Engagement Guide:
How to prepare for productive conversations

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

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This is a guide for conducting and preparing for productive conversations, compiled by staff members from the Office for Equity and Diversity, the Student Conflict Resolution Center, Multicultural Student Engagement, and the Office for Student Affairs at the University of Minnesota Twin Cities. We encourage students, faculty, staff, and community members to review this resource for strategies and techniques for navigating challenging conversations and situations.

Reflect

Being a student at a public, land-grant university means that you enjoy your First Amendment rights to freedom of speech. Exercising that right in an educational community where you have come to learn with and support the learning of others requires reflection, preparation, and practice.

“Think before you speak,” is a common refrain in many cultures. Here, we encourage you to reflect on your communication and listening skills and learning priorities in order to support your expressive development as well as that of other community members on our campus.

Lara Schwartz developed the following list of questions for college students and college community members to consider with respect to freedom of expression on campus. She writes, “Being the architect of your voice means actively deciding how best to communicate in service to your goals and values; taking responsibility for your choices as a member of the university community; pushing yourself to engage in rigorous inquiry; and challenging yourself to make the most of your education (194).” These questions center two sets of concerns, liberty and community, that is, “What do you want for yourself?” and “What will you ask of yourself?”

1. What do you want for yourself?

- What is the purpose of college?
- Do you have goals for personal growth? Service? Interpersonal relationships? Career?
- Who do you want to make proud?
- How do you want to be seen in the college community?
- What subjects excite you?
- What kinds of questions, books, works of art, and experiences bring you joy?

2. Values about classroom discussion

- Do you thrive on dialogue, debate, or discussion? See the Dialogue & Community Agreements section for definitions and distinctions.
- Do you prefer to listen, contribute, or a combination?
- When others are speaking, do you want to jump in and ask questions or add your thoughts?

3. Your actions in "hot" moments

- Do you tend to seek out conflicts? Avoid them?
- Do you join in when other people disagree—in person or online? When and why?
- Do you tend to "pile on" when someone expresses an unpopular view?
- Do you ever regret engaging in disagreement?
- Do you ever regret not getting involved?

4. How do you respond to constructive feedback?

- Are you ever defensive?
- Is it hard to show gratitude for feedback?
- Do you avoid communicating (or performing, writing, or creating art) to avoid getting feedback?
- What kind of feedback do you prefer?
- What kind of response to your communication will likely make you quit or avoid future engagement?

5. Self and community before and in college

- What role, if any, does your identity as a (select a part of your identity that feels relevant here) play in how you engage in discussion, expression, or disagreement?
- Have you lived or attended school in a community with a wide range of religious, political, ideological, demographic, or economic differences?
- Do you have friends or family members with whom you disagree about matters that are very important to you?
- Do you have experience being an outlier in high school or your home community? For example, have you been a member of a minoritized demographic group, or have you been the only person of your gender or race in an activity or club?
- What characteristics or experiences do you share with most students in your college (for example, coming from in-state, speaking English as your first language)?

- What characteristics or experiences do you have that make you more of an outlier at college (for example, being a nontraditional student, being a parent, or being from an underrepresented demographic group)?
- Have you engaged in activities where you've worked on your skills at listening and communicating across difference (for example, Girls or Boys State programs, debate, exchange programs, camps, friends from other schools, moving from one community to another)?
- Overall, how does your relationship with your college community compare with your relationship with your high school or home community?
- Are you in a position with the mental and emotional capacity to engage in challenging conversations and dialogue?

6. How comfortable are you with vulnerability?

- Do you find it hard to learn something new in front of others?
- Has concern about how you will be perceived ever discouraged you from learning something new (such as a new language, sport, or instrument)?
- Is it hard for you to admit when you don't know something?

7. What are your values about education?

- Do you like to take risks?
- Are you focused on achievement?
- Do you like trying things you find very difficult?
- Do you love learning? Under what circumstances have you loved learning something?
- Do you learn best by reading? Having conversations? Practice?
- How do you feel about rules? Do you see yourself as a rule follower?

8. How do you see fellow students?

- Are they collaborators? Competitors?
- Do you think students at your university are better prepared than you? Less prepared? About the same?
- Do you believe your fellow students share your goals and values for attending college?
- Do you feel you understand them?
- What goals and values do you believe you will share in common with them?

9. How do you handle challenging material?

- Do you find any subject matter hard to discuss?
- Do you feel uncomfortable around people expressing emotion? Do you feel uncomfortable showing emotion around others?
- Have you been told you're too sensitive? What do you think of that?
- Do you find yourself thinking other people are being too sensitive? If you have told someone they are being sensitive, how did that go?

10. Goals

- What would you most like to work on as a listener, communicator, and student?
- What action items do you plan to take this semester to make that happen?

- What is one thing you want to learn more about?
- What will excite you and motivate you most as you pursue your education?
- How can you protect the joy and excitement you feel about the things that motivate you?

Source: *Lara Schwartz, Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in Classrooms and Life (Princeton University Press, 2024).*

Prepare

For learners making the transition from high school or from the world of work to our university community, the legal and social norms with respect to freedom of expression in a public land grant university can be very different. In the K-12 education system, learners experience considerable restrictions on their speech and regular consequences from teachers and administrators when those restrictions are breached. Likewise, in the world of work, employers can set clear limits on your freedom of expression, and a failure to comply can lead to loss of employment.

Higher education is also distinct in creating a learning environment that brings together learners from across our diverse local, national, and global communities to learn together in the classroom; in our residential communities; in student organizations, groups, and government; and with guest speakers, to name a few.

Learning and helping to co-create norms with respect to freedom of expression are both part of your educational journey. These norms will likely differ as you move across campus from your residential communities to your classrooms and labs to your employment to the student and university communities you engage with.

As you learn and engage with the stated and unstated expressive norms across our campus, we encourage you to consider how behaviors, contexts, identity, and social capital impact and intersect with freedom of expression.

Behavior encompasses what we say, what our non-verbal cues communicate, and our actions. Here's how each aspect contributes to our overall behavior:

1. **Verbal Communication:** What we say is a direct expression of our thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Verbal communication includes spoken words, tone of voice, and language choices. It's crucial because it conveys explicit messages and provides information about our beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives.
2. **Nonverbal Communication:** Nonverbal cues include facial expressions, body language, gestures, eye contact, posture, and even the use of personal space. Nonverbal communication often reveals underlying emotions, attitudes, and intentions that may not be expressed verbally. It can significantly impact how our messages are perceived and interpreted by others.
3. **Actions:** Our actions are observable behaviors that reflect our intentions and values. Some people say actions speak louder than words, and they often have a more significant impact on others than verbal or non-verbal cues alone. Our behavior shapes our relationships, influences our environment, and affects outcomes in various situations.

The alignment or discrepancy between what we say, what our non-verbals show, and our actions can significantly impact how others perceive and understand our behavior. Consistency among

these elements builds trust, credibility, and authenticity in our interactions. Conversely, inconsistency or incongruence may lead to miscommunication and undermine clarity and trust.

Understanding the importance of verbal and non-verbal communication and the impact of our actions is essential for effective interpersonal relationships, successful collaboration, and overall social competence. By paying attention to what we say, how we say it, and what our actions convey, we can enhance our ability to communicate effectively, build meaningful connections, and increase the chance of achieving our desired outcomes in various contexts.

Context plays a crucial role in shaping communication and behavior. Here's how various aspects of context influence interactions:

1. **Individual Backgrounds:** Each person brings their unique experiences, beliefs, values, and perspectives to the table. These backgrounds influence how they interpret information, perceive others, and communicate their thoughts and feelings. Understanding the backgrounds of individuals involved in a conversation helps to contextualize their responses and behaviors.
2. **Community Dynamics:** The community or group individuals belong to also impacts communication. Group norms, cultural practices, and social dynamics influence how people interact with each other and express themselves. Awareness of the community context helps individuals navigate social expectations and communicate effectively.
3. **Current Events:** What's happening in the world during the conversation can significantly influence discussions and interactions. Current events shape people's priorities, concerns, and emotions, which may affect a conversation's tone, content, and direction. Awareness of relevant current events allows individuals to contextualize discussions and respond empathetically to the concerns of others.

By considering these contextual factors, individuals can better understand the motivations and perspectives of others, adapt their communication style to fit the situation, and foster more meaningful and productive interactions. Additionally, recognizing context's influence helps promote inclusivity, empathy, and cultural sensitivity in communication, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of diverse perspectives.

Identity and social capital are deeply intertwined with power and privilege, and both can significantly impact how individuals are perceived and treated in conversations and broader social contexts.

1. **Identity** encompasses various aspects of an individual's self-conception, including but not limited to race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religion, and ability. These aspects shape a person's experiences, perspectives, and societal opportunities. Likewise, a person's racial or ethnic identity can influence how they are perceived, the opportunities available to them, and the biases they may face.
2. **Social Capital** refers to the resources, connections, and advantages individuals gain from their social networks and relationships. It encompasses tangible resources (such as access to information, job opportunities, and financial support) and intangible benefits (such as trust, reciprocity, and social support). Social capital is often unequally distributed, with certain groups having greater access to networks and resources than others.
3. **Power and Privilege** refer to the advantages and influence specific individuals or groups hold in society, often based on their identity or social position. These advantages can manifest in various

forms, including economic wealth, political influence, social status, and cultural capital. Power and privilege shape the dynamics of interactions, determining who has the authority to speak, whose perspectives are valued, and whose interests are prioritized.

When entering a conversation, individuals' identities, social capital, power, and privilege impact how they are perceived by others and the expectations placed upon them. Those with greater social capital, power, and privilege may be given more authority and credibility in conversations, while those with marginalized identities may face greater scrutiny or skepticism.

Moreover, power dynamics and social hierarchies often influence the standards to which individuals are held in conversations. Those with more privilege may be held to lower standards or granted more leeway in their behavior, while those with less privilege may face higher expectations or harsher judgments.

Recognizing the role of power and privilege in conversations is essential for promoting equity and inclusion concerning freedom of expression. It requires acknowledging and challenging biases, amplifying marginalized voices, and creating spaces where all individuals can participate fully and authentically, regardless of their identity or social capital.

Practice

Inquiry is at the heart of higher education. Inquiry supports freedom of expression when it encourages learners to ask difficult questions, explore complex issues, question our own preferred opinions and our community's prevailing ideas and values, engage with ways of knowing that help us better understand, differentiate between what we can and can not know with certainty, and experience curious uncertainty as a critical part of learning and being.

Practicing Inquiry might look like asking yourself the following questions:

- What would I need to know to understand this issue better?
- Where would I draw the line?
- What values or standards might be at play?
- How might different disciplines address this issue? How do these disciplines inform my perspective?

Practicing Inquiry might look like avoiding the following types of questions:

- Questions that have no basis in fact
- Questions that attempt to set a trap
- Questions that create false binaries

Curiosity is critical to inquiry. It is the desire to understand something we do not fully comprehend better. In higher education, curiosity drives most of the research on campus and motivates many students in their course selection and degree programs. Curiosity can also support freedom of expression.

Practicing Curiosity might look like:

- Engaging with your instructors and colleagues about what they are curious about

- Improving your information literacy and acquiring information from diverse, credible sources

Practicing Curiosity might look like avoiding:

- The temptation to evade diverse sources of information and perspectives that disturb your understanding or sense of comprehension
- Social, political, and media siloing

Humility is critical to curiosity and inquiry. Expressing curiosity and adopting an inquiry-based mindset encourages learners to be comfortable with "not knowing."

Practicing Humility might look like:

- Recognizing the limits of your expertise and leaning into curiosity
- Getting comfortable saying "I don't know" or feeling uncomfortable and still saying "I don't know."
- Questioning your preferred opinions and your community's prevailing ideas and values

Practicing Humility might look like avoiding:

- Setting unreasonable expectations about what you should know.
- Shaming or canceling others for not knowing.
- Self-reflection and the interrogation of your and your community's prevailing views, opinions, and beliefs.

Source: *Lara Schwartz, Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in Classrooms and Life (Princeton University Press, 2024).*

Dialogue & Community Agreements

Dialogue, debate, and discussion are routine and regular speech practices in college. Community agreements allow community members to understand better the norms, practices, and expectations of these expressive practices.

The rules of debate differ, but generally speaking, debate is an expressive practice that usually involves opposing positions that strive to win an argument by proving their opponent wrong and demonstrating that their position is (more) correct. Debate is useful for teaching critical thinking and analysis, logical argumentation, evidential reasoning, and academic and persuasive writing.

Discussion is a regular form of classroom engagement and learning. Discussions can serve many purposes. Frequently, they are used to build a sense of shared learning in a community to clarify ideas, improve comprehension, and practice curiosity and inquiry around a set of shared questions. Discussion is useful for teaching problem-solving, consensus building, how to exchange information and explore ideas, and how to weigh different perspectives and ideas.

Dialogue is a collaborative process where hearing and sharing diverse perspectives and increasing mutual understanding with respect to our diverse perspectives is the primary goal. Dialogue is useful for teaching self-awareness, social-awareness, and relationality. Self-awareness encourages us to recognize our own perspectives and values and how they influence our views. Social

awareness allows us to recognize how others around us are doing the same and supports the development of empathy.

Community Agreements are a mechanism for being as transparent as possible about the norms and rules of a shared space. Different from a simple list of rules, members of the community generally participate in the construction of the agreements, or collective vision, for how the community will learn together, be in relationship with each other, be accountable for themselves and to each other, and repair breaches.

Sources:

- EP_Classroom_Exercise_Dialogue_Discussion_Debate.pdf
- Creating Community Agreements with Your Students | Center for Teaching & Learning
- Developing Community Agreements — National Equity Project

Challenging Conversations

When faced with challenging conversations, it is important to consider how you will approach them. After you have taken time to reflect on the situation at hand and your goals in engaging, consider what you will need to successfully navigate this conversation.

Environment

- Where is this conversation taking place?
    - If you consider holding a challenging conversation in a location related to your conflict, will that cause more agitation? Consider a neutral location that does not benefit or harm one participant.
    - Consider the space's constraints. Does it fit everyone? Is it private? Does it accommodate everyone?

Communication

- Determine how best to communicate to the other participants that you would like to engage in a difficult conversation (e.g., text or in person).
- Similarly, consider how the place of your conversation will determine how you communicate. Will you need to hold it virtually or face to face?
    - While technology makes it much easier for many people to communicate, it can be challenging to understand each other’s tone if you are only engaging over text, potentially exacerbating your conflict.

Reflect, Repair, and Care

- Prepare your important talking points in advance. Identify what is important for you to get across and what you would like to focus on.
    - This also means that you should actively listen to whoever you are speaking with. Challenging conversations are not one-sided, and to find resolution, everyone will need to be heard.
- If you anticipate becoming agitated in your conversation, plan ahead with strategies that will center you and allow you to engage with a level head, for example:

    - Deep breaths
    - Counting
    - Taking a break to get up and walk around
- Prepare to compromise. It is not easy to find a middle ground when each party is feeling frustrated; however, it is necessary to understand where you can each give and take.
- Take breaks or stop the conversation as needed. When we feel elevated, it can be difficult to walk away. However, this is sometimes exactly what needs to happen to move forward. Allow everyone to step back, reflect on the conversation, and return when you have calmed down.

Repair

Words and expressive acts are powerful tools for conveying ideas. However, regardless of the animating intention, words and expressive acts can also be harmful. When our expressive acts cause harm, we can engage in deep listening and work to understand the harm, offer a sincere apology, be accountable for our actions, and avoid similar harm.

Mia Mingus has created an excellent resource, The Four Parts of Accountability & How To Give A Genuine Apology | Leaving Evidence, which describes a process in four stages:

1. **Self-Reflection:** A personal awareness of and willingness to be accountable for the impacts of your actions.
2. **Apologizing:** An opportunity to acknowledge your responsibility for the hurt/harm, practice vulnerability, and begin rebuilding trust.
3. **Repair:** A process, sometimes quite lengthy depending on the breach, where you rebuild trust with the impacted party.
4. **Behavior Change:** A commitment to change the patterns of behavior that created the original harm. As with Repair, Behavior Change can take time and might be most achievable with support from trusted community members.

Source: The Four Parts of Accountability & How To Give A Genuine Apology | Leaving Evidence

Encourage

Resources that strive to support purposeful, meaningful, and constructive communication abound. We encourage you to explore these and share your feedback about which you have found most helpful.

University of Minnesota - Twin Cities Resources

- Basics for Common University-Based Problems (Student Conflict Resolution Center)
- Strategies to Support Challenging Conversations in the Classroom (Center for Educational Innovation)
- Engaging Conflict to Promote an Inclusive Community (CLA Call-In)
- Navigating Challenging Conversations (CLA Call-In)
- Classroom Conversations: Faculty Reflections on Fostering Political Discourse (CEI, CCEL, OED)
- Classroom Conversations: Student Reflections on Engaging in Political Discourse (CEI, CCEL, OED)

External Resources

- Civil Discourse in the Classroom: American Association of University Professors guide to building learning communities that support vigorous, respectful discourse.
- Bridging Differences Playbook (Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley): This resource provides research-based strategies to promote dialogue and understanding.
- Fostering Civil Discourse: How Do We Talk About Issues That Matter? This resource provides ideas and tools to help educators prepare students for civil discourse.
- Fostering Civil Discourse (Institute for Democracy & Higher Education, Tufts University): This is a facilitator training workshop guide for training others to facilitate groups with diverse perspectives, social identities, and lived experiences.
- Maintaining Campus Community during the 2024 Election (Constructive Dialogue Institute)
- Essential Partners Dialogue Guides and Resources (Essential Partners)

Notes