

PREPARING PUBLIC LEADERS FOR POLARIZED TIMES

Embedding Constructive
Dialogue in Schools of
Public Service

THANK YOU

We would like to begin by acknowledging the fourteen schools that participated in this cohort.



Clinton School of Public Service
University of Arkansas



Heinz College of Information Systems and Public Policy
Carnegie Mellon University



**Cornell Brooks
Public Policy**

Jeb E. Brooks School of Public Policy
Cornell University



Gerald R. Ford School of Public Policy
University of Michigan



Truman School
University of Missouri

Truman School of Government and Public Affairs
University of Missouri



TULANE
School of Professional Advancement | John Lewis Public Administration Program

John Lewis Public Administration Program
School of Professional Advancement, Tulane University



O'NEILL
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL AFFAIRS
Indianapolis

Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs
Indiana University, Indianapolis



UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS CHICAGO
College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs

College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs
University of Illinois Chicago



HUMPHREY SCHOOL OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Hubert H. Humphrey School of Public Affairs
University of Minnesota



University of Pittsburgh
Graduate School of Public and International Affairs

School of Public and International Affairs
University of Pittsburgh



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT DALLAS
School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences

School of Economic, Political and Policy Sciences
University of Texas at Dallas



FRANK BATTEN SCHOOL of LEADERSHIP and PUBLIC POLICY

Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy
The University of Virginia



Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs
UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

The Robert M. La Follette School of Public Affairs
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Berkeley Public Policy
The Goldman School

The Goldman School of Public Policy
University of California, Berkeley

INTRODUCTION

Higher education institutions are uniquely positioned to prepare students for engaged citizenship and leadership in an increasingly diverse and polarized society. In service to this goal, the Volcker Alliance partnered with the Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) to lead the Constructive Dialogue Curriculum Initiative beginning in the spring of 2024 and running through the 2024-25 academic year. The 15-month Initiative equipped 14 schools of public service with skills and resources to bring dialogue-at-scale to their campuses.

The Initiative supported a wide-range of dialogue-focused interventions. Most of the participating schools implemented CDI's flagship learning program, *Perspectives*, into orientation programs and course curricula, resulting in statistically significant improvements in intellectual humility, affective polarization, and finding common ground behaviors across the cohort of learners. Students also reported benefits of the program, with 79% noting that *Perspectives* helped them gain valuable professional and/or life skills. In addition to *Perspectives*, Volcker institutions effectively integrated constructive dialogue into their courses, campus activities, and leadership programs.

Drawing on insights from participating institutions, this paper outlines four key "best practice" recommendations for leaders seeking to effectively embed dialogue at scale into their campuses, as well as common pitfalls to anticipate.

RECOMMENDATIONS

ENSURE INSTITUTIONAL ALIGNMENT

Dialogue initiatives thrive when they are supported at multiple levels across a school and include leaders, faculty, staff, and students. Without visible endorsement from deans and program leads, dialogue risks being perceived as optional or peripheral. Without input from students, dialogue programming risks feeling perfunctory. Alignment ensures resources, credibility, and continuity.

The University of Minnesota made constructive dialogue one of its four strategic priorities, which elevated the visibility and importance of the work to faculty, staff, students, and alumni. They offered their communities multiple opportunities to explore constructive dialogue, through orientation activities, leadership development, and ongoing workshops.

At the **University of Illinois Chicago's College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs**, the College's leadership took an active role in promoting and supporting dialogue work. The College chose to implement *Perspectives* through a first-year seminar taught by the College's Dean. The College's senior academic advisor oversaw the implementation of *Perspectives*. Students saw that leadership valued the work and bought in. As one student put it, "It helped me to stop assuming and listen to people's stories. It gives me the moment to stop and think about the other side and not just think about my own personal beliefs."

Leaders can also draw on existing campus centers for civic engagement, pluralism, or teaching and learning. These centers (or other sources) bring cultural legitimacy and technical expertise that help build faculty trust and sustain momentum.

Cornell's Brooks School of Public Policy brought in expertise from another center on Cornell's campus, the Center for Dialogue and Pluralism (CDP). To foster this partnership, the entire Brooks School Academic Leadership team participated in two three-hour workshops led by the CDP Director. These workshops introduced Leadership to foundational dialogue skills and created space for them to explore ways to embed these practices in the Brooks School. Encouraging understanding and ownership at the leadership level enhanced collaboration and coordination between the CDP and the Brooks School over the course of the academic year.

EMBED DIALOGUE IN MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

Constructive dialogue programming is most effective when it is embedded deeply into the campus and community ecosystem rather than treated as a one-time skill-building activity. When dialogue is approached as part of an ecosystem, constructive dialogue programming can build the foundation for a self-sustaining campus culture and bring dialogue into the wider community.

Using an ecological framework, **Carnegie Mellon's Heinz College** embedded dialogue across three levels: micro (individual reflections in class), meso (a joint speaker series with the University of Pittsburgh's School of Public and International Affairs), and macro (a campus-wide culture initiative). Dialogue was not confined to the classroom, but featured in events, co-curricular programming, and semester-wide themes. By situating dialogue in every layer of student life, Heinz signaled clearly that constructive dialogue is a defining pillar of the school's culture.

Schools working within the Curriculum Initiative implemented dialogue programming in different pathways. Many used orientation. Others focused on coursework. CDI's analytics report (see Appendix A) suggests that these pathways were equally effective.

During its Professional Residency Week, **Tulane** integrated dialogue into simulations grounded in workplace dilemmas. Exercises such as “Agree/Disagree” lines and scenario-based discussions allowed students—many already in mid-career—to apply dialogue skills directly to professional contexts. Participants reported high satisfaction and immediate applicability.

Michigan's Ford School piloted the “Bridge Builders” initiative, selecting four students through a competitive process to serve as dialogue facilitators. The students designed peer-focused programs, introduced constructive dialogue skills across the school, and advised the dean on expanding dialogue initiatives. The experience proved transformative for the Bridge Builders themselves and generated concrete recommendations that the school is now adopting in the 2025–26 academic year.

When possible, dialogue programming should be integrated into existing institutional priorities and initiatives to ensure sustainability and reduce the risk of overburdening administration, faculty, and staff involved. By linking dialogue opportunities with mission-driven goals, institutions can create meaningful, high-value programming that strengthens both campus culture and community relationships.

The Clinton School at the University of Arkansas embedded CDI's *Perspectives* into an established, year-long practicum where teams of students work in collaboration with community partners on live, field-based projects. The aim was to help groups connect and collaborate in ways that would be resilient to disagreement and conflict. This potentially powerful implementation pathway introduces constructive dialogue skills in a context directly relatable to the work that many graduates of schools of public service will do upon graduation.

PAIR CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE WITH GREATER VIEWPOINT DIVERSITY IN COURSE SYLLABI

Fostering constructive dialogue depends not only on how we teach, but on what we teach. When course syllabi privilege a narrow range of texts, students are insulated from the real intellectual disagreements that shape democratic life. Schools should encourage faculty to include materials that reflect multiple ideological, methodological, and experiential viewpoints. This approach enriches the curriculum and signals to students that public service requires grappling with contested ideas.

Pairing this aim with skill and capacity-building in constructive dialogue is a very promising pathway for schools of public service, as the two can be mutually supportive. Constructive dialogue provides students with the tools to handle disagreement; diverse syllabi provide the material on which to practice. Together, they can foster resilience, curiosity, and civic engagement.

The Instructor of Democracy, Pluralism & Civil Discourse, a feature course at the **Truman School of Government and Public Affairs at the University of Missouri**, paired constructive dialogue skills work with a reading list covering many flashpoint issues that spanned political and social ideologies. Carefully selected readings juxtaposed a range of arguments. Discussion prompts and classroom activities regularly asked students to engage with perspectives they disagreed with, including through “assigned side” debates. A key assignment asked students to interview a friend or relative they disagreed with on an important issue in order to better understand their position. Students rated the class very highly, and in self-reflections at the end of the course often noted how much more they were able to engage with each other when they shifted from “winning arguments” to listening and curiosity.

PROVIDE PRACTICE OPPORTUNITIES

Dialogue is a skill, not a concept. Like negotiation, public speaking, or leadership, it requires rehearsal in structured settings where students can try, fail, reflect, and try again. One-off experiences, even well-designed ones, rarely produce durable change. Schools that build repeated and varied practice opportunities both inside and outside the classroom are likely to see the most significant growth in students' confidence and capacity to engage across different beliefs and perspectives. Schools in the Curriculum Initiative created opportunities for practice at multiple levels.

Course Activities

Within courses, practice opportunities could be connected to assignments, such as University of Missouri's course assignment to interview a friend or relative whom they disagree with, or involve in-class discussions or discussion boards, which encourage participants to take sides they may not agree with to understand different viewpoints. The University of Wisconsin-Madison developed an entire course dedicated to strategies to address disagreement and conflict in public policy, and provided students opportunities to practice dialogue-based skills in structured conversations throughout the semester. These course-related practice opportunities relate the growth of their dialogue skills to course goals that students prioritize and allow students to put skills into practice in a structured environment among peers. These academic activities can also connect constructive dialogue skills to the student's future career development.

Co-Curricular Activities

Campus activities can facilitate practice opportunities for students in less structured environments with a wider range of dialogue participants. Dialogue can be pulled into traditional campus-wide activities, like speaker series. For example, the University of Pittsburgh partnered with Carnegie Mellon University to offer a speaker series tied to both schools' mission to integrate dialogue into their campus culture. Carnegie Mellon University also experimented with other formats to create opportunities to practice dialogue, including facilitated "Conversations at the Crossroads" debates, which allowed the audience to take sides and engage in constructive debate.

Student Leadership

Linking dialogue practice to leadership roles accelerates skill development and allows students to distinguish themselves beyond the classroom. Career-oriented programs and civic initiatives provide natural settings for students to test and refine these abilities. At the University of Virginia, dialogue training spurred greater student participation in leadership and civic engagement programs. At Michigan, the Ford School's "Bridge Builders" were hired to design and lead dialogue activities across campus, embedding practice opportunities into positions of visible responsibility.

Students were key drivers of practice opportunities for constructive dialogue at the **at the University of California, Berkeley's Goldman School of Public Policy**. Student leaders applied new dialogue skills to planning and facilitating Lunch and Learn events. After the successful Fall rollout of a new course the school developed to support constructive dialogue, students requested that Goldman offer the class again in the Spring. They also built a bridge across generations of Goldman alums during a reunion with the Class of 1968, which involved a screening of a film about dialogue and opportunities to engage in provocative conversations.

The need for increased practice opportunities was one of the most common areas of improvement identified among participating institutions, and student feedback similarly highlighted the need for ongoing and progressively advanced practice opportunities. Institutions took this feedback seriously, with many highlighting future plans for more scaffolded practice opportunities to allow students at different levels in their programs to apply their dialogue skills in different environments.

Students at the **Paul H. O'Neill School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University Indianapolis** wanted more opportunities for dialogue. The School incorporated dialogue programming into their orientation "Bridge Week." They then sought to reinforce their work in orientation by building further programming into first-year seminars, including using "peer circles" to practice dialogue throughout the first semester. The tone that the school set resonated with their students, as student feedback at the conclusion of the seminars consistently asked for more scenarios and practice.

COMMON PITFALLS TO ANTICIPATE

While the benefits are clear, leaders should anticipate challenges that have hindered other institutions:

Fit with Curriculum

Dialogue modules can feel “bolted on” when not clearly tied to course objectives. Schools should provide faculty and staff resources to ensure that dialogue resources are smoothly integrated into courses and co-curricular programming.

Time Constraints

Orientation weeks and packed syllabi leave little room for dialogue. Effective implementations often distribute capacity-building across multiple settings rather than relying on a single event.

Assessment Gaps

Traditional assessments typically don’t capture growth in humility or listening skills. Schools can explore assessment options to address these gaps, such as lightweight surveys and reflective course assignments.

Faculty and Staff Buy-in

At this moment, faculty and staff may reasonably hesitate to address polarization directly. Opportunities to explore dialogue programming prior to implementation, structured feedback mechanisms, and visible leadership support can build trust and participation.

CONCLUSION

Public policy education must go beyond equipping students with analytical skills. To lead in divided societies, graduates need the confidence and capacity to engage across ideological, cultural, and experiential lines. By ensuring alignment, embedding dialogue throughout the school's ecosystem, promoting viewpoint diversity, and providing ample practice opportunities, leaders of schools of public service can prepare their graduates to meet this challenge.

The experiences of participating institutions demonstrate that constructive dialogue thrives when students are offered repeated, scaffolded opportunities to practice, reflect, and grow. By embedding dialogue into coursework, campus culture, and leadership pathways, and by fostering collaboration across institutional and community stakeholders, campuses can create self-sustaining ecosystems that support belonging, inclusion, and resilience. These findings underscore the importance of prioritizing dialogue initiatives as mission-aligned investments in student development, institutional culture, and civic responsibility. Advancing these recommendations offers schools of public service pathways to stronger campus communities and students prepared to navigate and lead in a complex, pluralist society.

THE VOLCKER ALLIANCE is a nonprofit founded by former Federal Reserve Board Chairman Paul A. Volcker to empower the public sector workforce to solve the challenges facing our nation. We build partnerships with government and universities, promote innovation in public service education, drive research on effective government, and inspire others with the story of Mr. Volcker's commitment to public service. We envision a public sector workforce with the experience, preparation, and commitment to ensure government is accountable and delivers with excellence.

CONSTRUCTIVE DIALOGUE INSTITUTE (CDI), founded in 2017, is a nonprofit organization dedicated to equipping the next generation of Americans with the mindset and skill set to engage in dialogue across lines of difference. At CDI, we seek to help teachers, faculty, staff, and administrators build learning environments that enable students to feel comfortable exploring challenging topics so that real learning can occur. To accomplish this goal, we translate the latest behavioral science research into educational resources and teaching strategies that are evidence-based, practical, and scalable.



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