

## **The Campus Civility Conversation: An Appreciative Approach to a Collaborative Conversation**

**Sarah C. Darling**  
**University of South Carolina**

Campus leaders nationwide have indicated the importance and need for institutions to focus on civility, both in definition and action, highlighting its role in the day-to-day functions and interactions on college campuses (Gomez, 2008). Given the importance of civility, it is imperative that higher education institutions employ a strong theoretical infrastructure for campus dialogues on this topic.

This need for discussions about civility to have a theoretical infrastructure was first brought to my attention when I served as the student body president of my undergraduate institution. In 2011, I had the opportunity to work with a select group of student affairs professionals to create a workshop regarding campus civility, specifically for our President's Advisory Leadership Council. The council consisted of several administrators, diverse members of the faculty, student leaders, and key community partners. The two goals of our workshop were to facilitate a conversation that defined "civility" on our campus and to identify council members who would act as leaders in a campus-wide civility effort. While there was plenty of dialogue sparked at this workshop, because there was no theoretical grounding to our work, the structure and follow-up discourse regarding our campus civility conversations were not as robust as we had hoped. Subsequently, in graduate school, I have learned about a comprehensive theory-to-practice framework called Appreciative Education, which would have been a powerful way to theoretically ground the conversation on civility at my undergraduate institution.

Appreciative Education is a strength-based framework that guides practices leading to both organizational change and personal growth in education (Bloom, Hutson, He, & Konkle, in press). Derived from both positive psychology theories (Seligman, & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) and Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Srivastva, 1987), it includes six phases: Disarm, Discover, Dream, Design, Deliver and Don't Settle. This article provides concrete steps that campus leaders can use to facilitate campus conversations on the topic of civility based on the Appreciative Education theoretical infrastructure.

### **Taking an Appreciative Approach to Campus Civility Conversations**

#### **Disarm**

When bringing campus leaders together to discuss the topic of civility, the Disarm phase focuses on creating a safe, welcoming environment that encourages and welcomes the sharing of ideas about civility (Bloom, Hutson & He, 2008). Strategies for accomplishing this goal include the facilitators warmly welcoming those invited to participate in the conversation, providing an overview of the six phases of Appreciative Education, followed by conducting an icebreaker activity that will provide the opportunity for individuals to meet one another.

One example of an icebreaker requires participants to write down the title and headings of the first five chapters of their own hypothetical autobiography and then share their

compositions with the group at large. Not only does this activity help participants to learn more about one another, but it often compels individuals to express their values or experiences that have defined their “story.” This is just one example of an activity that can be used during the Disarm phase, as there are a number of different icebreakers that may be more appropriate based on the size or make-up of the group. Again, the goals of the Disarm phase are for the facilitator to establish a welcoming environment and provide an intentional opportunity for participants to become more comfortable with one another before delving into a discussion of campus civility.

### **Discover**

The Discover phase makes use of positive, open-ended questions to learn more about participants’ stories (Bloom et al., 2008). Discover phase questions are meant to encourage thoughtful reflection, helping participants identify with others’ experiences and understand how these opportunities have shaped that individual’s approach to the topic of civility. For this portion of the dialogue, it is first recommended that participants be divided into pairs or small groups in which they can take turns asking one another questions. Potential questions for discussion within pairs or small groups include:

- Tell me about a time when you or someone else on our campus went out of their way to help another member of the campus community.
- As an institution, what are we doing well in terms of nurturing a civil environment?

These initial points of inquiry within the Discover phase focus not on analyzing the shortfalls of an institution, but instead highlight even the smallest victories within the campus community. This approach not only identifies the foundation of campus civility, but also draws attention to the tenets of these successes and how they later might be used to implement change (Finegold et al., 2002).

After participants have answered the first set of questions within their pairs or small groups, ask the small groups to pair up to share their stories. Challenge the groups to document common themes that emerge from the stories. Note that depending on the size of the group, it may be beneficial for all the participants to come together to share stories and identify common themes. Most importantly, the focus of this dialogue is to share common themes that highlight the “best of what is” (Finegold et al., 2002, p. 239) regarding civility within the campus community among constituents, departments, organizations, etc. The role of the facilitator is to isolate these successes as they are shared, and explain that the answers to addressing issues at the institution can be found in the everyday victories that emerge from the stories generated within the group discussion (Finegold et al., 2002).

### **Dream**

The goal within the Dream phase is to create a vision of what might be possible in terms of the topic under consideration (Bloom et al., 2008). The role of a facilitator in the campus civility conversation is to assist the group and encourage them to work together in devising an idea of what can be done at the institution to facilitate a campus environment that supports civility. In an effort to promote the idea of imagining what might be possible for the institution,

participants should share thoughts (in small groups or as a whole) pertaining to questions such as:

- How can we facilitate more of the civility that emerged through the stories we shared earlier?
- Imagine that it is five years from now and our campus has won a national award for being the most civil campus in the country. What is happening on our campus that earned us this designation?

As the vision emerges from the dialogue, it is important that the facilitator consistently document the common themes that promote positive change and new possibilities related to civility. These common themes can then be built upon in the final phases of the discussion.

### **Design**

The goal of the Design phase is to incorporate concrete, incremental, and attainable goals within a plan that allows what was discussed in the Dream phase to become a reality (Bloom et al., 2008). The role of the facilitator within this phase is to encourage participants to discuss how the vision that emerged during the Dream phase can be translated to a purposeful direction in terms of defining and supporting civility in all aspects of a campus community. Such planning has been referred to by scholars as provocative propositions, which are statements of the future organization written in present tense (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000) that challenge an organization to move from where it is to where it would like to be. The goal is to establish guidelines for any future structure or policy changes (Finegold et al., 2002). The statements constructed will not outline particular actions to be taken, but are meant to invoke deeper thought and to be actionable (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). Therefore, the facilitator should pose the essential question of the Design phase, “Now that we have talked about our aspirations for creating a civil campus, what kinds of steps do we need to take to make this a reality?”

### **Deliver**

The intention of the Deliver phase is to move beyond the planning stage, and actually implement ideas or methodologies that were prompted in the Dream phase and formulated in the Design phase (Bloom et al., 2008). To generate specific action steps and teams that will be responsible for carrying out various plans, participants should be allowed to meet with other people who have similar interests in carrying out specific parts of the plan devised during the Design phase. The small groups should come up with specific goals and sub-goals for accomplishing the various components of the plan. After these steps are established by the small groups, the facilitator should bring all participants back into one group where action plans and necessary support for implementation can be vocalized (Whitney & Cooperrider, 2000). The goal after this initial discussion in the Deliver phase is for the facilitator to prompt participants to establish task groups responsible for certain action items pertaining to campus civility.

## Don't Settle

As our students continue to evolve, it is essential that the campus conversation on civility also continues to evolve. Therefore, the Don't Settle phase challenges the institution to proactively raise the expectations of civility within the campus community (Bloom et al., 2008). It is essential that the task forces that are established be held responsible for completing their objectives. Follow-up sessions should include reports from the various task forces. Questions that can be posed during these follow-up sessions include:

- We have done great so far in our new initiatives regarding campus civility, but what is something that we can do even better?
- If our institution was challenged to become the best it could possibly be with regards to civility, what would we need to change about our practices?

Facilitators are reminded that institutions cannot rise to low expectations, but rather will thrive as they are challenged to reach new levels of accomplishment (Bloom et al., 2008).

## Conclusion

Civility has a role in each day-to-day interaction within and outside of higher education. Because of the commitment of institutions to the continued knowledge and development of students, it is the responsibility of campus leaders to initiate the campus civility conversation. We must strive to instill better civility practices on college campuses so that students are well prepared to be respectful and responsible citizens. Peter Levine (2010, p. 16) writes:

The business of colleges and universities is the production and dissemination of knowledge both for and with citizens as well as the promotion of dialogue and debate. Part of their responsibility is to provide literal spaces in which citizens can meet and talk. Campuses are often well positioned to host issue forums and to convene diverse community partners, with members of the campus community, for community problem solving. In doing so, they can serve as neutral facilitators who establish the tone for collaborative problem solving.

By taking an appreciative approach to promoting civility on college campuses, campus leaders have the opportunity not only to establish the tone for a collaborative conversation on civility, but also to engage others in a theoretically grounded and sustainable dialogue benefitting the entire campus community and society at large.

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