (see *Idea Lab)*. This new understanding may be informational (i.e. a more precise grasp of general knowledge) or relational (i.e. gaining insight into another person's point of view on a given topic). Greater clarity about another person's views does not imply agreement with those views. It is also not evidence of getting closer to an objective truth beyond a deeper understanding of how the other person sees the world.

Confidence: *The level of "sureness" a person has that their belief is accurate or right. On the number line from 0 to 1, where certainty lies at each endpoint, confidence occupies all the space in between. Confidence allows for the possibility, even if small, that what you think you know could change. (*see *Certainty, Moving from Certainty to Confidence)*

In Context: A person who is confident, rather than certain, understands that there's a chance they might be wrong or that information could come to light tomorrow that changes what they think they know today.

Consensus: *Widespread agreement and/or the absence of active disagreement.*

In Context: When a group reaches consensus, most or all will agree on an opinion, an idea or a plan of action. Members of a group may have to convince each other or compromise to reach consensus.

Controversial: *Likely to bring about strong emotions or reactions, disagreement, opposition, or debate; contentious; sensitive*.

In Context: In the current climate, many people find controversial topics difficult to discuss, leading to an unwillingness to exchange ideas on one hand and increased polarization on the other hand. Some examples of controversial topics include limits on free speech, abortion rights, policy surrounding immigration, or the government's role in a capitalist democracy.

Depersonalize Ideas: "*Try on" perspectives and untangle ideas from identity; to move away from overidentifying with a position, idea, or issue*. (see *Overidentification*)

In Context: There are two types of overidentification–feeling that our identity must define our views and feeling that our views must define our identity. Depersonalizing Ideas is an attempt to move away from both of these stances to engage in open inquiry. This may be accomplished by "trying on" or playing with ideas we don't automatically identify with and talking about ideas instead of the people who put them forward.

Dialogue: *A form of conversation or discussion in which people share ideas and viewpoints. (Note: A dialogue is not a debate or argument.)*

In Context: Dialogue is not about consensus, agreement, or disagreement. Instead, the goals of dialogue include but are not limited to: developing a fuller understanding of a given topic or perspective; addressing problems, issues, or conflicts; questioning stances and actions; processing new information; focusing one's thoughts and views; engaging in critical thinking and analysis.

Echo Chamber*: *A place where everyone shares the same worldview and opposing perspectives are unwelcome*.

In Context: The goal of an Echo Chamber is to create a sense of community or belonging by establishing an "in" group; membership to this "in" group may purposely or unwittingly reinforce a sense of moral superiority and righteousness. In an Echo Chamber, opposing ideas are unwelcome, considered dangerous or destabilizing, and are likely to be shut down or

removed as part of an "out" group. (see *Idea Lab*)

*_Echo Chamber_ is a term discussed by writer and social commentator Tim Urban. The following is an excerpt from the first chapter of his book *What's Our Problem? A Self-Help Book for Societies*.

> *"While Idea Labs are cultures of critical thinking and debate, Echo Chambers are cultures of groupthink and conformity. Because while Idea Labs are devoted to a* kind of thinking*, Echo chambers are devoted to a* set of beliefs *the culture deems to be sacred.*
>
> *A Culture that treats ideas like sacred objects incentivizes entirely different behavior than the Idea Lab. In an Echo CHamber, falling in line with the rest of the group is socially rewarded. It's a common activity to talk about how obviously correct the sacred ideas are–it's how you express your allegiance to the community and prove your own intellectual and moral worth."*

Generalize: *To make a sweeping statement in which an idea applies broadly to all instances or is true in all cases.*

In Context: Generalizations make assumptions about a larger truth without taking into account evidence to the contrary. Some examples may include, "All higher education institutions promote liberal ideals," or "America has given up on democracy."

Idea Lab*: *A place in which people may generate good thinking, develop new ideas and deepen understanding.*

In Context: In an Idea Lab, people are interested in figuring things out together, so multiple viewpoints are welcome and disagreement is valued. Examples of an Idea Lab may include an engineering team, a design shop, a think tank, or even a highly functioning classroom. (see *Echo Chamber*)

*_Idea Lab_ is a term used by writer and social commentator Tim Urban. The following is an excerpt from the first chapter of his book *What's Our Problem? A Self-Help Book for Societies*.

> *"People in an Idea Lab see one another as experimenters and their ideas as experiments. Idea Labs value independent thinking and viewpoint diversity. This combination leads to the richest and most interesting conversations and maximizes the scope of group discussions.*

> *Idea Labs place a high regard on humility, and saying "I don't know" usually wins trust and respect. When someone who often says "I don't know" does express conviction about a viewpoint, it really means something, and others will take it to heart without too much skepticism needed—which saves the listener time and effort. Likewise, unearned conviction is a major no-no in an Idea Lab. So someone with a reputation for bias or arrogance or dishonesty will be met with a high degree of skepticism, no matter how much conviction they express.*
>
> *Idea Labs also love arguments. Ideas in an Idea Lab are treated like hypotheses, which means people are always looking for opportunities to test what they've been thinking about. Idea Labs are the perfect boxing ring for that testing."*

Ideological Commitment: *Unwavering loyalty to an ideology or belief.*

In Context: A person who has made ideological commitments has subscribed to a set of beliefs about a particular issue. This may lead to them failing to seek out nuance or evidence to the contrary within the context of those beliefs. For example, someone who is ideologically committed to affirmative action may fail to seek out data that critiques it or someone who is ideologically committed to gun ownership may ignore data on increased shooting deaths.

Intellectual Humility: *A willingness to acknowledge one's intellectual limitations, be open to new ideas, and accept that one's beliefs or knowledge may be incomplete.*

In Context: A person with intellectual humility recognizes the possibility of being wrong, sees how having their errors corrected (or views challenged) can lead to deeper learning and is therefore willing to receive feedback and criticism.

Intellectual Risk: *When a person feels confident voicing a question, opinion, or challenge to another person's idea or position.* (see *Psychological Safety*)

In Context: To discuss controversial issues and work collaboratively, people must feel comfortable asking questions, disagreeing with each other, and making mistakes. People who take intellectual risks are able to refine their thoughts, correct their misconceptions, and allow their thinking to evolve. Intellectual risk-taking results in a more informed citizenry that is

better able to collaboratively solve problems and contribute to a functional democracy.

Live in the "Do-Over": *When people are given a chance to restate what they mean; a commitment to multiple conversations.*

In Context: "Living in the do-over" is an approach in which people give themselves and others space to change their mind, reform opinions, and communicate any new or evolved understandings without judgment. This approach encourages people to commit to multiple conversations about the topic from the start, taking the pressure off of having to be immediately understood by others.

Moving from Certainty to Confidence: *The process in which a person adjusts a belief they once felt certain about to allow even a slight possibility of another perspective.*

In Context: Ilana Redstone, sociology professor and co-founder of the Mill Institute, explains *Certainty* and *Confidence* as follows:

> *"A person who is certain is often unable or unwilling to entertain ideas that conflict with their own. This sense of certainty often leads to assumptions about the motives or intent of someone who disagrees. One of the solutions to the problem of certainty is to think of our knowledge as provisional, rather than definitive. This means there's always a chance either that you're wrong or that new information could appear tomorrow that changes everything you think you know today. If you imagine a scale that ranges from 0 to 1, where 0 and 1 occupy positions of certainty, our confidence in what we know about the world belongs in the space in between.*
>
> *Confidence is not the same as certainty. A person who is confident, rather than certain, understands that there's a chance they might be wrong or that information could come to light tomorrow that changes what they think they know today. When thinking of the number line from 0 to 1, confidence means that, even at the position of 0.99, there is openness to alternative ideas or explanations. Even that tiny sliver of possibility can shift a person away from the kinds of assumptions often made by someone who feels certain."*

Open Inquiry: *A culture that allows for people to openly and honestly share their thoughts, explore evidence, and adjust their thinking on the basis of competing or conflicting information.*

In Context: An educational culture that encourages open inquiry will promote dialogue and discussion while fostering an atmosphere in which

students may explore their questions, opinions, and views on a range of topics. Open inquiry is not a synonym for relativism, where all ideas are equally valid. Rather it is a culture that allows for people to openly and honestly share their thoughts, explore evidence, and adjust their thinking on the basis of competing or conflicting information.

Overidentification: *Feeling that our identity must define our views; feeling that our views must define our identity.* (see *Depersonalize Ideas*)

In Context: Ellie Avishai, Co-Founder and Executive Director of The Mill Institute, explains *Overidentification* in her article *"Four 'Circuit Breakers' That Disrupt Student Inquiry"* :

> *"Overidentification comes in at least two forms. One is the idea that who we are determines which ideas we can consider or espouse.*
>
> *This doesn't mean that identity is irrelevant. My view about policing, for example, is inevitably informed by the fact that I grew up in a middle-class suburb and rarely interacted with police in any negative way. Failing to recognize that my experiences affect my perception of policing would be both naive and limiting. Students should be able to do this kind of reflection.*
>
> *Overidentifying, however, goes further than this. When we do this, we behave as though our identities not only shape our thinking, but they determine which ideas we have sufficient standing to consider. In the case of policing, this might mean that because I am white, I have no standing or right to form an opinion about policing policy in communities of color.*
>
> *A second form of over-identification is when people start to blend their opinions with their sense of who they are. For instance, "I am someone who supports policing" or "My belief about policing is part of what makes me me." While our views clearly contribute to our overall sense of self, overidentification with them limits our ability to tolerate disagreement. When there's no line between what we believe and who we are, a criticism of the idea can feel indistinguishable from a personal attack."*

Oversimplification: *When a complex idea is reduced to broad or generalized statements that often result in a misunderstanding of the original concept in a way that lacks nuance and minimizes complexity.*

In Context: An example of oversimplified language regarding the topic of Free Speech may sound something like "Democrats are against free speech and Republicans champion free speech." Oversimplified language often falls into binaries of "for/against" or "good/bad," reducing a complex topic like Free Speech to pithy stances that limit opportunities for deeper understanding or open dialogue.

Polarization: *When people with strong convictions identify with opposing views and as a result, divide themselves into separate groups. In her article "The Certainty Trap," Ilana Redstone describes polarization as, "A state in which people adopt increasingly more extreme positions; the growing tendency to express disdain not just for the position one doesn't agree with, but for the moral character of the person who holds it; the exasperation people feel communicating across divides about difficult social problems; a lack of ideological diversity."*

In Context: In a climate of polarization, people hold strong, often extreme opinions. They will agree or disagree with little to no possibility of compromising, shifting their views, or meeting anywhere in the middle.

Precision: *Accurate, clearly defined, carefully constructed to reflect complexity of thought or research.*

In Context: A precise explanation will not include vague generalizations or sweeping statements; instead, it will make clear distinctions between various trains of thought by explaining the nuances and details that reflect multiple layers of depth and meaning in one's thinking and ideas.

Psychological Safety: *Scholar Amy Edmondson defines psychological safety as, "a belief that one will not be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, or mistakes, and that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking." Psychological safety allows people to speak and share their thoughts with the knowledge that, while not safe from others challenging their views, they are safe from personal attack. (see Intellectual Risk)*

In Context: To discuss contentious topics and continually learn from and about others, people must have permission to take intellectual risks to voice their thoughts and ask questions. According to Edmondson, psychological safety is the cornerstone of innovation because it enables the

expression of diverse viewpoints, takes advantage of multiple perspectives, and is a key to building a successful team. (see *Safe Space)*

Safe Space: *A space in which everyone agrees to minimize the chance that any individual will face an idea, comment, or task that challenges them in a way that causes any discomfort.*

In Context: To create a safe space, everyone commits to striking down any statement that might negatively impact another, the result of which may be self-censorship for the sake of maintaining that commitment. The concept of a safe space often lies in opposition to the concept of psychological safety; a safe space promotes "protection from" others rather than "permission to" take intellectual risks. (see *Psychological Safety)*

Settled Thinking: *Refers to the way we treat our knowledge as definitive, rather than provisional. We treat open questions (questions that actually have no clear answer because they are complex or messy) as though the answers are known. Also refers to our tendency to treat solutions as so obvious they don't need to be stated explicitly or entirely without downsides worth considering or worrying about.* (See *Certainty*)

In Context: When our thinking is settled, we stop asking questions, we stop feeling curious, and we dismiss or even demonize people who disagree with us. An example of settled thinking may sound like, "Everybody knows that immigration is good for the economy and anyone who doubts that is just saying so to hide their xenophobia and racism."

Viewpoint Diversity: 1. *The presence of different perspectives; 2. Understanding that all people have unique experiences and see things differently; 3. The end result of a commitment to moving from certainty towards confidence, seeking clarity, and engaging in open inquiry.*

In Context: When a culture or discussion encourages viewpoint diversity, people feel safe sharing and hearing about multiple perspectives and experiences, including ones that are different from their own. Viewpoint diversity encourages people to consider other points of view with the aim of learning from each other to ultimately gain more clarity around an issue. (see *Clarity*)