



## EDMOND & LILY SAFRA Center for Ethics

### **Civic Engagement & Civil Discourse at Harvard**

Eric Beerbohm, Faculty Director, Edmond & Lily Center for Ethics

The Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Ethics (ELSCE) has long worked at the intersection of civic engagement and civil discourse. These efforts have become more concentrated and integrated over the past decade in response to democratic institutions showing obvious signs of fraying, while increasing polarization has taken hold of the political and social landscape affecting institutions of higher education.

Our Intercollegiate Civil Disagreement Fellowship (ICDP) is a consortium of five colleges and universities located throughout the United States. The mission of the ICDP is to advance fundamental democratic commitments to freedom of expression, equality, and agency; develop students' skills to facilitate conversations across political difference; and create spaces for civil disagreement to flourish on college campuses.

The core of the ICDP is a cross-institutional fellowship that brings together students from a range of public, private, two-year, and four-year institutions. The fellowship develops students' abilities to engage in and lead conversations about difficult, important topics across political difference at their respective universities and beyond. Eight fellows are selected from each partner school. Fellows will receive training in facilitation, engage in deliberative conversations within the fellows' group, and have opportunities to interact with speakers from different sectors.

In Fall of 2023, Harvard College launched the certificate for Civic Engagement, which supports and recognizes students who integrate academic study with sustained public service to become more informed, engaged, and effective citizens. Students combine coursework that includes rigorous analysis of social issues and critical assessment of the policies, strategies, and practices designed to address them with direct involvement in community groups and/or policy and advocacy organizations. They are encouraged to relate what they learn in these different settings to their personal commitments and professional goals after graduation.

### ***Civil Discourse Initiative***

Our founding director, [Dennis F. Thompson](#), did pioneering work on civility, including his classic paper with Amy Gutmann, [“Moral Conflict and Political Consensus” \(1990\)](#). Our previous director, [James Bryant Conant University Professor] [Danielle Allen](#), made initiatives around civil discourse a priority during her tenure, and her work leading the [Presidential Taskforce on Inclusion and](#)

**Belonging** identified the need to bring together principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion and academic freedom, which the task force viewed as mutually supportive.

Over the past few years, the Center has run a civil disagreement public lecture series. We hosted moderated conversations among four panelists coming from different points of view on a single issue, from immigration to abortion, to model healthy dialogue across difference. This effort allowed us to explore topics in an intellectual, honest way, a deep way, and a sensitive manner.

Over the next five years — and we hope beyond that— we propose to lead widespread and lasting change at Harvard through concrete and measurable contributions in four domains:

- Mixed-method research for understanding civil discourse
- Developing curricula
- Events and programming
- Expert consultancy and dissemination

Our short-term and medium-range plans are modeled on the successful pedagogical innovations and high-profile events we have already built, tested, and refined. Partnership with the College and FAS has paved the way for us to bring niche programs and events, such as the Intercollegiate Civil Disagreement Partnership fellowship program and the Civil Disagreement Series panel events to a much wider audience.

#### ***Mixed Method Research for understanding civil discourse:***

All our programming and pedagogical efforts must be grounded in sound research. To that end, we seek to expand our work into a larger research, inquiry, and development lab to inform how to design, implement, and assess our educational programming. A research lab will enable us to:

- attract top talent across disciplines who can contribute to the knowledge base that informs our understanding of the field of civil discourse, particularly in university settings, as it rapidly develops.
- build an assessment team to develop measurements and assessments specifically for ethics and civics curricular and co-curricular interventions. Such as team would position ELSECE to oversee Harvard's assessment efforts for Civil Discourse branded programming and course interventions.

#### ***Developing curricula:***

Thoughtful pedagogy recognizes the power of both formal and informal learning settings. Our hope is to instill a culture of civil discourse at Harvard that operates on two parallel tracks with frequent points of intersection across both settings. We are building an expansive database of resources that will support faculty, TFs, and administrators in need of proven methodologies for fostering open inquiry and engaging students in civil disagreements. We will also continue to partner with relevant partners (e.g., the College, FAS, and the Bok Center) to deliver tailored workshops and trainings.

***Events and programming:***

High-profile Civil Discourse events, such as our Civil Disagreement Series panels, serve several purposes. However, they contribute to a campus culture of open dialogue and intellectual curiosity in three important ways:

1. Open conversations on issues our campus communities wish to discuss but do not know how to get started.
2. Serve as models for faculty, staff, and students on how to disagree productively on hard topics.
3. Create opportunities for continuing conversations in the yard and the houses through our co-curricular programs centered on small group facilitated discussions.

***Expert consultancy and dissemination:***

ELSCE aims to support and strengthen Harvard's culture of learning while solidifying the University's role as an innovation leader, helping others in the higher education space to achieve widespread culture change on their campuses.