



Civic Education and Engagement and Civil Discourse Fellows FAQ on Civic Discourse

These questions and answers are meant to be the beginning of a conversation and not the final word. This is a living document and it may be revised. Please suggest other questions to civicfellows@suny.edu. Thank you.

Q: What is the difference between civil and civic discourse?

A: These terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes used in ways that are distinct from each other; there are varied meanings for each but, our conception for the purpose of the Civic Discourse core competency in the SUNY General Education Framework is as follows:

The phrase “civic discourse” refers to reasoned discussion of civic issues which incorporates multiple perspectives. The term “civil discourse” has been used to refer to the same concept, with an emphasis on showing respect and facilitating conversation with people who may have different opinions. There has been a recent shift away from the use of “civil” due to concern that this term implies that all ideas presented through discourse merit equal consideration and respect, whereas it is clear that not all civic actors engage with integrity and the public sphere is far from an equitable space. The issues central to our most polarizing debates affect Americans in profoundly different ways. For certain segments of the population, the resolution of these contentious matters may carry substantial and potentially adverse consequences for their lives, so it is important to preserve the concepts of public good and equity through the term “civic.”

Q: What is discourse?

A: Discourse, in simple terms, is the exchange of ideas through conversation and dialogue. We can look to the concept of intergroup dialogue for more details as to what this process looks like:

- An environment for conversation is created.
- The conversation is situated within a particular context, discipline, or goal.

- Conflicts will emerge from multiple perspectives and be explored.
- There will be movement from conversation to action: what next?

Q: What is the end goal of civic discourse?

A: The end goal of civic discourse is to find greater understanding and common ground on issues understood through diverse perspectives and viewpoints. This can unfold in any context or discipline. The process of discourse has already been outlined above and starts with setting ground rules/norms in advance, which might include:

- Boundaries as to what topics are relevant to the discussion, and which are not. Self-awareness of your own biases and assumptions.
- Listen to understand, not only to respond.
- Ask genuinely curious questions to better understand points of disagreement.
- Take breaks and/or be willing to close the discussion if it's not productive.
- Acknowledge that dialogue is hard and be comfortable with uncertainty.

Q: What does civic engagement look like?

A: Civic engagement in higher education can take many forms, each designed to engage students with their communities and to develop nonpartisan civic skills.

Some examples include:

- Credit-bearing courses which integrate community projects with academic study, allowing students to apply classroom learning to address real world challenges.
- Voter engagement: campus initiatives to support nonpartisan voter registration, education, and turnout through curricular and co-curricular programs and activities.
- Civic advocacy: campuses can involve students in learning about opportunities to influence public policies, laws and regulations to address social, political and environmental issues including writing letters to representatives, peaceful protesting, community organizing, and public campaigns.
- Civic dialogue and discourse: structured opportunities for discussion of issues which may include single or multiple presenters, small group

breakout sessions led by discussion leaders, or other arrangements appropriate to the topic and number of attendees.

- Volunteerism and community service: local and global community service experiences provide students with co-curricular applied learning opportunities to address community priorities and develop civic skills.
- The Empire State Service Corps is a paid internship opportunity for students to contribute towards civic concerns such as food security, K-12 education, and climate change.

Resources:

- [Civic Engagement in Higher Education: Concepts and Practices | Campus Compact](#)
- [As the Dust Settles: A Snapshot of Civic & Community Engagement at Community Colleges | Campus Compact](#)
- [Empire State Service Corps - SUNY](#)

Q: What is the value of civic education?

A: Civic education in higher education holds significant value for students and society. Civic engagement fosters a sense of [personal and social responsibility](#); encourages understanding of individuals' role in a democratic society; helps to develop [skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, and respect for diversity](#); provides applied learning opportunities that promote academic growth; and provides opportunities to improve retention and graduation rates.

Resources:

- [The Effects of Community-Based Engagement \(AAC&U\)](#)
- [All In? Or Just Some? \(Inside HigherEd\)](#)
- [The need for civic education in 21st-century schools \(brookings.edu\)](#)

Q: What does it mean to be “non-partisan,” and is this a requirement on public university campuses?

A: Student groups commonly discuss and may bring politicians and activists to campus to speak on issues they care about which may be controversial. In those cases, state university employees must act on the principle of “content and viewpoint neutrality.” Reasonable “time, place, and manner” restrictions may be “narrowly tailored” to limit “disruption” of educational activities on

campus, but all points of view that fall within the status of speech “protected under the First Amendment” must be allowed to be heard. Definitions of the words and terms bounded by quotation marks not surprisingly are the subject of fierce debate both on campus and sometimes in courtrooms. [First Amendment Watch at New York University](#) and the [Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression](#) offer guides, teaching modules, glossaries, case studies, and analysis which can help students and educators understand their rights and responsibilities. Another excellent source of in-depth research on these topics is the [University of California National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement](#).

Q: Is it appropriate for professors to discuss their political points of view in the classroom?

A: Opinions vary on how much educators should reveal their own political preferences and ideology in the classroom. Doing so can demonstrate reasoned decision-making as a central element of citizenship skills. Doing so too much can chill the speech of students who disagree, and perhaps even create a classroom environment which feels discriminatory. [Current case law](#) suggests that professors have wide latitude to use their judgment in matters of assigning course content and pedagogy, without a requirement for even-handedness. Nevertheless, this latitude should not be overly broad, exceeding the purpose of instruction. According to American Association of University Professors [Guidelines](#), “teachers are entitled to freedom in the classroom in discussing their subject, but they should be careful not to introduce into their teaching controversial matter that has no relation to their subject” In short, there is a difference between speech permissible under law, and speech advisable within guidelines of professional responsibility.

Resources:

- American Association of University Professors, [Academic Freedom of Students and Professors, and Political Discrimination](#)
- University of Chicago, [Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression](#)