



Building the Base:
Principles of Productive Discourse



# Navigating Both Challenging & Essential Conversations in Academic Spaces: Tools for Inclusive Dialogue

This series equips faculty with tools to navigate challenging conversations—balancing shared values, respectful disagreement, and empathy—to create more open, thoughtful, and supportive learning environments.

# September 10, 8:30am-10:00am CDT (virtual): C&S

Building the Base: Principles of Productive Discourse

# October 21, 8:30am-10:00am CDT (in-person): UIUC Faculty Institute Fellows

Building the Skill: Collaborative Problem Solving Across Difference

#### March 6, 9am-3pm (in-person): C&S

Building Impact: Transforming Dialogue to Action

# April 7, 8:30am-10:00am CDT (virtual): C&S

Building Connections: Virtual Engagement and Inclusive Collaboration



### Building the Base: Principles of Productive Discourse

#### **Learning Outcomes**

- Explore/review ways of building trust for difficult conversations
- Understand principles of productive discourse/dialogue across difference
- Identify individual communication styles and biases (and their impact on productive discourse)
- Practice listening and communication techniques
- Discuss applications to current role



Formerly
The Woodrow Wilson National
Fellowship Foundation



75+ years

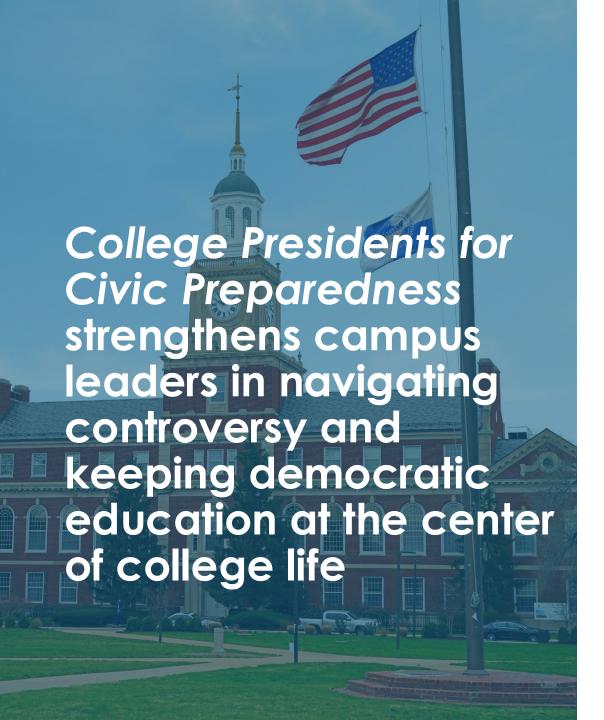
of **proven experience** investing in next-generation talent and ideas

27K

Fellows across education, business, philanthropy, community institutions, media, and government 18

private and public sector leaders on the board of trustees





In the face of a polarized public and eroding trust in higher education, our consortium empowers presidents with **indispensable tools**, **unwavering civic commitments**, and a **supportive network** dedicated to revitalizing confidence in our civic mission.

Led by a diverse coalition of esteemed institutions and presidents

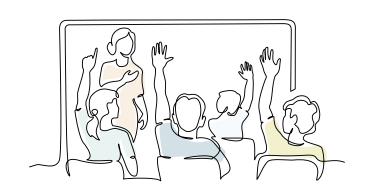
A catalog of civic initiatives—shaped by top practitioners and co-crafted with:

- o Presidents
- Faculty
- o Staff
- > Students



#### The Civic Commitments

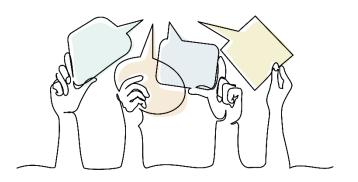
Presidents joining College Presidents for Civic Preparedness make the following civic commitments to our students, our academic communities, and the democratic society we serve.







We will protect and defend free inquiry.



We will prepare our students for a vibrant, diverse, and contentious society.



The coalition of College Presidents has grown to 125 campuses.

Scan the QR code to see all member presidents.

### **Listening for Deep Details**

Effective listening builds trust and relationship, foundational to productive dialogue.



#### Deep details listening exercise

- In pairs, assign one listener and one speaker.
- For 1 minute, the speaker describes their dream vacation—focusing on details and feelings, not places.
- Listener then summarizes speaker's description and suggests a real-world match.
- Switch and repeat.



# **Ways of Operating**

- Embrace non-closure: With limited time together, accept that conversations may not end in resolution.
- Listen to understand: Listen to understand the other's perspective, not to defend your point of view.
- Maintain confidentiality: Outside the group, you may discuss the content of what was said, not who said what.
- **Personal egress**: When your "growing edge" is at its max, take time to step away and recalibrate.

- **Posture openness**: Approach dialogue with humility, curiosity, and willingness to learn.
- Respond rather than react: Pause before speaking, remember to T.H.I.N.K. (Is what I'm saying Thoughtful, Honest, Interested, Necessary, and Kind?)
- Assume best intent: We are all learning. Begin with the belief that others' contributions come from a sincere place.



## Language



Productive conversations (often referred to as civil discourse) involve respectful dialogue on divisive issues such as economic security, climate change, global conflicts, identity, and reproductive rights.



# What is a characteristic of productive conversations?



When confronted with a divisive or difficult topic in the classroom, which approach do you most often take?





Debate	Dialogue
The goal is to "win" the argument by affirming one's own views and discrediting other views	The goal is to understand different perspectives and learn about other views
People listen to others to find flaws in their arguments	People listen to others to understand how their experiences shape their beliefs
People critique the experiences of others as distorted or invalid	People accept the experiences of others as real and valid
People speak based on assumptions made about other's positions and motivations	People speak primarily from their own understanding and experience
People opposed each other and attempt to prove each other wrong	People work together toward common understanding



## Many Frames for Civil Discourse



### Values-Based Leadership

Communicating authentically and transparently, guided by core values like integrity, respect, and fairness.

- Align words and actions with institutional & personal values
- Foster trust through honesty and empathy
- Maintain clarity and accountability

#### Why It Matters:

- Builds credibility with students and colleagues
- Strengthens the campus culture for productive dialogue

Who am !?

What do I stand for?

How do I ensure my leadership reflects stated commitments?





# **REFLECTION**

# ABCs of Productive Conversations



Barriers/Challenges

Opportunities/ Excitement



# Communication Style Self-Assessment



# Communication Style Self-Assessment







## **CHAT CHECK-IN**

Did anything surprise you?

How do you adapt or adjust your communication style with each of these groups?

- Students
- Colleagues



## Skill Practice: Listening & Inquiry



It's a couple of weeks after October 7. A student has worn a shirt to class that has offended a group of students in your 90-minute lecture. The offense isn't being vocalized, but you notice students taking pictures and texting, which means the situation may soon travel outside your classroom walls. You aren't certain what is unfolding, as no one has said anything, but from the students' mannerisms and facial expressions, you can tell they are displeased, and from a lack of engagement in your lecture, distracted. As you ask students to find their groups and begin working on the project, the situation worsens. You witness students refusing to talk with their group mates or complete the assignment.

#### Rose—Bud—Thorn



What worked?

What didn't work?

What are you wondering about?

What resources does your university offer for this?



# Recap & Questions



# Thank you!

We look forward to seeing you again soon!





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Questions? Comments?

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Meet the needs of the participants

Promote understanding and empathy

Both participants feel respected throughout the conversation and after.

difficult

Improve the state of understanding

Conversations where the goal is not to convince but to understand.

Respectful

honest





Perspective taking

Respectful

Allowing everyone to be heard, looking for common ground

Action plan at the end

where individuals use their voice to share ideas respectfully Calm

When people feel heard and understood, even if the issue is not yet fully resolved.

Both sides feel heard and valued





both or all parties walk away feeling like they've learned something or they've been heard

Honesty

The one where there is active listening and everyone has a chance to speak up.

Respectful exchange of perspectives

Productive conversations help get things done

When two individuals listen and try to understand each other's perspectives or points of view

open communication

Mutual respect No judgment Agree to disagree



Ones where both individuals are able to share their honest perspective and both parties feel understood

Increased understanding

Listening to each other to understand and not necessarily agree

Allowing everyone to be heard

where people feel seen

Engaged, respectful conversations where change in thinking is likely to occur

Expanding your undersranding (rather than trying to change someone's mind)

Conversations that start and end with a shared acknowledgement of humanity and needs.

Conversations where mutual respect is maintained via tone and words through agreements as well as disagreements.

Humility

One in which both (or more) parties come away with new or broader thinking on a subject that leads to an unexpected connection and collaboratory nature.

Recognize your opinion is subjective

When confronted with a divisive or difficult topic in the classroom, which approach do you most often take?

