

Working Group on Civil Discourse

Consultation Themes and Preliminary Recommendations

Introduction

We are presenting the following themes and preliminary recommendations to the University of Toronto community in advance of submitting our final report to the Provost. The Working Group has deliberated deeply and held many discussions based on what we heard during our community consultations, the results of the online survey, and initiatives and practices at peer institutions and on our own campuses.

This preliminary document should not be seen as a substitute for the full report, which will offer insight into the underlying rationale for each of the recommendations. Rather, it offers a **high-level summary** of the themes, observations, critiques, and suggestions that emerged from the consultations that were held in Fall 2024. While this is not an exhaustive list of every item we heard, we intend it to capture broadly the points we heard repeatedly in our discussions.

Because the war in Gaza was a major subject during the consultations, we received many comments that were focused specifically on how issues arising from the war were manifesting on our campuses. However, the focus of the working group is not on any singular event but rather how the University can better foster an environment that is conducive to productive dialogue, debate, and discussion. In this summary, we have attempted to distill the feedback related to specific incidents into common themes.

If there is something that you think we have overlooked or perhaps not heard that does not appear to be represented in the themes below, please let us know via our [online form](#).

Summary of what we heard

Definition of civil discourse

- The term can be perceived as creating a chill on discourse itself and also derives from knowledge traditions and practices that privilege and ratify Western perspectives to the exclusion of others.
- “Civil discourse” is often confused with “civility,” which distracts from the core meaning of the term and the important aspects of the definition
- Should recognize that discourse can cause harm even when it is not intended

- Be careful when referring to “norms” and common standard; who determines what is normative?
- Should recognize that a “willingness to take risks” is easier for some people than others, depending on their personal experience of marginalization or precarity
- Some respondents expressed the worry that a focus on civil discourse could lead to the perception that every view should be given weight within the university context, including that that academic experts have deemed to be non-valid (e.g., “both sides”-ism)

Programming

- While programs that support civil discourse exist on campus, there should be more and these should be widely-publicized
- Many staff and student groups are already offering programs that intersect with and develop skills for challenging discourse and these should be acknowledged
- Frequent training opportunities should be offered for students, staff, faculty and librarians on facilitating and participating in “civil discourse”
 - These should include information on the role of emotion and physical experience in dialogue, managing conflict, hearing difficult things, building empathy, and repairing working relationships
- There should be more town halls or other opportunities to engage with University leadership
- More events should be held across all our campuses that model civil discourse – not just one position on an issue but events that showcase how to disagree

Classroom environment

- There are excellent examples of pedagogical interventions that have strengthened the exposure to and practice of civil discourse in the classroom, for example:
 - structured debate on non-contentious issues
 - embedding concepts and approaches that encourage students to reason from other people’s points of view
 - rotational leadership exercises that encourage multiple perspectives
 - including language in the syllabus and first day of class stressing the importance of disagreeing well and setting the values and behaviours that will be expected in the classroom;
 - consistent use of opportunities for productive discourse in class so students (and instructors) are prepared to use their skills when extreme challenges arise
 - explicitly affording students the opportunity to dissent from a majority view or make mistakes in the service of learning without being penalized

- Some undergraduate students noted that the readily perceived political biases of their instructors in the classroom did not leave room for counterarguments.
- Some students and faculty fear being canceled or socially ostracized if they disagree with particular opinions that correspond to perceived left-wing or progressive views associated with EDI, on subjects like sex and gender, vaccines, and Israel and Palestine, and likewise when it comes to interrogating the principles and practices of EDI itself.
- Some community members perceive that the leftist positions and ideologies noted above have become so presumptively orthodox at the University, this over-determines what material is taught in class and what views are legitimate and acceptable
- Instructors fear addressing contentious issues in the classroom, even if they are relevant to course material, for fear of cancellation and retribution on social media and elsewhere
- Instructors and others should be aware of how differences in culture, personal experience, and background can affect how people express themselves in challenging and contentious discussions
- Generally, students in STEM disciplines reported that civil discourse was not an issue in their classrooms, where those in the humanities and social sciences seemed to report more challenges

Faculty/division/departmental environment

- Like students, faculty and staff reported fear of retribution for expressing what they perceive as minority views within their departments and divisions
 - Especially pronounced for pre-tenure staff, CLTAs and sessional instructors on the faculty side and non-unionized staff
- Staff indicated a lack of clarity on what protections they have with respect to speaking freely about contentious issues
- There was some confusion about the difference between “civil discourse” and behaving civilly that illuminated that there are issues regarding some staff feeling like second-class citizens relative to faculty
- Staff would like to be more included in planning for civil discourse initiatives as they perform important front-line work with students and faculty in creating the conditions and sometimes the training for civil discourse at the University
- Some faculty reported significant polarization within their departments based on political viewpoints with respect to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine
- People holding “conservative” viewpoints reported feeling isolated within their divisions and departments

Perception of University administration and leadership (i.e., President, Vice-Presidents, Provosts, Vice-Provosts, and Governing Council)

- Many respondents expressed frustration over a perceived lack of transparency about decision-making from University administration
- There is strong support for more timely and transparent communications from University administration and leadership, particularly during crises
- There is a sense that senior University leadership does not do enough to engage with students in particular, and is inaccessible to them
- Some faculty reported feeling that senior leadership is too constrained in statements to their academic colleagues by considerations determined by legal and communications professionals
- Some reported that they found the tone of communication from University leaders to be distant and condescending
- Some perceived University administration as hostile to protest
- Some perceived University administration as too permissive of protest

University structure and culture

- Decentralized structure means makes it challenging to have a centralized strategy to encourage civil discourse
- Structure of University feels opaque and overly complicated to many students, which makes knowing how to have their views heard difficult
- Students (and staff and faculty) have a lot to say and nowhere to say it; when it comes up, it bursts out; we need to provide more avenues for expression
- Power imbalances among different levels of staff, students, and faculty and librarians are a challenge civil discourse
- Competitive culture at U of T can be both inspiring and demoralizing, making the stakes for “being right” higher, which can lead to challenges to civil discourse
- Campuses with predominantly commuter student populations, UTSC and UTM, have particular challenges in fostering community, which can make establishing a norm for civil discourse difficult
- Some respondents object to the principle of neutrality within the University and indicated that there are some issues that the University should be taking a stand on

Broader factors that negatively impact civil discourse

- Perceived orthodoxies associated with EDI inhibit freedom to express dissent or to pursue ideas that challenge these orthodoxies, thereby challenging teaching, learning, and research activities
- Post-COVID impacts that have affected how students are prepared for disagreement and challenging conversations
 - Mental health concerns
 - Challenges to resilience in younger generation
 - Students coming out of COVID may rely more heavily on social media to model behaviour for dealing with conflict
- Increased polarization in society in general
- Impact of social media as well as mis- and disinformation and the erosion of trust in society
- Geopolitical events, such as the war in Gaza

Other

- Timing of civil discourse project and working group is suspect
 - Suspicion that it is an exercise intended to silence pro-Palestinian activist voices
- Exclusion from staff from working group was a significant point of unhappiness
 - Sense that staff contributions to creating an environment for civil discourse is not valued by the administration

Preliminary Recommendations

R1: Make an institutional commitment to civil discourse in the research, teaching and co-curricular activities of the University

The need for this working group, as well as the feedback we received through the consultations, indicates that the University needs to ensure that a commitment to respectful and productive dialogue, discourse, and inquiry is recognized as a central part of our shared culture. We heard strongly that this commitment should not take the form of a policy; rather, we recommend that the University seeks to embed its commitment in consistent and institution-wide communications and support for civil discourse as an explicit value. We also recognize that any success in this respect depends upon more than just centralized commitments but likewise on this manifesting in academic divisions, departments, programs, individual classrooms, and various other learning and research settings. Many of our subsequent recommendations are made with the goal of fostering and modeling this attitude across the university in local academic communities, classrooms, and co-curricular spaces and initiatives.

Action items

- a. Create a university-wide statement of commitment to civil discourse
- b. Convey leadership support and expectations for civil discourse, in all orientation and introductory materials for faculty, librarians, staff, and students joining U of T.
- c. Provide clarity as to how the University's commitment to civil discourse fits with other University statements and commitments

R2: Provide ongoing institutional support for activities and initiatives that foster civil discourse

Due to U of T's size and decentralized structure, local initiatives that foster civil discourse should be encouraged in ways that will engage people from many perspectives. To stimulate and reward the development of such initiatives, the University should consider devoting funds and/or administrative support for activities that further the training or practice of productive dialogue, debate and inquiry across our communities.

Action items

- a. Appoint a faculty member to serve as University Advisor on civil discourse, who in turn will convene meetings with colleagues across the university, with a remit to promote initiatives in this area.

- b. Establish an institutional fund to support civil discourse-related research and programming with particular attention to initiatives that feature interdisciplinary collaboration, collaborative teaching, and creating space for diverse viewpoints; should be open to full community to seed, sustain, or scale civil discourse activities across the University
- c. Encourage and develop expertise on civil discourse within academic units that can be referred to by members of the university, including faculty, and also librarians, staff, students who seek ways of fostering civil discourse

R3: Encourage familiarity and experience with civil discourse in the classroom

Teaching is one of the University's core responsibilities and arguably plays the most important role in developing the skills and expertise that enable students to contribute meaningfully to society and to achieve success in their chosen fields. The capacity to encounter difference, challenge ideas, and participate productively in disagreement and debate is crucial to a well-rounded and sophisticated education, grounded in critical thinking and rhetorical skills. The University should ensure that its students build these competencies in core courses throughout the curricula of its various academic programs.

Action items

- a. Explore idea of creating a common curriculum for all first-year first-entry division undergraduates that allows for a common conversation, whereby students can develop a shared base of skills, capacity and disposition towards challenging discussions and issues
- b. Create resources for faculty to draw on in their courses, so as to create a culture of civil discourse (e.g., language for syllabi on civil discourse, establishment of "Chatham House rules" for the classroom, social media guidance, case studies and other exercises to use in class, training on holding difficult discussions, modules on civil discourse especially for STEM courses)

R4: Enhance and improve opportunities for civil discourse within individual divisions and departments

We heard clearly in consultations that many faculty members and staff feel that civil discourse is threatened or lacking in their own divisions and departments. The University should encourage Deans and Chairs to implement practices and structures to encourage better communication, engagement, and dialogue within their departments and divisions

on a regular basis, such that a culture of discourse, even about challenging issues is the expected norm.

Action items

- a. Encourage divisions and departments to develop or draw on existing formats (like Faculty Councils, etc) to foster civil discourse and ensure broad access to trainings, events and initiatives, and to identify and pursue new opportunities for the practice of civil discourse (e.g., time outside of departmental meetings for discussion of difficult issues)

R5: Offer training on facilitating civil discourse across constituencies and encourage the formation of local networks and communities of practice to generate ongoing grassroots engagement in discourse opportunities, best practices, and problem-solving

One of the key challenges to civil discourse can be a lack of skill or familiarity with managing difficult conversations. While some people may be more skilled in this area, training on how to facilitate and engage in controversial subjects, and likewise be prepared to deal with the pressures of social media in these situations, can help create better environments for discussion.

Action items

- a. Develop programming and training on civil discourse in the classroom for teaching assistants, instructors, and faculty
- b. Establish training programs for students and staff on fostering civil discourse and the importance of encouraging, engaging with, and respecting multiple perspectives, in co-curricular settings (e.g., student group training)
- c. Identify civil discourse champions from across the university who will work as a team to identify and initiate institutional and local opportunities for civil discourse
- d. Encourage and support the establishment of informal communities of practice for civil discourse, especially in non-classroom settings (e.g., student leadership groups, etc)

R6: Improve transparency, visibility, and approachability of University leadership and senior administration and encourage engagement with the whole University community

To foster trust in University leadership and create an atmosphere where civil discourse is seen to be modeled at the highest levels of University administration, leaders should take steps to improve their accessibility to students, staff, librarians, and faculty as well as increase transparency with respect to how and why decisions are made. As an example, senior leadership might consider holding regular townhalls with the community.

Action items

- a. Increase clarity about decision-making (i.e., guiding principles, rationale, and reasons for confidentiality where necessary)
- b. Create channels and/or events for University leadership to explain to new students, staff, librarians and faculty how the University works (e.g., decision-making processes, timeframes, roles, etc.) and for two-way discussion to occur between the University community and leadership (e.g., open townhalls, Q&As)
- c. Adopt a more personalized, approachable style for leadership communications and re-examine what many perceive as a highly-controlled, risk-averse communications style

R7: Create channels, spaces, and events to promote civil discourse across the University and develop incentives for facilitating, engaging in, and modeling civil discourse within the university community

One of the challenges of a large university such as U of T is finding information about particular topics. Civil discourse is no exception. We know that currently there are many initiatives that already support civil discourse at the University. However, knowledge of these is limited. The University should take a proactive position and establish consistent spaces and vehicles for dialogue on which the university community can rely on an ongoing basis and recognize those who are pursuing exemplary work in this area. This need not be in conflict with the University's position on institutional neutrality; rather it would be an arena within which this position can be emphasized while also allowing space for civil discourse to occur.

Action items

- a. Explore different forums to provide information about commitments and actions, resources and wayfinding regarding civil discourse at U of T, lists relevant events, and sets institutional expectations around civil discourse

- b. Establish a plan for staging high-profile institutional events (e.g., conference on civil discourse, speaker series featuring public intellectuals and/or top scholars on contentious topics) to maintain momentum and model a consistent approach to civil discourse
- c. Establish a recognition program for civil discourse at institutional level, identifying members of the community who are engaged in this work in exemplary and influential ways, whether through their research, teaching, or community engagement
- d. Explore the creation of outlets where civil discourse can be promoted/exercised (e.g, community news/issues source that is not a “brand outlet” but that allows for debate to occur on issues that are important to the University community).

R8: Deepen engagement with the broader external community beyond U of T

As an anchor institution in the Greater Toronto Region and a leader in the Canadian, North American, and global post-secondary landscape, U of T is in a unique position to collaborate on, model, and innovate practices and initiatives that further civil discourse in our societies more generally. We should aspire to be a leader in this area, and to encourage other institutions locally, nationally, and internationally to focus on preparing young people to participate fully in democratic processes through civil discourse.

Action items

- a. Collaborate with other Canadian and international universities on supporting civil discourse in the sector
- b. Identify and expand opportunities to work with community partners to support civil discourse skill building (e.g., ethics bowl)