

The Civil Discourse Lab

FOR COLLABORATIVE LEADERSHIP AND THE
PUBLIC GOOD

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The Civil Discourse Lab for Collaborative Leadership and the Public Good at the University of New Hampshire integrates education, research, and civic engagement grounded in a dialogic ethic to purposefully rethink *the relational practice* of civil discourse and civic reasoning in the 21st century. Our mission is “to strengthen the ability for our students and community members to conduct meaningful conversations, collaborate, and make decisions about sometimes difficult but important topics to a civil society.” Our work emphasizes the fundamental connection of human beings in the pursuit of pluralistic discourse, while rebuilding social trust (in one another) and institutional trust in public higher education as a pillar of our democracy. The Civil Discourse Lab was co-founded and is co-directed by Associate Professor Renee Heath and Professor Jennifer Borda in the Department of Communication at the University of New Hampshire.

History of the UNH Civil Discourse Lab

The Civil Discourse Lab (CDL) at the University of New Hampshire was established in December 2017 and launched its first dedicated course, *Public Dialogue and Deliberation*, in the Communication Department in January 2018. That course taught a curriculum anchored in civil discourse concepts of dialogue and constructive conflict, and trained students to design, host, and facilitate public dialogues on the topics of immigration, addiction, estuary health, gender and racial equity, to name a few. In our first five years (2018-2023), more than 1,700 people—including faculty, students, local politicians, and other community members—participated in interactive dialogues. Other courses were added to the Communication curricula over the next few years, including *Communication and Deliberation Across Differences*, which focused on deliberative inquiry, a process that requires listening, exploring unbiased facts, analyzing adversarial perspectives, weighing options, and negotiating tradeoffs. Annual public deliberations were held on voting rights and responsibilities each fall from 2020 through 2022. Two lower-division courses are offered regularly—*Collaborative Leadership* and *Introduction to Civil Discourse*—introducing students to key concepts related to civil discourse, democratic virtues, dialogue and deliberation, and began the practice of simulating conflict and collective decision-making situations typical of trying to solve wicked problems.

The CDL coalesces curriculum (classes related to dialogue, deliberation, civil discourse, and collaborative leadership); curricular and co-curricular experiential and high-impact learning for students; workshops and professional development opportunities for faculty/staff; and a robust research program. More than 600 students participated in our experiential-based curricula over five years and volunteered a combined 2,269 hours in co-curricular or extra-curricular event design and facilitation. Fifty-one alumni who devoted 10 hours or more to the CDL between 2018-2023 have participated in a study that points to the success and relevance of our methodologies (forthcoming). While we no longer run the Civil Discourse Lab as an extracurricular opportunity for students, we recently launched a two-credit Civil Discourse Lab class open to both Communication majors and non-majors, and stackable to four credits if taken over two semesters. The CDL curriculum designed and cultivated for undergraduates since 2018 has become a cornerstone of the Communication major at UNH and is now an elective option for Sustainability Dual majors at UNH, an elective cognate requirement for the new Public

Health Policy major in the College of Health and Human Services, and approved as Honors units credits for the Honors College.

In 2023, the CDL added “for Collaborative Leadership and the Public Good” to its name and made the decision to do fewer convenings and supporting events outside of the classroom (extracurricular work) and focus more on systemic change inside and outside of the university. As faculty, we are concerned not only with universities’ role in upholding and advancing liberal democracy, but ways that we may *rethink our role and the relevance of the university as integral to democracy’s flourishing*. To fulfill the democratic mission of our land-grant university, the Civil Discourse Lab for Collaborative Leadership and the Public Good serves as a research and teaching hub for understanding the state of public discourse on complex community problems that New Hampshire citizens are concerned about and university researchers have the methods and knowledge to help address. We reimagine higher ed’s commitment to the public good by bringing communities and researchers together to co-investigate locally situated issues and needs. We are committed to a dialogic ethic that pursues the co-creation of meaning, understanding, empathy, and transformation. The Civil Discourse Lab for Collaborative Leadership and the Public Good operationalize Ronald J. Daniels’ recommendations in *What Universities Owe to Democracy*: empowering our students and community members by leveraging civically engaged dialogue across difference in service of the shared production and interpretation of both expert and local knowledge.

Integrating Experiential Learning, Research, and Engagement for the Public Good through CIRCLE

Our programming addresses the question: what is the role of the university in a modern democracy? And, more specifically, what is the role of the Civil Discourse Lab in fulfilling the public university mission of a public good by connecting our state, flagship university to the needs and concerns of NH citizens? New Hampshire is a small, politically moderate state, swinging with some regularity between Democratic and Republican governance. However, the various towns and communities of New Hampshire represent a microcosm of the nation at large, from the progressivism of the Seacoast region to the more conservative former mill or logging towns in the North Country, from rural communities facing demographic decline to the diverse and politically “purple” demographics of our major cities (Concord, Manchester, and Rochester). This ideological, socioeconomic, and regional diversity is reflected in our student body, as well as in the commitments of our faculty researchers to “Embrace New Hampshire” by addressing complex problems that impact our state, our region, and the nation at large.

With our program, we have demonstrated that creating the conditions for dialogue, talking “through” rather than “at” or “to,” is integral to the process of collaborative inquiry and a necessary prequel to shared decision-making and problem-solving. These conditions already exist in dialogic practices: setting up a room with ground rules and facilitators (guardians of the dialogic ethic); creating openings for encounters with diverse perspectives and opposing viewpoints; developing capacities to evaluate the credibility and civic relevance of expertise; and complexifying public problems by asking good questions. This approach disrupts partisan binaries by prioritizing a policy (solutions) lens rather than a political (ideological) orientation.

We design deliberative dialogues that navigate divisions, surface concerns calling for intervention, and animate shared values and interests to drive solutions. For example, citizens along the NH and Maine coasts experienced unprecedented winter storm damage over the last few years. While these residents may disagree on the existence or root causes of climate change, as flood waters inundated their driveways and endangered their homes, they may discover proximity and social connection in their collective desire to better understand, mitigate, or adapt to rising sea levels that directly impact their properties and livelihoods. To address such topics, our interactive dialogues foster [discursive openings](#) by foregrounding contested language and perspectives particular to issues (rather than persons) and allowing participants to determine their own meaning and understanding (rather than interpret information or prescribe solutions). Building on this framework, we design the conditions necessary to teach people to be skeptical of adversarial modes that fuel polarizing stances on emotionally charged issues and, instead, to be more receptive to collaborative models of co-investigation, understanding, constructive conflict, and problem-solving.

To meet these objectives, in 2024-2025, we created two consecutive Lab courses that offer a practicum to students to facilitate conversations that connect the citizens of New Hampshire with university research that impacts their lives. This initiative creates *a reciprocal listening exchange* by aligning academic and community expertise to better understand *how people are talking and thinking together about public problems*, and to influence *how academics develop research questions*, or decide *which community problems are in need of research solutions*. Our newly launched CIRCLE (Conversations at the Intersection of Research and Community Listening Exchange) series convenes scientists, scholars, thought leaders, advocates, students, and citizens in conversations across the state that consider “What Should We Do?” These exchanges open a space for applied research collaborations between universities and the communities they serve. Together, we can contemplate what kind of communities we want to live in, what we need to do to get there, how fast we should go, and how much risk we are willing to assume in implementing solutions.

The CIRCLE deliberative dialogue series also functions as a living “lab” for our students to experiment with the design and facilitation of public participation. With this revised approach, our CIRCLE public meetings will run twice a year for the next two years with the help of CDL Engaged Research Fellows, selected by the CDL advisory board based on how well their research engages public problems and community issues in need of solution. The Fellows’ research serves as the impetus for the public deliberative dialogue, which is framed to encourage participants to deliberate public policy solutions. Fellows agree to consider the data collected from public feedback in their future work. We believe this project is replicable and could fundamentally change the relationship between universities and their communities. We envision scaling our project beyond the pilot to partner with New Hampshire community colleges and possibly other civil discourse programs at New England universities.

Civil Discourse Leadership Boot Camp at the University of New Hampshire

As a part of our organic growth, CDL faculty have been called on to train university leaders, New Hampshire state legislators, K-12 teachers, for-profit organizations, and community college faculty across New England. However, the demand for our training and guidance on implementing civil discourse concepts and curricula is beyond what we can accommodate given the obligations of our professorships. We believe our expertise in translating curricula related to constructive conflict, dialogue, consensus, and civil discourse positions us to fill a leadership gap. We believe the missing piece in current civil discourse programs is a leadership academy or institute that reaches out to faculty and upper-level administrators in other universities, community colleges, and the K-12 system, as well as leaders in industry and nonprofit organizations. We are not practitioners in the traditional sense (i.e., New Hampshire Listens at the UNH Carsey School for Public Policy serves this role by running and facilitating dialogues in service of the state). We facilitate difficult conversations as a pedagogical tool to teach our students, but this is not our primary focus. We also are not a bridging group that brings polarized parties together to talk across differences, although this may be an outcome of our training. When we train leaders, we do so not as a response team to facilitate negotiation of a singular conflict, but as a teaching team that offers professional development with our own and others’ communication curricula designed for institutional transformation around civil discourse.

Civil Discourse Lab Co-Directors

Professor Renee Heath has 20 years’ experience researching dialogue and collaborative decision making in communities, while Professor Jennifer Borda has more than 25 years’ experience researching rhetoric, deliberation, and public discourse, including advocacy campaigns. Renee Heath’s award-winning textbook on *Interorganizational Collaboration* provides a communicative model for working across differences while paying attention to power at the individual, relational, and institutional level. This work resonates with those in leadership positions and has been used in policy schools at all levels. Jennifer Borda contributes insight as a rhetorically trained deliberative scholar who specializes in public discourse and social change. Her research also has addressed

the issue of gender inequity, further cementing our commitment to a democratic, egalitarian culture. Both Renee and Jen were individually awarded one of UNH's highest honors, the University Teaching Excellence Award, in 2019 and 2021, respectively. Our distinct attention to dialogue, conflict, and collaboration with an eye towards how power works at all levels contributes to a cutting-edge curriculum that we have already translated across leadership groups. Professors Borda and Heath also have been recognized as national experts in civil discourse with invitations to the Kettering Foundation Democratic Initiatives Learning Exchange, Aspen Institute Wye Faculty Fellows Executive Leadership seminar on "Citizenship in the American and Global Polity," the SNF Ithaca Leadership Summit at the Biden School of Public Policy & Administration, the Global Listening Centre, the Alliance for Civics in the Academy, and, most recently, invited presentations at the Building Next-Gen Leaders: Empowering Students to Navigate a Divided World conference hosted by the National Conflict Resolution Center and Applied Research Center for Civility and the New England Commission of Higher Education Annual Meeting.

Unlike other deliberation and policy experts, our work is grounded in communication, dialogue, and constructive conflict concepts. We are able to translate, at a granular level, the communication practices and structures that cultivate civil discourse and discursive opening. Central to our work (and not always central to other deliberative scholars and practitioners) is the role of power. We have developed workshops for leaders at the highest level of higher education. After designing a workshop for our own University President's Leadership Council in June 2022, we were asked by the former UNH Provost to speak to the Association of Public Land Grant Universities Provosts' Council to share our approach to civil discourse in higher education with academic leaders from across the nation. We aim to create an authentic civil discourse economy where civil discourse is part of the wealth and resources we draw upon to live.