INITIATING CONSTRUCTIVE CONVERSATIONS AMONG POLARIZED UNIVERSITY STUDENT GROUPS
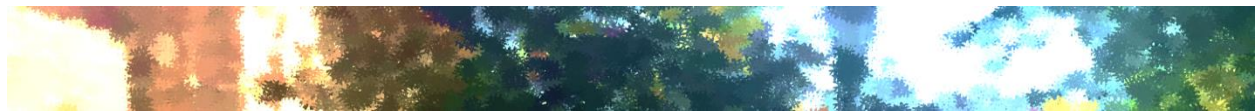
A Framework for Students, Faculty, and Administrators

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- Key Considerations for College and University Leaders: When Conflicts and Divisive Incidents Arise (2020)
- Key Considerations for College and University Leaders: Preparing the Campus at a Time of National Polarization (2020)
- Symbols and Public Spaces amid Division: Practical Ideas for Community and University Leaders (2021),

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INTRODUCTION

A student group invites a speaker who has engaged in hate speech. Or conversations between rival campus political groups turn into personal insults on a campus social media platform. Perhaps a campus religious group refuses membership to a gay student.

You may know a dozen more examples of conflicts among student groups. They tend to have similar hallmarks: Disagreements among campus groups turn bitter. Trust plummets. They become what we call here "polarized" groups. The danger that lingering disputes radiate to others on campus is real.

It can be difficult in the midst of or aftermath of polarized group conflict to persuade the involved students to use a mediator or facilitator, or even agree to meet. As a result, factionalism and polarization continues, often impacting the academic community well beyond the conflicting groups. Finding yourself in a disrupted academic community can be unsettling.

But you—university faculty, administrators, students, or members or leaders of affected campus groups—can decide to do something about it. Even if not invited initially, you can promote constructive exchanges among polarized groups or persuade someone else to take on that role.

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"[W[e urge you to consider being proactive…when your expertise can make a positive difference. At some point, you may be the best person
to help your own community find a way to deal more productively and fairly
with a conflict that has produced a bitter divide."[ii] – Dispute System Design Textbook

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This user guide is designed to help you initiate and organize constructive conversations between polarized groups in a college or university setting. It guides those taking the initiative through the entire process. The process begins with planning, moving to initial contacts before the discussions between groups begin. It includes suggestions during those conversations and afterward. It is tailored to help you navigate the unique needs and challenges of a college or university environment and student groups operating in good faith that become bitterly divided over issues such as politics or policy.

This guide will not, importantly, provide guidance in two settings that are even more fraught and risky for all but the most experienced:[iii] 1) de-escalating in the midst of a volatile event and
2) working with groups that dehumanize a group of people or condone vigilante violence.

Meaningful dialogue helps create a safe and constructive environment for participants and can lead to positive outcomes for the campus as a whole. Let's get started!

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Several considerations operate throughout the life cycle of promoting constructive dialogue between polarized groups – before, during, and after. Before diving into the guide, remember that what follows is a framework to offer a way to organize thoughts. It should function as a checklist of sorts.

While conversation and engagement are key, it might not always be practical or feasible to start with them. For example, a significant amount of work might go into this process during the preparatory stage when an individual or small team gets in contact with the polarized groups, evaluates their willingness to meet with the other group or groups in the conflict, and discusses next steps. That engagement might result in the realization that a joint conversation is not feasible. Do not view this guide as a rigid framework that must be followed step-by-step, but as a malleable and organized amalgamation of important considerations and factors that can help facilitate dialogue and depolarization.

UNDERSTAND THE "WHY". It's important to know the purpose and intended outcome of your involvement to encourage polarized groups to engage in constructive conversation. Without clear objectives, the conversation may lack direction and fail to achieve its goals. Identifying specific objectives allows you to create a tailored framework for the conversation, making it productive and effective. If these objectives also serve the goals of the groups, clear objectives also motivate participants to engage fully and work towards a positive outcome. For example, your goal may be to promote respectful dialogue among student groups to enrich the intellectual environment and discussions. The student group leaders may want a channel that permits them to respond to a concern privately before either group goes public. Be sure to delineate, if needed, between your aims and those of the groups you seek to engage. Both are important to keep in mind. Often, you will seek to engage in this process to meet the participating groups' goals and the additional goal of serving the climate of the campus. However, those goals may not overlap perfectly. Balance is key!
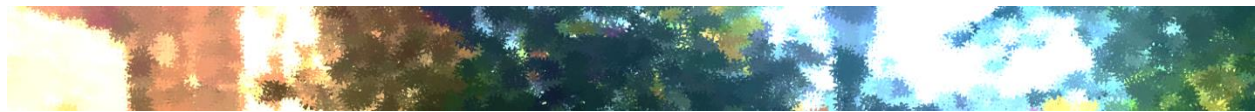
ACKNOWLEDGE BIAS AND FOREBEAR IN PROMOTING YOUR POLICY AGENDA. Before having a conversation, it's important to understand your biases because they affect how you perceive and interpret information. Biases are unconscious beliefs that can influence thoughts and behaviors, potentially hindering the ability to empathize with others and leading to misunderstandings.
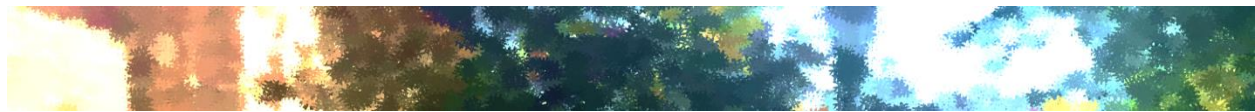
Understanding biases begins with acknowledging their existence and becoming curious about how your reactions to this conflict might be informed by them. Recognizing biases helps manage and mitigate their impact, such as seeking out diverse perspectives and remaining open-minded. This fosters a more productive and empathetic conversation and can build understanding and trust between individuals with different backgrounds and viewpoints.

To illustrate, when we co-authors exchanged thoughts on our biases, before beginning conversations with two polarized student groups, we learned that three of us leaned more in favor of the views of one group and one in favor of the other's views. In more candor, one said, "Honestly, I don't think of my views as bias, rather that I am right." All of us acknowledged a similar feeling in values-based conflicts, but we could also see the strength that a group with varying views brought to the work we were about to begin.

You may be most likely to succeed in your goals if you refrain from speaking about your own views on a particular matter, and that may require you to do some mental preparation. Something close to neutrality in facilitated polarized conversations creates a safe space for all to share ideas and does not interrupt the flow of discussions. If you shift roles, suddenly displaying bias or advocating for your own policy objectives, it can cause distrust and defensiveness.

Suppose, though, that you are a member of one of the groups. If you have defined your role initially as sharing some of the opinions of that group, it may not sow distrust to express your own opinions respectfully, while listening actively, acknowledging diverse views, and avoiding blaming others. But you are treading on more difficult ground in terms of gaining the other group's trust.

CREATE AN INCENTIVE TO ENGAGE. When factions are deeply entrenched, members of both groups may find the ongoing conflict to be an undesirable situation yet lack a sense of how they might make progress. You have the potential to illuminate a path forward. To encourage participation and build trust in a polarized conversation, creating an incentive structure that emphasizes the potential for positive outcomes is important. Without such a structure, individuals may hesitate or disengage from the conversation. By highlighting the potential for greater understanding, improved relationships, and solutions, for example, organizers motivate participants to engage fully and work towards a productive outcome. Clear expectations and goals, along with a sense of ownership and agency for the

participants, create a collaborative and empowering environment that further encourages participation and positive outcomes.

TAKE INTO ACCOUNT MORAL RIGHTEOUSNESS. When polarized groups believe their own beliefs and values are superior, it can impact the conversation and hinder finding common ground or solutions. You can level the playing field by creating a balanced and non-judgmental discussion in which people of all values and perspectives feel respected.

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"[As a student], I see a. . . troubling problem: an academic environment with two loud camps, one aligning with far-right politics, one aligning with the far left. In between, where most students can be found: silence."[iv]
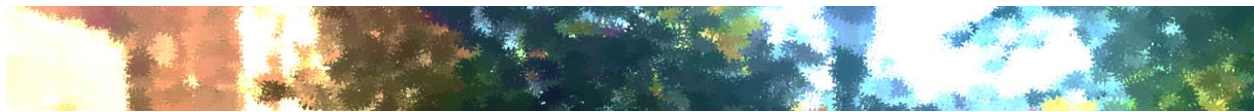
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This can be achieved by setting clear ground rules that emphasize active listening, empathy, and respect for people with differing viewpoints. Reframing the conversation in a collaborative and solution-focused manner, focusing on shared values and goals, and modeling non-judgmental behavior can also help. You can also reduce reluctance to engage across differences by humanizing the situation for the stubborn participants. This can be as simple as asking them, "Have you both felt misunderstood at times?" Do not overcomplicate humanizing the situation. It tends to flow from authenticity and students will see past organizers who merely try to act authentic.

UNDERSTAND THE REALITY OF THE SITUATION. Catalysts of a conversation between polarized groups need to be realistic and understand the challenges involved, such as deep-seated beliefs, complex issues, and emotions. By being realistic, you can develop a targeted and strategic approach, set clear goals and expectations, identify potential barriers, select appropriate facilitation techniques, and develop a plan for addressing any issues that may arise. This process helps to build trust and credibility with participants and create a safe and respectful space for dialogue. Ultimately, this promotes greater understanding, empathy, and cooperation between students from different backgrounds and viewpoints.

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"There's little room for nuance. If you're not overtly one of 'us,'
then you're assumed to be one of 'them.'"
-- A student writing about polarization between politically conservative and liberal students[v]

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RESPECT PARTICIPANT HESITANCY. Respect the students' hesitancies in polarized conversations, as they may be based on negative experiences, fear, or distrust. Your respect can build trust and create a more inclusive environment for dialogue. For example, you can listen actively, empathize, reassure, and provide incentives or support to help participants feel more comfortable and thereby contribute positively to the conversation. Building a safer environment is a precursor to encouraging people to moving into an open dialogue.

CREATE PRIVACY AND DEVELOP TRUST. Creating privacy and trust in polarized conversations is crucial for a productive and respectful space where participants share their perspectives and engage in honest dialogue. This can be achieved by holding conversations in confidential and secure locations, limiting the number of participants and observers, and establishing clear guidelines about what can be disclosed. You can also enhance trust by demonstrating commitment to balanced conversation, transparency, open communication, and providing feedback opportunities. They may also respond to your small acts of kindness that demonstrate your concern for them as persons. When participants feel respected and valued, they are more likely to be invested in the conversation and open to alternative perspectives and solutions. By prioritizing privacy and trust, you lay a foundation for productive conversations that lead to positive change in higher education and beyond.

RESPECT DIFFERENCES. Understanding lived experience is essential when it comes to engaging polarized groups in conversation, because it helps to create empathy and understanding between individuals. Each person brings a unique perspective and background to a conflict, and this can have a significant impact on their beliefs, attitudes, and actions. A concept that is not much more than an intellectual abstraction to one individual may represent even generations of lived experience and negative emotions to another. By acknowledging and valuing these differences, individuals gain a better understanding of the complex issues involved and work towards finding common ground. Consider each person's identity, history, and lived experience to create a safe and respectful space for dialogue. By doing so, you develop trust and work towards a more inclusive and respectful conversation in the hopes of conflict resolution and depolarization.

RECRUIT COLLABORATORS: Discussing your strategy with others who share your concern about the polarization can improve the approach, create the emotional support you may need, and add people trusted by one or more of the groups. For us, working as a group also meant that we could share the tasks that needed be quickly accomplished.
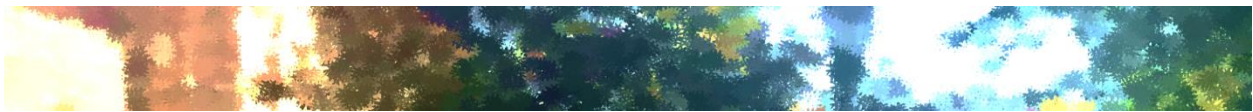
PREPARATION

PREP WORK (BEFORE A CONFLICT EMERGES)
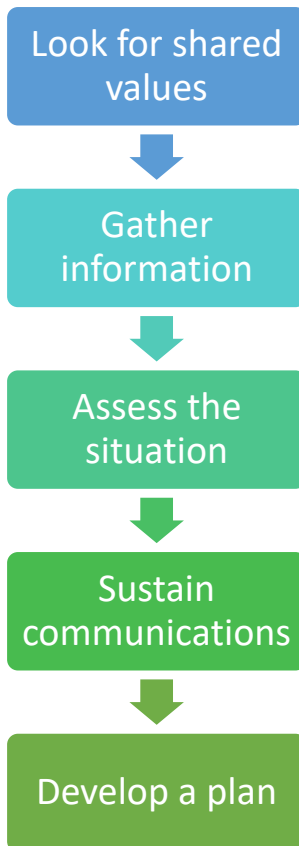
Policy conflicts among organizations and those who support their viewpoints differ from fender bender disputes. Those observing policy conflicts note that they escalate quickly and, if unmanaged, may reach a point in a few hours that simple strategies that might have worked at the beginning will not anymore. Sides form, positions harden, people stop talking across differences, and social media posts may gain national attention.[vi] So preparation matters.
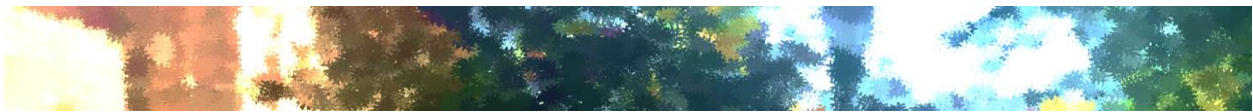
LOOK FOR SHARED VALUES: You can help polarized student organizations create a climate and set expectations within their memberships to help promote constructive cross-group discourse behaviors. Though policy positions may differ, student groups can often embrace the key principles of the university and core missions of education, research, and service while preparing conflict management strategies. Focusing them on the values they share across policy viewpoints may help them recognize the value of treating each other well amid disagreement on other points.

The broadly endorsed Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching report has inspired many campuses to "build or rebuild a sense of collegial and civil community." The report argues that campuses should refocus their actions and choices to comply with the six key elements of higher education:

> First, a college or university is an educationally purposeful community where faculty and students share academic goals and work together to strengthen teaching and learning on campus.

> Second, a college or university is an open community where freedom of expression is uncompromisingly protected and where civility is powerfully affirmed.

> Third, a college or university is a just community where the sacredness of the person is honored and diversity is pursued.

Look for shared values

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Gather information

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Assess the situation

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Sustain communications

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Develop a plan

Fourth, a college or university is a disciplined community where individuals accept their obligations to the group.

Fifth, a college or university is a caring community where the well-being of each member is sensitively supported and service to others is encouraged.

Sixth, a college or university is a celebrative community, where the heritage of the institution is remembered and where rituals affirming tradition are widely shared.[vii]

You can ask the involved students whether these elements, in addition to the university's mission and vision, are values that they can emphasize always. If so, they can place them at the forefront of their organization's focus when later addressing a conflict. They might also usefully discuss which values they might prioritize over others. It could be helpful for student organizations to publicize these ideals among their respective members, to keep everyone on the same page about what the organization values and how it will make decisions. For instance, if a student organization clearly outlines both the ideals of freedom of expression and diversity, it can point to those stated values when reminding a member who makes members of a certain identity feel uncomfortable expressing who they are. Setting out values from the get-go can help let everyone know what expectations the organization has of its members.
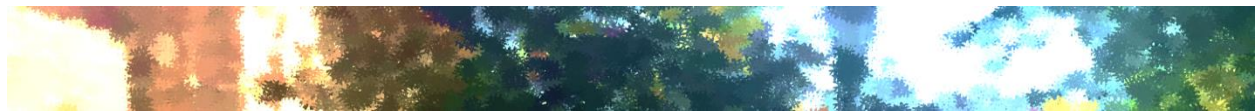
PREP WORK (AFTER THE CONFLICT EMERGES)

When you get wind of a conflict and decide to help, you can begin a four-step preparation process. If you are getting involved from within one of the organizations, you can suggest and assist as they follow the steps:

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"When people do not understand the history of the other organizations involved and their problems and special sensitivities, they are more likely to make incorrect assumptions about the motives of their adversaries and they may unintentionally issue provocative statements that make resolution more difficult."[viii]

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GATHER INFORMATION: You will want to investigate the nature and cause of the conflict before making any decisions about what to do. With this and with other steps, time is of the

essence, as people tend to announce hard positions early in a conflict, prompting others to escalate their demands. Depending on the scope of the conflict, this investigation might include:

MEDIA: If talk of the conflict is already prevalent on social media, it is helpful to look through the posts that have been made about it. *Social media posts do not always accurately depict the cause or nature of the conflict,* you might remind them. Social media messages are often phrased poorly or blow issues out of proportion. Although the angry posts may be the most disseminated content on the topic, they do not necessarily define the positions of the majority membership of either faction. They may not come from a member of the organization being defended or even from a
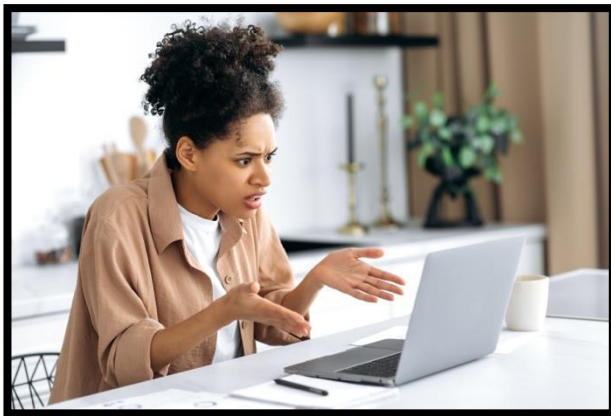
non-student. This suggests keeping an open mind during this investigation, even if the reasoning behind one side's stance doesn't seem compelling from their social media posts. (This method can be adjusted if one of the sides is posting clear hate speech against a particular group of people. It would not be advisable to go into a communication with such a group with an open mind, and in fact the organization may choose not to communicate directly with that group at all, depending on the circumstances.) Although the angry posts may be the most disseminated content on the topic, they do not necessarily define the positions of the majority membership of either faction.

IN-PERSON COMMUNICATION: After getting a preliminary understanding of the conflict and the groups involved, you can decide whether some members can still talk constructively with members of the other group. If not, you and your colleagues might shuttle among the groups to perform these tasks. If they can still talk respectfully across groups, you might suggest that one or a few members of one group ask a few members of the other groups about what's going on, and report back. The student organization may designate members (liaisons) to speak with representatives from all sides of the conflict. These liaisons might be leaders or influential members of the organization, but more importantly they would be members who have a good relationship with at least one of the groups in conflict. Multiple liaisons may need to be designated, depending on the scope of the conflict and whether any one member has a good relationship with all polarized groups. You can point out the advantages if the liaisons (as well as a few other members of leadership, if it seems appropriate) keep an open mind while learning as much about the conflict and its causes as possible. You could prepare that person to use these meetings as an opportunity to build trust with the participants through active listening and summarization techniques or accompany the liaison and use those approaches yourself.

DIVERSITY: You may want to help organization members to be mindful of the impact of lived experience, different identities, and individual and collective histories in creating the initial conflict as well as escalating tensions. Individuals or groups that have been historically disenfranchised may engage very differently in conversations than those who have never experienced discrimination.

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"Lead with curiosity to get a better understanding of the other person's perspective….Share your perspective as a humble observation
rather than the gospel truth."
— Kwame Christian in How to Have Difficult Conversations About Race[ix]

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ASSESS THE SITUATION: You may want to prompt the organizations to hold a meeting after the liaisons have gained enough information about the conflict and can brief members on what's going on and what future actions the groups are planning on taking. As mentioned, time is of the essence. You might mention the following as well:

NEXT STEPS: Next steps can be discussed that are in line with the key principles of the university/student organization. These values can include respecting all people involved in a conflict (unless again, one side is being purely hateful to a group of people) and not trying to shut down the conflict altogether. Typically, trying to shut down a conflict too early or mocking the importance of it will lead to it bubbling out of control because of resentment from the students involved. Conflicts involve a clash of different ideas and ideologies. They also evoke strong emotions. You may be engaged with individuals whose personal or cultural histories include narratives of inequality and oppression or other experiences that give rise to their own sense of fear or anger. It is important, even as you are making the assessment, to acknowledge and validate that feeling content.

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"Assessment … was an obvious first step in conciliation. [Early in the work of the Justice Department's community-wide civil rights interventions,] conciliators learned that perceptions were often as important as facts. In conflict situations it was how the facts were perceived that moved the parties to action."[x]

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MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE: It is important throughout the process to assess the possible outcomes and consequences of the conflict and whatever decisions are made to manage it ("What could go wrong if we follow this strategy?" "Would a different strategy diminish these risks?"). One perspective to keep in mind is that conflict isn't a hassle, inconvenience, or even a bad thing at all. Universities are bound to breed conflict, just from the nature of having so many diverse viewpoints on campus. If
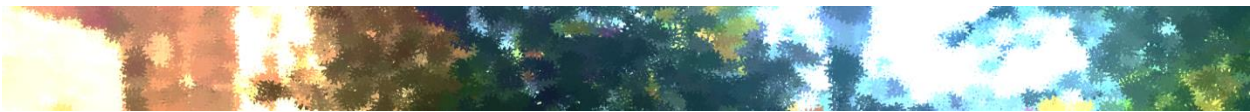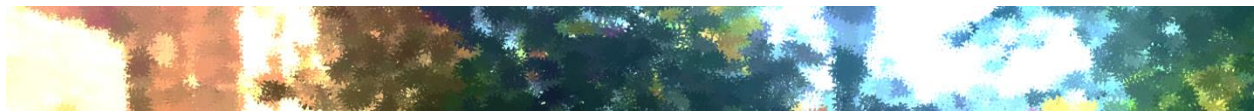
people didn't bring up new ideas or become frustrated with the old, nothing would ever change. You may wish to reframe conflicts for the participants as an opportunity to look at a problem from a new perspective and possibly change the organization, or even the university, for the better.

SUSTAIN COMMUNICATIONS: During conflicts, misunderstandings arise and spread quickly. Therefore, you might play a role in or urge the liaisons to keep up communication with the members of other groups throughout your assessment and the discussions and decision-making within each student organization. If some students involved in the conflict feel unheard or ignored, or worse if they feel they were used by and ratted out by the liaisons, tensions are bound to rise. It's also important to continue following social media posts about the conflict to stay abreast of the situation. There could be new developments that should change the plan of action.

DEVELOP A PLAN: Based on the assessment, the following sequence of decision-making may further the preparation:

> **SCOPE OF THE PLAN:** You and the organizations involved do not need to make a full plan right away. The plan can change as the conflict develops. For instance, at the first meeting, you can suggest that the organizational leadership decide on some first steps for managing the conflict, such as hosting a meeting separately with each of the interested groups. Those meetings and new developments can inform a plan. If one or more organizations implement the beginnings of a plan and maintain communication with the other interested organizations, they demonstrate that they are taking the conflict seriously. An organization can also begin by reaffirming its values, with action steps to follow ("We stand for free speech." "We stand for one person, one vote." "We want to pursue our values but also take care to let others know that we understand their viewpoints." etc.).

> **MEETING WITH ALL GROUPS:** Many conflicts among student organizations can benefit from representatives of the polarized groups meeting together in a carefully planned environment to better understand each other and come to some sort of resolution (e.g., "We agree that we will notify those hosting an event at least a day in advance if we will urge others to walk out or engage in disruptive behavior during the event.") The next section of this guide will provide some ideas for how an organization can navigate and structure such a meeting. It assumes, of course, that you and the leaders decide that talking together is an appropriate next step.

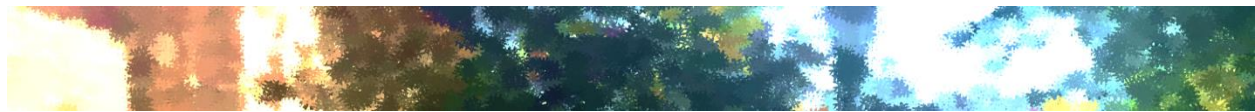| |
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| Consider the space for conversations |
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| Arrange participant seating |
| ↓ |
| Create an informal atmosphere |
| ↓ |
| Define your role |
| ↓ |
| Consider ground rules |
| ↓ |
| Ascertain the participants' goals and your own |
| ↓ |
| Set an agenda |
| ↓ |
| Encourage empathy and mutual understanding |
| ↓ |
| Promote storytelling |
| ↓ |
| Focus on framing |
| ↓ |
| Summarize throughout the session |
| ↓ |
| Take notes |
| ↓ |
| Avoid giving advice or being judgmental |
| ↓ |
| Suggest breaks as necessary |

DURING THE CONVERSATIONS

This portion of the framework focuses on how to facilitate a productive meeting between polarized groups. If the groups agree to use a professional mediator or facilitator, you may be able to turn the planning over to them at this point. But in polarized contexts, student groups often refuse to use someone to play these roles. Thus, it may fall to you, as an administrator, a teacher, or a peer, and any colleagues working with you, to help plan the meeting and/or make suggestions "from the side" as an attendee at the meeting.

It takes planning and coordination to bring two bitterly divided groups together for a meeting in hopes of strengthening social relations between the two groups and perhaps engaging in joint problem-solving. It may be difficult for you to convince polarized persons or groups to meet at first or even at all during a conflict. If polarized groups are not at first willing to meet with each other but you see potential in conducting a meeting between the groups to resolve the dispute and/or create mutual understanding between the groups, you can first meet with each group separately. To build trust in your competence, interest in them, and integrity during this shuttling step, interact with each group in an honest and empathetic manner and direct the conversations to learn about the scope of the dispute as well as the ideologies and values of each group. If you identify a potential for a productive meeting between the two groups during these initial separate meetings, you can utilize the following suggestions in this section to guide the engagement.

CONSIDER THE SPACE FOR CONVERSATIONS: The space in which the meeting occurs can subconsciously impact each participant's mindset going into the session and can either promote teamwork and problem-solving between the participants or can hinder the participants' willingness to empathize and understand each other.
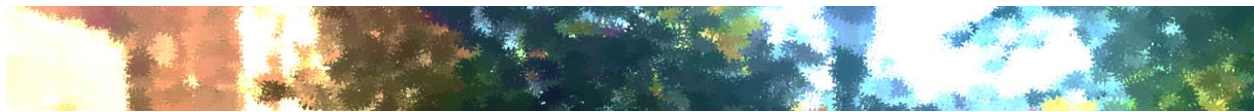
When choosing the space for a meeting, you can first determine if the space is accessible to all participants. And, if not, determine the barriers of accessibility to participants and either select a new space for the meeting or plan for accommodations to address these barriers so that each participant can have an equitable experience within the meeting. Barriers of accessibility can be both physical (i.e., conducting the facilitation session in a space that is not American Disability Act-compliant; conducting the facilitation session in a location that favors one group of participants over the other due to participants' proximity to the location; conducting the facilitation session in a location that necessitates car transportation) as well as cultural (i.e., conducting the facilitation session in a location in which any participant feels uncomfortable or unwelcome due to perceived cultural biases that they associate with the location). If the location inspires resentment for any of these reasons, participants will be less likely to engage in a meaningful way. Thus, there is value in directly inquiring with the participants regarding the suitability of the proposed space.

Consider as well how the level of familiarity of various environments may affect each participant's involvement within the meeting. For example, will participants engage equally within the facilitation session if it is held within a space that is familiar to one group of participants but not the other? Will conducting the meeting in a space that is familiar to both groups of participants create a more informal environment, or will participants associate the space itself or certain items they see within the familiar environment with grievances they experienced with the other group of participants? Will they lose interest in participation? Will conducting the meeting in a space that is unfamiliar to both groups allow participants to focus on discussions and problem-solving without distractions from the familiar, or will the participants' unfamiliarity with the space create unnecessary anxiety and hinder discussions between the participating groups?

ARRANGE PARTICIPANT SEATING: Another factor that can either bolster or hinder progress within a meeting between conflicted participants is each participant's physical position. In the book, *Getting to Yes*, authors Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton recommend against positioning groups of participants against each other (i.e., by having one group of participants sit on one side of a table and having the other group of participants sit on the opposite side of the table), and instead recommend situating each group of participants on the same side of the table so that all participants feel as though they're facing the conflict together.

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"People facing each other tend to respond personally and engage in dialogue or argument; people sitting side by side in a semicircle of chairs facing a flip chart or whiteboard tend to respond to the problem depicted there."
— Roger Fisher, William Ury and Bruce Patton[xi]

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You can also consider seating the participants in a way that mixes participants within each group together, but you will need to consider if this method of participant positioning will be conducive to helping them understand each other or if it will make participants feel anxious and uncomfortable by seating them next to participants they view as the "other". It is also worth considering if it is appropriate to guide where each participant sits at all. Will allowing participants to choose their own seating offer them a sense of autonomy and agency within the meeting and prompt them to be more involved within the meeting? Or will allowing each participant to choose where they sit create unnecessary polarization within the meeting by giving the participants the option to group together and subconsciously entrench them against the other group of participants?

CREATE AN INFORMAL ATMOSPHERE: If both groups of participants are used to engaging with each other in formal settings, it will be worth considering if creating an informal environment for a meeting would be conducive to problem-solving and understanding. This kind of atmosphere can be achieved by setting the meeting space so that it's atypical from more traditional meetings. The idea is to make participants more likely to engage in the session and less likely to judge any problem-solving options that are suggested during the session;[xii] specific actions that can achieve this informal setting include providing food and beverages to the participants and requesting that each participant come to the meeting dressed in informal attire. We found it helpful, for example, to hold a meeting between polarized groups in a convenient spot within their usual classroom building but with an unusual (for that setting) family-style lunch.

DEFINE YOUR ROLE: If you are not a member of either organization, you can clarify your role to the participants at the onset of the meeting. For example, you might be seen "as a substantively neutral person who is not a group member and who works for the entire group"[xiii] or at least someone who has decided to set aside policy views in order to serve the
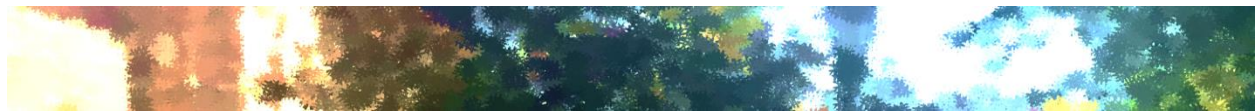
needs of both groups and the larger campus. Otherwise, participants from either group in the meeting might perceive that you are too biased to be trusted and choose not to engage in the session in a meaningful way. The role need not be as carefully choreographed as that of a mediator but can include activities that mediators employ:

- *An "opener of communications channels,"* who initiates communication between polarized people or uses summarization and reframing to improve communication if the participants are already talking;[xiv]
- *A " legitimizer,"* who helps all participants recognize the rationale for others to be involved in the discussions;[xv]
- *A facilitator*, sometimes suggesting a procedure and an order for discussing issues, though you typically will not be a leader;
- *A focuser on interests*, who helps parties to suggest a range of alternatives that fit those interests and delays or helps them move from firm positions;[xvi]
- *An agent of reality*, who encourages participants to assess their alternatives pragmatically.
- *A scapegoat*, who may take some of the responsibility or blame for an unpopular decision that the participants are nevertheless willing to accept (this enables them to maintain their integrity and, when appropriate, gain the support of their constituents);[xvii]
- *A positive force regarding intense emotions,* using preparation, ground rules, framing, breaks, shuttling, protection of all participants from personal attacks, empathy, and choice of participants to move conversations in a constructive direction.[xviii]

CONSIDER GROUND RULES: Suggesting or assisting the group to develop ground rules at the onset of a meeting can guide participation and can also help all participants to retain a sense of decorum during the meeting. Ground rules allow you to identify dysfunctional group behavior among the participants so that you can intervene, help to develop de facto group norms among participants which can enable participants to share the responsibility for improving the process, and can help guide your behavior within the session.[xix] Examples of ground rules can include: limiting the use of labels within the sessions that participants may find to be disparaging, such as "racist" or "woke"; requiring all participants to summarize the points of the last participant who spoke before they're allowed to respond; banning any verbalized criticisms of ideas to allow participants to freely express their ideas without fear of rebuttal; and determining how long each participant can speak during the meeting before they must let another participant speak. You can suggest the ground rules for the session, but it is meaningful to participants if they're allowed to suggest their own ground rules instead; this may lead to the development and inclusion of pertinent ground rules that you may have not considered and may also entice participants to engage in meeting in a more meaningful way, because their input on the process will be heard and incorporated into the meeting.

ASCERTAIN PARTICIPANTS' GOALS AND YOUR OWN: As the meeting begins, you can help the participants focus on articulating their meeting goals. Is your goal to bring two polarized groups together to brainstorm solutions for a problem? Is your goal instead or in addition to enhance the relationships between the participants to produce understanding and social capital between each group while limiting the chance for the escalation of conflict between these groups in the future? Is this their goal as well? If not, are the groups' goals and yours in conflict? Determining meeting goals at the onset will help you interact with the participants and enable a more productive exchange.

SET AN AGENDA: Time is an important resource to consider during a meeting; It can be easy for both you and the other participants to lose track of time during a meeting. If that occurs, participants may devote too much time to one topic while not reserving enough time to meaningfully discuss other key topics. Developing and announcing an agenda before the meeting can increase the odds that the meeting will be appropriately structured to enable the realization of the participants' goals and yours. However, note that an agenda may make the conversations overly rigid; if participants become engaged in a meaningful discussion but the agenda calls for participants to move on to another topic, consider whether adherence to the agenda remains constructive or detrimental to the current state of the facilitation session. As much as possible, achieve agreement from both groups when a decision is made to modify the agenda in order to maintain their trust and build a climate in which they realize that they can agree on some matters, a sense that the "other" is somewhat reasonable after all.

Setting a meeting agenda can also allow you to suggest an order for the issues to be discussed within the session. The order for discussing the issues can provide problem-solving momentum to participants if they begin by discussing an issue in which consensus among all participants appears likely. However, you can also suggest that participants discuss the more difficult issues first if they believe that it would be more beneficial to address the most pressing problems among the participants at the onset of the meeting.

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"[Having learned from experience that no experts could predict
how community-wide conflict would play out,]
"an obvious truth [emerged] that was to become an article of faith:
in the absence of predictability, contingency planning is a must."[xx]

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ENCOURAGE EMPATHY AND MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING: In conflicts stemming from an ideological divide among the participants of each group, your modeling the use of empathetic listening techniques can potentially prevent participants from entrenching themselves in
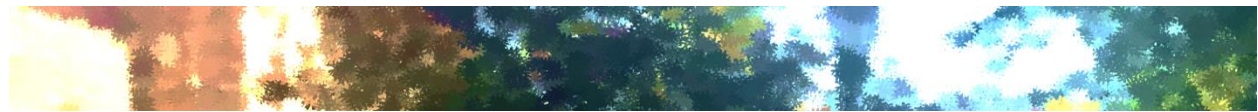
their group's positions at the onset of the meeting. This, in turn, may lead to a more productive collaboration to take place between the participants.

These techniques include verbally reflecting the content and feelings of the speakers and remaining neutral in both tone and body language. To show respect for the speaker, it is important that you neither approve or disapprove of what is being said and are cognizant of what your body language communicates to the participants. Sitting up straight, maintaining eye-contact with whomever is speaking, and not fidgeting or letting yourself appear as distracted communicates your investment during the meeting and tells participants that their meeting contributions matter and have been heard.

PROMOTE STORYTELLING: Storytelling helps participants to communicate their lived experiences to the other meeting participants, which can then humanize them and make it more difficult for the other participants to dismiss the speaker's values and interests. Storytelling can also allow participants to express their own values and may potentially allow other participants to see that they share similar (or the same) values among the participants in the other group. You can identify moments during the meeting in which storytelling can be a constructive tool to generate understanding among the participants and encourage

participants to then speak on their lived experiences (e.g., "Tell us a little about your background, particularly what led you to join this organization?"). The way you promote storytelling can be constructive or detrimental to the meeting; while you might feel like you're asking a participant to share their lived experience with the group in a neutral fashion, the way you communicate this ask might cause participants to feel that they're being asked to provide their account of the conflict in order to justify their position rather than communicate their experience. This can lead to participants declining to further engage if they believe that they're on trial, trying to justify and defend their position to both you and the other participants.

FOCUS ON FRAMING: You can readjust the lens through which participants view an issue within a conflict by reframing the issue so that other facets of that issue become highlighted. Reframing an issue can shift focus from past occurrences between the participants to the possibilities for the future, demonstrate how problem-solving options align themselves

within the interest-based nexus that is comprised of all participants' interests and values and move participants beyond the old ways of thinking about the problem to more constructive ways.

Reframing can also be a useful tool for supplying the participants with more neutral language to discuss the conflict as polarized language will lead to distractions and further polarization among the participants. For example, suppose tensions in a meeting begin to escalate and a participant says something like, "I'm a student who deserves to feel welcome and safe at this university. Inviting a speaker to campus who has made antisemitic statements in the past means that the group has decided to adopt a Nazi approach. I don't want to attend a university that would allow a student group to do that to me." You can use reframing techniques to let the speaker know that they've been heard but also restate the passage in more neutral language, potentially responding with something like, "I hear the reference to feeling unsafe, that this is not just another exercise of free speech to you. I wonder if you would share some of your experiences and also more about what values you would like to see weighed as student groups invite speakers." This type of response allows the participant to speak about their values and humanize their own situation while guiding them away from polarizing language, which can then potentially let the other participants see that they share similar values.

SUMMARIZE THROUGHOUT THE SESSION: Summarization is another useful technique for you during a meeting. By either summarizing what a participant has expressed for the group or summarizing the entirety of the meeting thus far, this technique can help the participants to stay on the agenda and not become distracted by polarized comments, help participants to adopt the more neutral language, build credibility between you and participants by letting the participants know that they've been both heard and understood, and demonstrate progress that has been made within the session by summarizing what has happened within the session. Summarization can also be a useful tool when discussions become contentious; by stepping in and summarizing the session thus far, you can refocus polarized or unhinged discussions and allow the participants a chance to breathe, to take a step back to view the session in a more holistic frame.
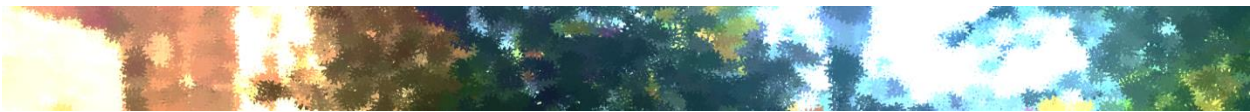
TAKE NOTES: Working from the side to improve a meeting between polarized groups can be difficult and taxing for you as you seek to stay engaged with all participants. You or one of your team can take notes during the session so long as that is consistent with assurances of confidentiality that might have been made. Taking notes on a chalkboard or other writing surfaces that can be seen by all participants can also become a physical demonstration of the progress made by all participants within the session. Of course, putting the visible notes in neutral language might avoid distracting the participants.
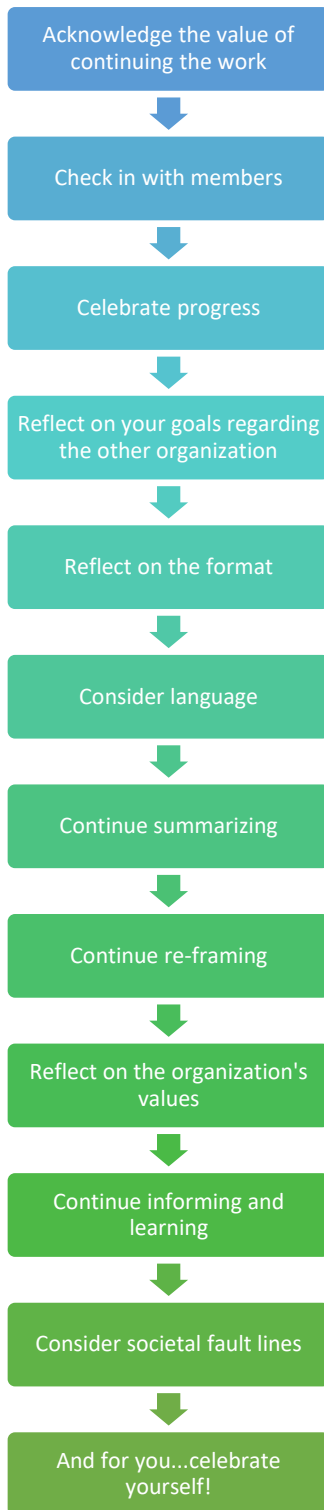
AVOID GIVING ADVICE OR BEING JUDGMENTAL: If you avoid giving advice to other participants, you can maintain their focus on problem-solving or reaching mutual understanding. Likewise, if participants feel like they're being judged for their contributions during the meeting, they may contribute less or not contribute at all, and other participants might become more hesitant to participate in the session if they believe they'll be scrutinized for their contributions. Judgment can also be communicated or interpreted through your body language, so consider using body language that communicates interest rather than apathy or dissent.

SUGGEST BREAKS AS NECESSARY: A potentially contentious meeting can be mentally taxing for all participants, so it is important to identify when the group needs to take a break. If the discussion becomes heated and the participants need to be redirected to the problem at-hand, you can suggest a ten-minute break so that the participants can recollect themselves and return to the session with a clearer head. You can also use summarization techniques whenever the conversation becomes contentious, which lets the values of the participants be communicated in more neutral terms while also allowing participants a window to cool emotions. If participants reach an impasse during the session, you can use a break to speak to participants individually to determine what is contributing to the impasse and what might be an acceptable approach to move the discussion forward.

AFTER THE CONVERSATIONS AND CONFLICT

Acknowledge the value of continuing the work

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Check in with members

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Celebrate progress

↓

Reflect on your goals regarding the other organization

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Reflect on the format

↓

Consider language

↓

Continue summarizing

↓

Continue re-framing

↓

Reflect on the organization's values

↓

Continue informing and learning

↓

Consider societal fault lines

↓

And for you...celebrate yourself!

Once a conversation has been successfully concluded or a crisis has subsided, you can usefully encourage the organizations to take advantage of their experience and prepare ahead of the next consuming situation. You might urge the organizations to consider some or all of the following strategies:

ACKNOWLEDGE THE VALUE IN CONTINUING THE WORK. There might be a tendency, once a crisis subsides, to immediately move on. It might feel natural to take a break. The organization's goals might also still feel uncertain, and it might be unclear what both sides want out of the relationship moving forward. But even if the groups do not plan to meet again soon, it is important to put in time to reflect and adjust plans for the future. Disagreements and tensions might arise in other contexts between other groups, and reflection post-session (*i.e.*, assessing which strategies worked well and which strategies did not) will be helpful in preparing for those possibilities.

This acknowledgement goes hand-in-hand with a group's reflection on its goals. Do they expect tension between groups in the future, or do they anticipate situations might arise that might position the groups opposite each other? If so, might it help to establish lines of communication now in order to best respond to those incidents? Or perhaps simply reflecting on the practical realities of the conversations, such as the initial organizing, the format of the discussions, and the topics, might help groups plan how future conversations might be organized, should they occur. It might also be helpful to use the momentum from resolving the past crisis to sketch out policies or priorities for future conflicts and conversations.

CHECK IN WITH MEMBERS. An organization can rarely bring all of its members to each meeting, so it might be useful to spend time updating members on what occurred during the crisis. Enduring a conflict can be tough on each
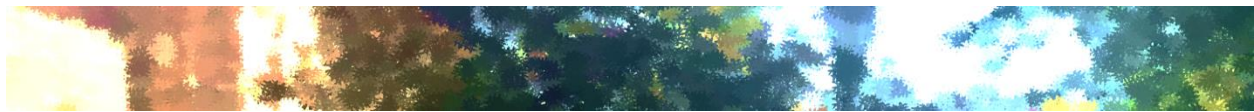
person, so they may want to share their reactions to what occurred and support each other.

CELEBRATE PROGRESS. Take stock of what the groups have achieved so far. Progress includes not only tangible movement toward a stated goal, but also intangibles such as establishing lines of communication with opposing organizations, avoiding future conflict, and gaining a better understanding of the opposing group's values. There could also be value in helping the groups understand that there may be future conflicts. Asking them to reflect on the progress made thus far might inform future conversations between them.

REFLECT ON YOUR GOALS REGARDING THE OTHER ORGANIZATION. Ask if the organization wants to reconcile with the opposing organization, or does it want to simply avoid tension and hostility in the future? Does the organization want a change in policy, or reparations for past harms? Does the organization want to disrupt through advocacy? Or accommodate opposing viewpoints to calm tension? Another goal might be institutional efficacy; how can they continue forward in this situation in a way that maximizes the trust your membership, or the public, holds in your organization?

Even if it seems like an organization's goals cannot or will not be accomplished through meetings or communication with the opposing organization, are these meetings mutually exclusive with that organization's goals? Can the organization still pursue and accomplish its goals while still communicating with the opposing group, or would further communication interfere with your goals?

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"Our goal cannot—and should not—be to eliminate conflict… Our challenge, therefore, is not to eliminate conflict but to transform it. It is to change the way we handle our most serious differences, replacing fight… with more constructive processes such as negotiation, democracy, and non-violent action."
– William Ury[xxi]

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REFLECT ON THE FORMAT, IF INTER-GROUP CONVERSATIONS OCCURRED DURING THE CONFLICT. Note whether the format seemed conducive to the group's goals. If the organizations were to come together again in the future, would you recommend a similar format? Or should future meetings look different in order to end in a better or more productive result?

CONSIDER LANGUAGE. Did you notice any language that seemed to inflame tensions before or during the meeting? If this was not the group's goal when they used that language, can

they create new terms to refer to the same concepts that might prevent defensiveness and lead to more productive learning and discussion?

CONTINUE SUMMARIZING. You can encourage organization leaders to continue summarizing frequently as this can help members focus on key points and values. If it feels appropriate in your role, suggest that they continue checking in with the opposing organization to ensure their summarizations continue to be accurate and up-to-date characterizations of that group's positions.

CONTINUE RE-FRAMING. As the organization members reflect after the meeting, they might find that they wish to alter or distill or emphasize certain positions in light of their experiences during conflict and any gatherings. The organization's overarching goals might also become clearer after the crisis, and it can be helpful to keep everyone updated on any changes or distillations you notice after re-framing.

REFLECT ON THE ORGANIZATION'S VALUES. Are there any values the organization shares with the opposing organization? Even if there are disagreements relating to ideology or policy, are there values that underlie both organizations? Is their mutual willingness to sustain open lines of communication a value that they both share? Does their mutual membership and participation in the university or college community reflect a shared value between these organizations?

CONTINUE INFORMING AND LEARNING. If you feel like the polarized groups are operating from different bases of information or experience, encourage them to continue sharing information and stories that might be relevant to the disagreement. It might be helpful to set expectations about how to effectively share and communicate in a way that does not inflame tensions. Storytelling that might be helpful in this context includes stories about individuals' backgrounds and how these backgrounds shape their understanding and perception of the world. Stories about our backgrounds can help opposing groups understand the values that underlie a group's positions. Storytelling might also include accounts about how individuals
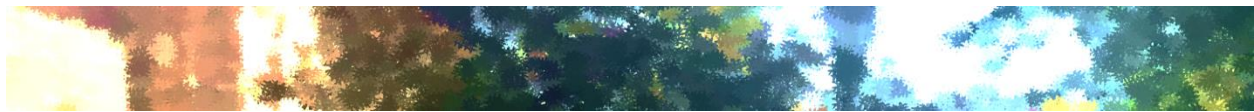
experienced and perceived previous disagreements or instances of tension between the two groups—sometimes reactions to inter-group tension are more similar than they might think.

If the conflict is apparent to the campus community or beyond, can they inform the public about their positions and values and how these values are reflected by their work? Do they think the community or the opposing group misunderstands their positions? Can they remedy this misunderstanding? Suggest that the groups reflect on what aspects, if any, of this experience they want available to the public. They can acknowledge what they would like to be public or private and take next steps accordingly. You might also ask the participants to consider how they wish to communicate about the meeting to their constituents, and what their message will be.

CONSIDER SOCIETAL FAULT LINES. Did you notice any substantive disagreements on definitions or basic values? Groups with opposing viewpoints will never agree on all premises. But we sometimes overestimate how well opposing organizations understand each other's premises. Encourage the organizations to spend time distilling the values most important to their organizations, and practice what it would be like to communicate those values to a group with an opposing viewpoint. Defining terms can be useful to ensure clear communications. It's likely the groups will continue disagreeing about many different matters, but agreeing on basic definitions can help clarify what the disagreement is really about. It can also help the opposing group better understand your group's positions.

For example, think about the value "free speech." Most of us probably value free speech, but throwing around the term without taking time to express our definitions can cause confusion and ineffective communication. Groups might disagree about what it means to uphold free speech. Is free speech a constitutional doctrine or a value that applies to us as individuals? What are the benefits of what each group believes to be free speech? Are there downsides to either group's definition or understanding of the term? Does upholding free speech require inviting all viewpoints to speak at a college or university? If so, does it require each student group to invite varied viewpoints, or just that the college, on the whole, has access to varied viewpoints? Do the groups agree on whether the analysis is affected by the concept of platforming, or by payments to speakers for their appearances?

Groups don't just disagree on definitions; they also disagree on how certain values should be weighed against other values. After each group has had a chance to express the values that are important to them, reflect on how the weighing process differs between the two groups. It's possible that a group's decision to hold one value as more important than another will not change. But it is helpful for a group to understand the opposing group's values, how it defines those values, and how it weighs those values against other considerations.

AND FOR YOU....*CELEBRATE YOURSELF!* It takes no small measure of courage to enter a conflict, perhaps especially "from the side". Your willingness to help two conflicting groups move their conversations beyond polarization, toward greater understanding and new ways of engaging with each other, is an important contribution to a more civil society.

Endnotes

[i] The co-authors were graduate and law students in the Ohio State University course, Engaging Polarized Groups, taught by Tom Gregoire and Nancy Rogers in Spring, 2023. Anthony Long served as the assistant for the course. This framework is published under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial license, authorizing copying and redistribution for nonprofit purposes. A special thanks to members of the Divided Community Project and others who added insights from their work as mediators and helped with editing, including Sara Childers, Bill Froehlich, Teri Murphy, Josh Stulberg, and Andrew Thomas.

[ii] Nancy Rogers, Robert Bordone, Frank Sander, and Craig McEwen, Designing Systems and Processes for Managing Disputes 6 (2d ed. 2020).

[iii] The U.S. Department of Justice Community Relations Service provides civil rights mediators to advise on collaborative approaches to conflict. See https://www.justice.gov/crs.

[iv] Tess Winston, Opinion: With Some of My Fellow Stanford Law Students, There's No Room for Argument, Washington Post, April 3, 2023.

[v] Id.

[vi] Susan Carpenter and W.J.D. Kennedy, Managing Public Disputes 11-15 (2001); James Coleman, Community Conflict 4-5 (1957).

[vii] Earnest L. Boyer and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, Scholarship Reconsidered: Priorities of the Professoriate 7-8 (1990).

[viii] Susan Carpenter and W.J.D. Kennedy, Managing Public Disputes 7 (2001).

[ix] Kwame Christian, How to Have Difficult Conversations About Race 87 (2022).

[x] Bertram Levine and Grande Lum, America's Peacemakers: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights 35 (2d ed. 2020).

[xi] Roger Fisher, William Ury, and Bruce Patton, Getting to Yes 63 (1992).

[xii] Id.

[xiii] Roger Schwarz, The Skilled Facilitator 8 (2016).

[xiv] Christopher Moore, The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for resolving Conflict 18 (4th ed. 2014).

[xv] Id.

[xvi] Nancy H. Rogers and Richard A. Salem, A Student's Guide to Mediation and the Law 28 (1987).

[xvii] Christopher Moore, The Mediation Process: Practical Strategies for resolving Conflict 18 (4th ed. 2014).

[xviii] Susan Carpenter and W.J.D. Kennedy, Managing Public Disputes 245-257 (2001).

[xix] Roger Schwarz, The Skilled Facilitator: A Comprehensive Resource for Consultants, Facilitators, Coaches, and Trainers 10 (2016).

[xx] Bertram Levine and Grande Lum, America's Peacemakers: The Community Relations Service and Civil Rights 31 (2d ed. 2020).

[xxi] William Ury, The Third Side: Why We Fight and How We Can Stop xix (2000).