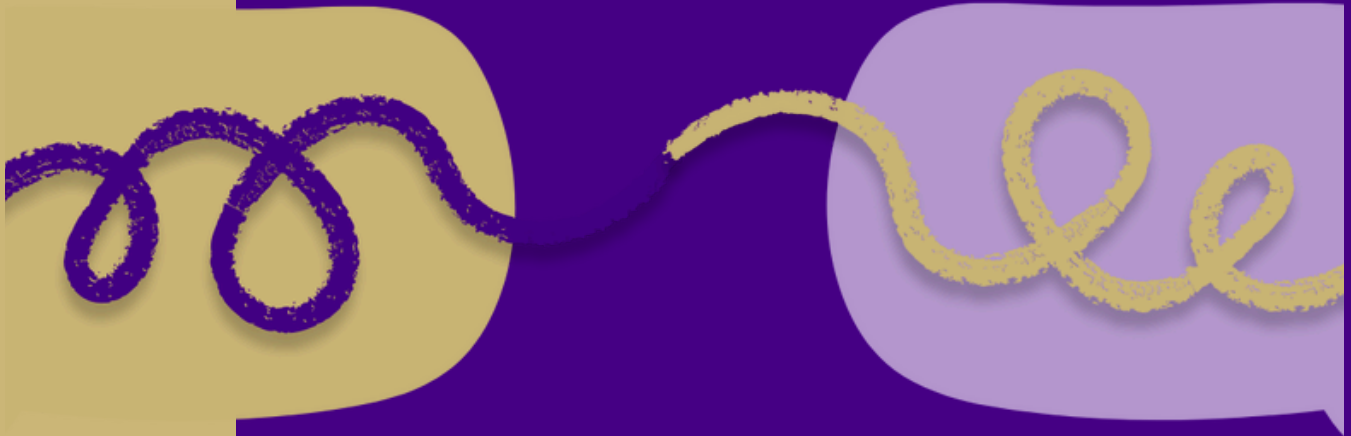


JMU MADISON CENTER FOR CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

2024 REPORT

CIVIC OUTCOMES FROM DELIBERATING ACROSS DIVIDES



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Figure 1: America in One Room Deliberation

With the trend of increased polarization and decreased deliberation across political divides, this white paper seeks to report findings from the James Madison Center for Civic Engagement Week of Deliberation: Bridging Wicked Divides initiative. Students from various political backgrounds deliberated on various public topics, including climate change, the future of the economic success of younger

generations, free speech, and immigration. These forums were facilitated by a trained peer moderator, and they hoped to have participants find common ground on the solutions to these wicked issues. Overall, results have shown that participants felt comfortable expressing their views but results also showed that there was a low level of participants that respected and found value in other's views.



INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEMS OF DIALOGUE ON CAMPUS

In today's political climate, having civil discourse with those of opposing opinions has become increasingly difficult, particularly for young people. College campuses have been the hotbed for many divides and discrimination against people of different views, causing students and faculty to ban hate speech and create safe spaces. Despite these changes however, deliberating effectively across divides has not improved, and in some cases has caused further polarization because of the lack of discussion on campus. When students cease to participate in political conversations and segregate themselves into groups where everyone shares similar views, understanding and respect for other opinions begins to disappear.

A survey conducted by the Heterodox Academy found that many students would even prefer to avoid conversations on any issue that could be controversial. It was found that college students, ages 18-24 were afraid of being canceled and their grades being negatively affected for sharing their true opinions on contentious issues.

According to the survey, students worry that criticisms of organizations like Black Lives Matter will get them labeled as 'racist', and this fear carries on into many other polarizing issues. And perhaps most famously, UVA student Emma Camp wrote an op-ed for The New York Times about the discomfort she and other students feel when discussing issues and the perception that social sanctions by peers have a real impact in stifling student speech.

To combat this issue, colleges are implementing deliberative programs and methods so that students can speak to each other across these divides. The main idea is that students are able to engage in meaningful conversation and look at how certain outcomes affect different populations, in addition to asking themselves if they are willing to compromise and live with the drawbacks of certain options. The results of deliberation on campuses show promise that it's possible to discuss divisive issues with students of a variety of political backgrounds face to face. After deliberation, students' felt that they were more comfortable speaking about politics to people they knew.



INTRODUCTION

THE PROBLEMS OF DIALOGUE ON CAMPUS

Research involving deliberation surveys showcase that students who engage in deliberation are more likely to increase their knowledge, to change their opinions on issues discussed, and to increase their levels of participation engagement. Students in a control group experienced no similar changes, suggesting that deliberation might be an effective tool for combating student apathy and disengagement. Although deliberation has produced positive outcomes within college students, the issue of group polarization gives rise to potential consequences that facilitators and researchers must consider when conducting a deliberative forum. In a deliberative forum, when partisans engaged in like-minded deliberation exercises, they not only had their ideas validated, but they also became more extreme in their respective ideologies. To keep deliberation as productive as possible, facilitators must engage students with a diverse point of view.

Individuals, whether weakly or strongly aligned, engage in interconnected networks of conversation.

Students who enter their first year of their college journey tend to foster diverse beliefs that mirror those of their past social networks. As college is a new environment for everyone with differing beliefs, social influences create a more partisan environment with time.

Deliberation has had many successful outcomes in the recent past. In 2019, the largest sample of the U.S. electorate for a deliberative polling experiment occurred called America in One Room. This forum avoided the following four words: Democrat, Republican, Trump, Obama. This tactic eliminates potential biases and drives the focus on the issue at hand, not politicians. The results of this deliberation were astonishing. Initially, researchers found extreme partisan-based polarization between Democrats and Republicans on 26 of the proposals. But after a weekend of deliberation, the two parties moved closer on 22 out of the 26 proposals and in 19 of those, movements were significant. America in One Room and countless other deliberations prove its effectiveness in decreasing polarization while also garnering positive attitudes towards other peers.

METHODOLOGY

Our target population for the purpose of this study was all interested college students who have an interest in collaborative deliberation about our chosen issues. Our recruitment methods included targeted messaging and emailing, online and in-person marketing of the event and the topics, and outreach to specific groups and organizations around campus who are interested in the topic areas. We specifically reached out to professors that teach in the specific issue areas and other student groups who are invested in the betterment of society. Our outreach extended across the James Madison University campus, and the national landscape, with

the goal of recruiting politically diverse people to create politically diverse groups, who were also interested in the specific issues. The National Week of Deliberation provides multiple opportunities for students at JMU and across the country to participate in deliberative dialogues. In 2023, 10 campuses from 10 different states joined in conversation about difficult issues. In 2024, over 100 students participated in this project.

ISSUE GUIDE: YOUTH & OPPORTUNITY

The **Youth and Opportunity** initiative by the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) is designed to help students deliberate on how to address the challenges that may hinder future generations from leading successful and economically secure lives. Options explored in this forum are

- OPTION 1: Equipping people to succeed
- OPTION 2: Give everyone a fair chance
- OPTION 3: Focus on economic security

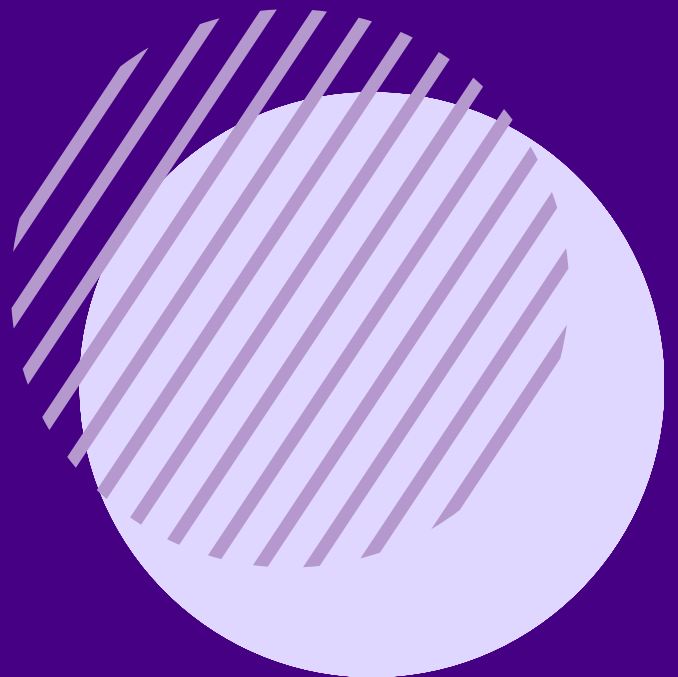


METHODOLOGY

Materials provided by the National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI) were edited to fit the program's needs, including creating shorter versions of the issue guides and adding updated statistics, options and actions. The issue guides included background information on the issue, three potential values-based options for action, potential trade-offs and drawbacks people or campuses may face when acting, and questions for facilitators. NIFI issue guides provide campuses with pre-framed, nonpartisan discussion guides that help every participant understand the issue from a variety of perspectives while also encouraging discussion. NIFI guides are well established in the field.

Each forum was facilitated by a trained peer facilitator. Participants were broken up into groups of roughly 7-10 people, and placed in a break-out room on Zoom or in small in-person groups with their peer moderator. The moderator's main role was to facilitate the discussion among the participants. They used pre-written questions on specific issues to help facilitate the conversation. Peer moderators were also used to help participants feel more inclined to participate in the dialogue, as research shows that peer-to-peer interactions can help facilitate these conversations.

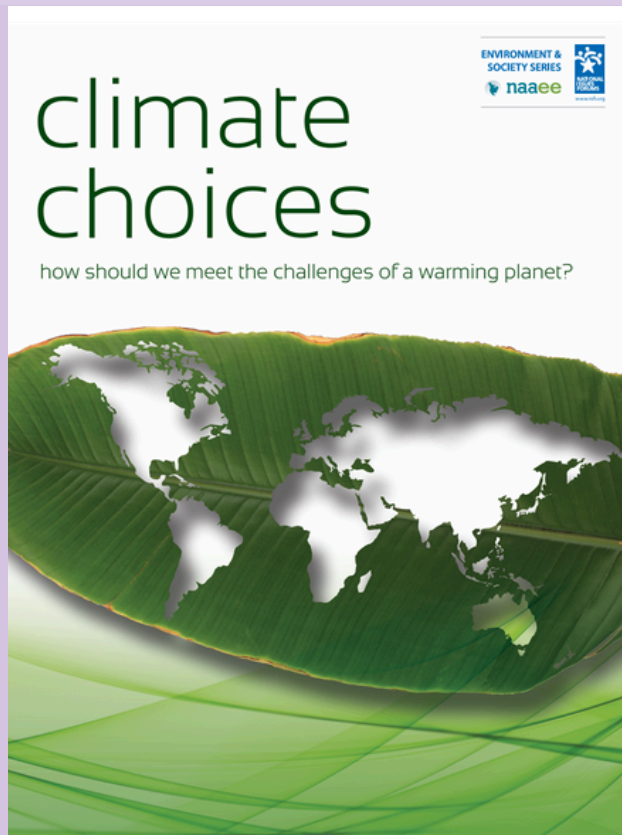
from a variety of perspectives while also encouraging discussion. NIFI guides are well established in the field. The issue guides used during the 2024 National Week of Deliberation included Youth and Opportunity, Climate Choices, and Policing Reform. Climate change is a popular and wicked issue for students and campuses, Youth and Opportunity discusses economic issues faced by younger generations and is applicable to our target population of college students. Policing and issues relating to race and class are continually on the news as campuses face protests and activism.



ISSUE GUIDE: CLIMATE CHOICES

The **Climate Choices** guide is designed to help communities and individuals engage in thoughtful discussions about how to address the challenges posed by climate change. Three options are explored in the guide including the following:

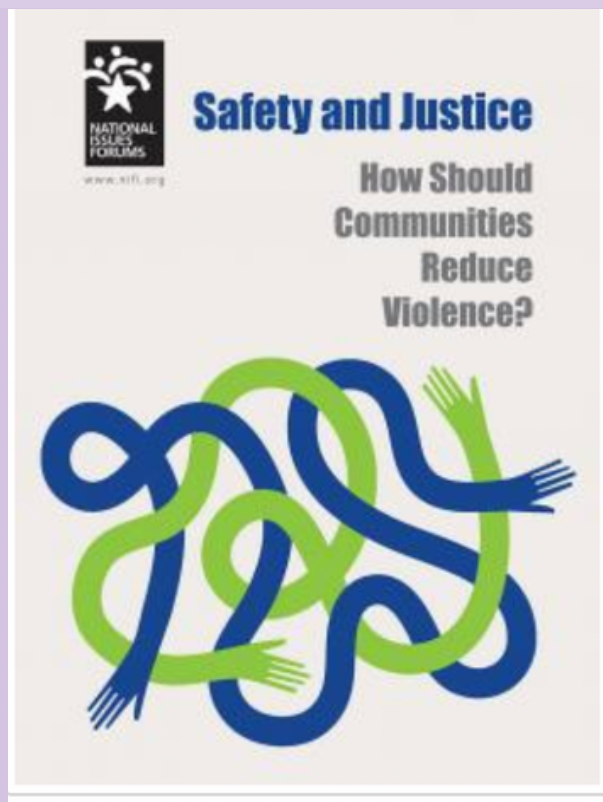
- OPTION 1: Sharply reduce carbon emissions
- OPTION 2: Prepare and protect our communities
- OPTION 3: Accelerate innovation



ISSUE GUIDE: POLICE REFORM

The **Police Reform** guide helps communities and individuals engage in meaningful discussions about improving policing practices. It offers a framework to explore various reform strategies, encouraging balanced and inclusive dialogue to develop actionable solutions for justice and safety. Options explored in this guide include:

- OPTION 1: Make rigorous accountability the top priority
- OPTION 2: Make ending racial bias the top priority
- OPTION 3: Make avoiding violent encounters the top priority



HYPOTHESIS



Figure 2: James Madison University

We hypothesize the following regarding the student-participants in the deliberative forums:

H1: Students will have a better understanding of: the issue itself, different perspectives on the issue, the factors affecting their own perspective, and the rationale behind different perspectives.

H2: As a result of participating in this forum, the student will be more willing to listen to persons who hold different perspectives on issues and fairly consider their views and reasoning.

H3: After participating in the deliberative forum, the student will feel more confident in their ability to have conversations about difficult issues with others.

H4: As a result of participating in this forum, the student will better understand the complexity of social issues and the need for compromise to arrive at a workable solution for all persons.



RESULTS

JMU STUDENTS & DELIBERATION

Overall, participants were able to deliberate in forums that were highly diverse which address campus ideology imbalances. Student participants varied in geographic diversity, class standing, and political ideology. As shown in Table 1, across all forums, 18% of student participants were from a small town, 25% were from large cities, 21% of participants were from rural areas, and 52% had suburban hometowns. A majority of students consisted of first (34%) and second year (33%) students, but the forums were also made up of third (21%) and fourth year (23%) students. Participants were also highly politically diverse: 40% of participants self-identified as more liberal, 34% self-identified as more conservative, and 27% as more moderate. Compared to the general political affiliation pool nationwide derived from the General Social Survey, our sample strays away from the general American population in which 28% report liberal affiliation, 31% are conservative and 37% are moderates.

TABLE 1 GENERAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF NATIONAL WEEK OF DELIBERATION PARTICIPANTS

DEMOGRAPHIC	SCALE	PERCENT
POLITICAL VIEWS**	MORE LIBERAL	40% (33)
	MORE MODERATE	27% (22)
	MORE CONSERVATIVE	34% (28)
YEAR IN SCHOOL	FRESHMAN	34% (28)
	SOPHOMORE	33% (19)
	JUNIOR	21% (17)
	SENIOR	23% (19)
HOMETOWN**	RURAL	21% (4)
	SMALL TOWN	18% (15)
	SUBURBAN AREA	52% (45)
	LARGE CITY	25% (21)

** Numbers do not equal 100% due to rounding, and missing data



RESULTS

JMU STUDENTS & DELIBERATION

These results assess how JMU students feel about discussing various issues with their peers, how comfortable students are when discussing topics with their college peers, even those with whom they disagree, how they can find common ground with peers they generally disagree with, and how empowered they feel when engaging with their communities for a change.

The chart below combines data from the deliberative forums to analyze whether students found common ground based on their political affiliations. Overall, the data indicates that JMU’s deliberative forum successfully facilitated finding common ground between different political affiliation.

Further data suggests that JMU students do find deliberation a powerful tool in bridging wicked divides. By having conversations that are rooted in conversation and moderated by a facilitator, we can decrease polarization on college campuses and encourage students to express their opinions without feeling guilty. The following data explores, in detail, the affect of deliberation on JMU students.

TABLE 2

COMMON GROUND FOUND ACROSS
POLITICAL AFFILIATION

COMMON GROUND FOUND?	MORE LIBERAL	MORE MODERATE	MORE CONSERVATIVE
YES	100% (33)	91% (20)	89% (25)
NO	0% (0)	4.5% (1)	11% (3)
N/A	0% (0)	4.5% (1)	0% (0)

RESULTS

JMU STUDENTS & DELIBERATION

Table 3 assesses the results of participants' proficiency in communicating with one another. Our findings align with a broad spectrum of previously published results from earlier deliberations. Typically, after a deliberation, most students feel comfortable engaging in discussions with each other. While political conversations are often associated with incivility and the belief that polarization is insurmountable, our results tell a different story. Post-deliberation, over 90% of participants reported a better understanding of the issue at hand and a greater appreciation of others' viewpoints. This suggests that structured deliberations can effectively foster civility and mutual understanding, even in politically charged contexts.

TABLE 3

**PARTICIPANTS FEEL
PROFICIENT TALKING
ABOUT ISSUES WITH
OTHERS**

QUESTION	SCALE	REPUBLICAN	INDEPENDENT	DEMOCRAT
I HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUE	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	91% (22)	90% (20)	93% (31)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	8% (2)	9% (2)	3% (1)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	0% (0)	3% (1)
I HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE REASONS BEHIND DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	85% (24)	86% (19)	90% (30)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	10% (3)	10% (2)	6% (2)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	4% (1)	4% (1)	3% (1)
I CAN ARTICULATE MY OWN OPINIONS	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (26)	90% (20)	90% (31)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	3% (1)	5% (1)	5% (1)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	5% (1)	5% (1)
THE ISSUE IS MORE COMPLEX THAN I ORIGINALLY THOUGHT	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (26)	90% (20)	78% (26)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	3% (1)	9% (2)	9% (3)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	0% (0)	12% (4)

RESULTS

JMU STUDENTS & DELIBERATION

Previous deliberation results indicate that liberals tend to become more liberal, and conservatives more conservative during political conversations. This has led to diminished internal diversity within groups and an increased gap between liberals and conservatives, largely due to political polarization and the structure of the deliberations. Typically, sorting students into groups of like-minded individuals exacerbates polarization. However, our approach diverged from this pattern. We prioritized creating mixed groups with diverse political affiliations and ages. Our results suggest that students found it easier to engage with those holding different opinions and felt more comfortable with perspectives from across the political spectrum. This structure fostered a more inclusive and understanding environment, countering the effects of deliberations with like-minded people.

TABLE 4

PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCE MORE COMFORTABILITY WITH THEIR COLLEGE PEERS WITH WHOM THEY DISAGREE

QUESTION	SCALE	REPUBLICAN	INDEPENDENT	DEMOCRAT
MORE WILLING TO LISTEN FAIRLY TO PEOPLE WHO HOLD DIFFERENT OPINIONS	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	89% (25)	91% (20)	76% (25)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	7% (2)	9% (2)	24% (8)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	4% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
MORE WILLING TO UNDERSTAND THE REASONING OF PEOPLE WITH DIFFERENT OPINIONS	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	93% (26)	91% (20)	88% (29)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	4% (1)	9% (2)	12% (4)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	4% (1)	0% (0)	0% (0)
I FEEL THE MEMBERS OF MY GROUP FAIRLY CONSIDERED IDEAS THAT WERE IMPORTANT TO ME, EVEN IF THEY WERE NOT AGREED ON	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (27)	91% (20)	88% (29)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	4% (1)	9% (2)	9% (3)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	0% (0)	3% (1)
MORE WILLING TO HAVE DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS ON DIFFERENT ISSUES WITH PEOPLE I MIGHT DISAGREE WITH	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (25)	81% (17)	91% (30)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	4% (1)	19% (4)	6% (2)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	0% (0)	3% (1)

RESULTS

JMU STUDENTS & DELIBERATION

Previous research indicates that participants, regardless of their level of disagreement, tend to be satisfied with deliberation. This satisfaction stems from finding common ground between participants. Studies suggest that deliberation is most effective when conducted without political nuances and ideas. When students come together to discuss issues directly, they can usually find common ground. Our results suggest that almost all students can find common ground with those they disagree with. However, this can only be achieved through well-planned deliberation and productive conversations.

TABLE 5

**DO PARTICIPANTS FEEL THEY CAN FIND
COMMON GROUND OR SOME POINT OF
AGREEMENT WITH PEERS WITH WHOM THEY
GENERALLY DISAGREE?**

QUESTION	SCALE	REPUBLICAN	INDEPENDENT	DEMOCRAT
I AM MORE WILLING TO LISTEN EVEN WHEN I KNOW I WILL DISAGREE WITH OTHERS	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	93% (26)	86% (19)	88% (29)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	7% (2)	14% (3)	12% (4)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	0% (0)	0% (0)
ASK QUESTIONS IN ORDER TO INCREASE MY UNDERSTANDING OF THE DIFFERENT VIEWPOINTS ON THE ISSUE	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (26)	77% (17)	85% (28)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	4% (1)	18% (4)	9% (3)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	5% (1)	6% (2)
I AM BETTER ABLE TO SEE BEYOND A BINARY OF "TWO SIDES" AND UNDERSTAND THE ISSUE IN MORE NUANCED WAYS	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (26)	82% (18)	82% (27)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	4% (1)	14% (3)	15% (5)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	5% (1)	3% (1)
EVEN WHEN WE DISAGREE ABOUT ISSUES, THROUGH CONVERSATION PEOPLE CAN FIND AND COLLECTIVELY SUPPORT SOME ACTIONS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT AGREE	96% (26)	91% (20)	91% (30)
	NEITHER AGREE/DISAGREE	4% (1)	9% (2)	6% (2)
	STRONGLY/SOMEWHAT DISAGREE	0% (0)	0% (0)	3% (1)

CONCLUSION

Overall, our attempts at bridging wicked divides and encouraging deliberative dialogue on a number of wicked issues was successful. Participants were able to talk together across political divides and find common ground to act on. While the public narrative surrounding politics is that we're too polarized to find common ground, our deliberative forums created conditions for college students to find and support acting together.

Our findings in some ways also challenge the popular narratives that students self-censor when faced with having to talk about difficult issues. In our forums, student participants indicated they felt listened to and that the space and framework of the deliberative forum provided them opportunities to express their views without retribution. The model of providing a pre-framed issue guide with a peer moderator who can establish and maintain ground rules, timing, and pace of the deliberation seems to be helpful, and encouraging students to consider actions and drawbacks to a set of mutually exclusive ideas for acting also gives speaking courage to students since they can better find their views and ideas in the discussion material. With moderately high satisfaction rates, it seems that student self-expression in these settings has real impact. If one of the challenges of college civic engagement is creating spaces for students to break out of their ideological silos and talk across divides, the model of deliberation we present here seems efficacious in doing so.

The way to address the polarization challenge is to ensure that opportunities like campus deliberation and dialogue programming are not one-off, class activity only events, but are embedded into the civic engagement mission of colleges and universities. Developing civic behaviors is like developing muscles - students must be given continual and sustained opportunities to listen and ask questions in structured settings with students from different backgrounds. Making programs like the week of deliberation a capstone event and not the sole event can help students build the continuum of civic muscles needed for full participation in democratic life.