

Administrative Response to the Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse

University of Toronto, May 2025 **Introduction**

Universities have a unique role in society as places to discuss and examine difficult issues. Approaching a problem with curiosity and an open mind is central to our mission of teaching, research and discovery. This is a time when divisions within our society are being amplified by a variety of forces, and the skill of listening with empathy and engaging contradictory viewpoints without resorting to personal slights can seem in short supply.

It is in this context that I asked Professor Randy Boyagoda in January 2024 to take on his role as Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse and support the University in strengthening an environment in which robust dialogue, academic curiosity, and civil engagement on difficult questions can thrive. Professor Boyagoda and the members of the Working Group who took on this task conducted extensive consultations with over 1,500 participants. As befits a project on this topic, they listened carefully to the perspectives of our community, thoughtfully weighing the results of those consultations – through data analysis, environmental research, extensive deliberations, a retreat, and many follow-up conversations with campus experts – to ensure that their recommendations were substantive and practicable.

The result is that the findings of their report reflect the diverse perspectives and voices within our community. This level of diligence and accountability is a testament to the commitment of all involved. On behalf of the President and the University, I thank everyone who contributed to this effort.

I am pleased to accept all of the recommendations put forth by the Working Group. I encourage the entire University of Toronto community to read the [full report](#) and actively engage in implementing these recommendations. The actions that are proposed here are designed to amplify the good work that is already taking place at U of T and to spark reflection and further innovation. It is vital now more than ever that universities take conscious steps to build capacity for civil discourse as part of our academic mission. In a time of increasing divisiveness, our efforts will benefit the academy and civil society as a whole.

Issues Raised in Consultations

The Working Group conducted its consultations during challenging times, in the aftermath of the October 7th attacks on Israel and subsequent war in Gaza, and against the backdrop of many protests, including an encampment on the St. George campus. All this came as the University continued to grapple with the lasting impacts of COVID-19, which have limited in-person interactions and social engagement, straining our sense of academic community. Rebuilding this sense of community is crucial, and we must find ways to bring people together in person more often. This foundation is essential for fostering productive disagreement and robust dialogue in and out of the classroom.

During their consultations, the Working Group identified several obstacles to civil discourse that we as a community must be mindful of as we consider next steps.

The report highlights that members of our community in general feel positively about their experiences of civil discourse in the classroom. In consultations, some members said that they censor themselves in different settings when addressing controversial topics: some faculty members worry that students may record and post classroom interactions; some students feel intimidated by each other when social media exchanges grow acrimonious or by instructors when they convey strongly held political views; and some staff encounter a power imbalance with faculty members who benefit from additional protections such as academic freedom.

This pervasive sense that ‘power resides elsewhere’ undermines our shared belief in the fundamental principle of free expression, which is crucial for a vibrant and inclusive academic community like ours. Free expression allows for the exchange of diverse ideas and perspectives, fostering intellectual growth and mutual understanding, as enshrined in our [*Statement of Institutional Purpose*](#). As we work to build capacity within our community to engage in difficult conversations, we must be mindful of the vulnerabilities and power imbalances felt by others and the trust that is required to engage across these differences, as well as the legal obligations that all members of our community share, such as compliance with the Ontario *Human Rights Code* and other relevant laws and policies. We also need to be mindful about providing space and frameworks that enable those with marginalized perspectives to feel able join the conversation.

Some members of the community spoke to the Working Group about a chilling effect on candid campus conversation when it comes to polarizing issues related to race, sex and gender, faith, and most recently, responses to the war in Israel and Palestine. Footnote 4 of the report helpfully notes the distinction between the practice of equity, diversity, and inclusion and perceived orthodoxies that some people feel can constrain campus dialogue.

There also is clearly a desire for greater transparency in decision-making and more openness from senior leadership in all areas. I am working with the President, the President-Designate, the VicePresident, People Strategy, Equity and Culture, and other senior leaders at U of T to better understand some of the underlying factors informing these findings, while maintaining our core commitments to diversity and excellence, transparency and accountability, and academic freedom.

The findings also underscore the importance of our ongoing work to improve communications at U of T. The University’s system of governance includes publicly available agendas and reports as well as open meetings that are broadcast live. Recent efforts, such as my regular [newsletter](#) to faculty members and librarians, my office’s [weekly digest](#) of administrative news, and the creation of the [UTogether](#) web site, which focuses on information for the University community, along with other strategies can be used to raise awareness of the workings of the University, how issues are considered, and how decisions are made.

Addressing Terminology and Definitions

The report lays out a very helpful “living definition” of civil discourse, rightly flagging the term as contested due to diverse histories within our community and the term’s similarity to “civility.” This latter word can sometimes be misused to chill the speech of others, including those who have traditionally been marginalized in academia.

I hear and acknowledge these critiques while pointing to principles underlying these terms that would appear to be consistently supported by our community: fostering dialogue and discourse across our differences, with respect for each other and for the law. While we may not need to use the term “civil discourse,” the essence of respectful and constructive dialogue remains central to our mission at U of T.

Throughout the consultation process, the Working Group heard numerous accounts of uncivil conduct, as distinct from civil discourse aimed at sharing ideas and learning from one another. The University of Toronto has established policies and procedures to address instances when discourse is not civil, particularly as it impacts the workplace environment and/or involves the legal framework of the Ontario *Human Rights Code*. During the preparation of this report, the government of Ontario released Bill 166, prompting the University to reaffirm its commitment to addressing discriminatory, harassing, and uncivil conduct. This includes a [review](#) of the *Statement on Prohibited Discrimination, Discriminatory Harassment, and Sexual Harassment* that is currently underway.

Providing our community with the skills to examine and debate contentious issues without treading into demeaning or harassing attacks is essential to what the report refers to as “our capacity to disagree well.” The work of the Provostial Advisor as expressed in this report is akin to preventive maintenance, aiming to minimize the frequency of people taking offense and maximizing the ability of all of us to engage in constructive and empathetic dialogue in furtherance of learning and knowledge – even when emotions are high. While the University will still need to intervene in a corrective manner at times, our goal is to foster an environment where respectful and productive discourse is the norm.

Responses to the Recommendations

The report from the Working Group on Civil Discourse includes eight recommendations, primarily focusing on faculty and students, as set out in its mandate.

In response, work will begin immediately in two areas:

- Enhancing Civil Discourse Education
- Promoting Best Practices

To facilitate this, **Professor Boyagoda has agreed to a six-month extension of his Provostial Advisor role in order to implement these actions by December 2025.**

Professor Boyagoda can consider whether an **advisory committee could assist in guiding the implementation of the recommendations.** Professor Joshua Barker, Vice-Provost, Graduate Research & Education, has agreed to serve as an assessor to such a group, if needed. I hope that these steps will lay the groundwork for Vice-Provosts, Deans, Chairs, Directors and others to take action as well.

Enhancing Civil Discourse Education

Creating the conditions for our students to engage in meaningful and challenging discussions begins with foundational work. To that end, action is beginning on the following:

- **Entering students should have a meaningful opportunity to engage in learning the skills of civil discourse, generally within their first year.** I have asked Principals and Deans on all three campuses to begin this work in the Fall of 2025.
- Creation of a [Learning & Education Advancement Fund Plus \(LEAF+\)](#) for **projects that foster civil discourse, to provide seed funding of between \$5,000-\$10,000.** Initiatives could introduce students to the principles and practices of civil discourse (active listening, facilitation, disagreeing well, etc.), as well as lectures and events designed to model dialogue and promote engagement on topics of broad interest, including on controversial or contested topics.
- In addition to the LEAF+ program, which is open to faculty members in undergraduate and graduate programs, the School of Graduate Studies will also support **programming related to civil discourse for graduate students**, including through the [SGS Sponsorship Fund](#) and the [Graduate Education Innovation Fund](#).
- The Office of the Vice Provost, Faculty & Academic Life and the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation will offer opportunities and resources **for faculty members and instructors to develop and practice skills to teach and facilitate dialogue across difference.** This could include materials, seminars, workshops, access to expert advisors and orientation sessions for faculty and instructors, teaching assistants, clinical advisors, and others who work with students in the classroom and experiential learning settings.

Promoting Best Practices

The University of Toronto has many faculty members who have experience in fostering the conditions for robust civil discourse and dialogue, both in and out of the classroom. For example, many of our students in the health sciences learn in clinical settings and are taught skills to have difficult conversations. Other examples of this excellence are highlighted in the list of classroom successes on page 16 of the report. To build on this experience and expertise, we will take the following actions:

- **Develop a resource to share best practices at U of T.** The Provostial Advisor, along with the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students, will develop an institutional hub for sharing and amplifying successful strategies to build on existing, and deepen further, a culture of respectful dialogue across all areas of our three campuses. From reading the report and talking with colleagues over the past year-and-a-half, I know there are many initiatives already taking place and believe U of T has a role to play as a leader in this area.
- **Highlight civil discourse initiatives and practices institutionally and in disciplines and Faculties.** For example, the [Discovery Series](#) organized by the Office of the ViceProvost, Innovations in Undergraduate Education, and the Centre for Teaching Support & Innovation's annual Teaching & Learning Symposium can include dedicated sessions for those who work on civil discourse, dialogue, and debate.

- Staff play an integral part in enacting these recommendations. The University of Toronto is fortunate to have talented staff working on these initiatives under the direction of academic leaders. In order to bring together faculty and staff in this area, I call on academic divisions to work with the Provost's Division and the Office of the Vice-President, People Strategy, Equity, and Culture to establish **communities of practice** to provide support, resources, and opportunities on civil discourse in ways that are specific to the context of individual disciplines.

Conclusion

Let me end by expressing my sincerest appreciation to Professor Randy Boyagoda, the members of the Working Group on Civil Discourse, senior assessors, project team, and all those who participated in this vital initiative. Their dedication and hard work have been instrumental in shaping a comprehensive and insightful year-and-a-half-long campus conversation, culminating in their thoughtful report, which will guide our efforts to foster a more robust culture of civil discourse at the University of Toronto.

As the Working Group members observe in their report,

“Broadly and locally instilling and sustaining cultures of generous engagement and productive inquiry is an ongoing, shared effort that will require generosity and intentional commitment from the entire U of T community.”

I call on each and every member of the U of T community to reflect on these findings and participate in the actions above, as well as in initiatives in your own campuses, Faculties and departments, in order to build on the tradition of thoughtful, curiosity-driven exploration of difficult questions that is at the heart of our mission as a university.

Professor Trevor Young

Vice-President & Provost

University of Toronto