

## Discussion Prompt: Promoting Civility in Co-Curricular Spaces

**Duration:** 30 - 45 minutes

**SLOs:** Students will define and discuss civil discourse, examine the impact of civil and uncivil discourse in co-curricular spaces, draw evidence from primary sources including audiovisual testimony on the topic of civil discourse, and consider strategies for its promotion.

### Step 1

- **Overview:** In this section, students will explore their understanding of civil discourse.
- **Discuss:** Open the discussion by asking students what is civil discourse and what does civil discourse look like on a college or university campus.
- If relevant, offer the sentence starters below as possible prompts:
  - *I think this means...*
  - *I agree with \_\_\_\_\_ because...*
  - *My ideas are similar to \_\_\_\_\_ because...*
  - *I hear what \_\_\_\_\_ is saying, but I disagree because...*
  - *My idea is different than \_\_\_\_\_ because...*

### Step 2

- **Overview:** In this section, students will be presented with a definition of civil discourse and asked to compare it to their prior understanding.
- **Consider:** Present students with the following definition of civil discourse. Offer some context: this definition is provided by the National Institute for Civil Discourse, a nonpartisan organization based at the University of Arizona:
  - *Civil discourse is the free and respectful exchange of different ideas. It entails questioning and disputing, but doing so in a way that respects and affirms all persons, even while critiquing their arguments.*
- **Discuss:** Ask students to share their interpretation of and reaction to the definition. To what extent do they agree or disagree with the definition. If relevant, remind them of the suggested sentence starters. Explain that students will first consider how civil discourse, or the lack thereof, affects the broader community before considering civil discourse in the context of the university setting.
- **Optional:** Expand the discussion by asking students to consider the following questions: Why is civil discourse needed? When is civil discourse needed? Encourage students to exchange their ideas.

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### Step 3

- **Overview:** Next, students will be introduced to another primary source: testimony.
- **Testimony Clip:** Display Agnes Adachi's bio (included at the end of this Discussion Prompt). Then show students Agnes's clip of testimony to gain a different perspective on civil discourse, its breakdown, repercussions, and repair.
- **Discuss:** Ask students to share their interpretation and reaction to Agnes's testimony. Why wasn't civil discourse present in this situation? What occurred when civil discourse broke down? How was it repaired and restored?

### Step 4

- **Overview:** Next, students will be asked to reflect on the need for civil discourse on college campuses.
- **Discuss:** Depending on the number of students present, break the students into smaller discussion groups. Encourage students to share experiences from their college or university. The following questions may help prompt discussion: What are some examples of when the students recognized or experienced civil discourse in their classrooms or living situations? What are some examples of when the students recognized a lack or breakdown of civil discourse, either in person or online? What were the attitudes and ideas shared across these instances of a lack of civil discourse? How are attitudes and ideas connected to the lack of or presence of civil discourse? If relevant, how did the college/university administration respond? How did the student body respond? How does the involvement of the media play a role in civil discourse? How did the media respond? What would have been an appropriate response or action on the part of the administration? The student body? The media?

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### Step 5

- **Overview:** Next, students will be asked to consider what ground rules or components are necessary to foster civil discourse on campus. If possible, write up the list of terms and/or rules so that everyone can see them and reflect on the terms selected.
  - *Examples may include: active listening (or listening with the intent to understand, rather than the intent to reply), constructive sharing (thinking through what feedback or content may benefit the conversation rather than “win” a debate), and mutual respect.*
- **Remember!** Civil discourse is grounded in the goal of bettering society, not in being polite. Civil discourse means having difficult, often tense conversations about differing views that often cause one or all interlocutors to feel uncomfortable or challenged. Try to encourage students to think through how to transform difficult conversations into constructive conversations rather than avoid them. Ask students to reflect on times when they might have responded to criticism defensively or when they offered criticism with good intent, but someone else misjudged their motives. What are attitudes or behaviors that can minimize or fend off defensiveness in the pursuit of a civil discourse?
- **Optional:** Display Nicholas Winton’s bio (included at the end of this Discussion Prompt). Then show students Nicholas’s clip of testimony for a list of the values that make up standard ethics. Ask students how his list of standard ethics relate to civil discourse.

### Step 6

- **Discuss:** Facilitate a discussion about how to foster civil discourse on campus among students. This is an opportunity to practice some of the rules they drafted as they share! Encourage students not only to share their own thoughts, but react to the responses of their classmates. Guide them to ask new questions that relate the conversation on civil discourse on campus to broader themes and ideas about promoting civil discourse throughout society.
- **Optional:** Have students write their responses in preparation for a final discussion.

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### Agnes Adachi Biography

Agnes Adachi was born in 1918 in Budapest, Hungary, the only child of a textile magnate and his wife. She had a comfortable and happy childhood. Having been raised largely without religion, Agnes had little awareness of the divide between Jews and non-Jews. In the 1930's, however, as Europe's economy suffered, Agnes noticed more bitterness towards the Jews from Hungarians who saw them as being better off than they were. After finishing her education, Agnes went to Germany to stay with family members, and remembers getting to see Jesse Owens run in the 1936 Olympic Games. She attended university in Switzerland between 1939 and 1942, and while there she felt shielded by the political turmoil that went on in Europe. She couldn't believe that it could reach Hungary, but two years after she returned home, Hungary was invaded by Germany. Agnes had friends in Sweden who wanted her to come stay with them, and they sought the help of Raoul Wallenberg, a Swedish diplomat and humanitarian who helped arrange for her to be granted protection by the Swedish government, as well as papers to move to Sweden. As the war grew more chaotic, it became impossible for Agnes to leave Hungary with her family, and she experienced the horrors of the German occupation. Right before Christmas, she got word of the orders of a mass execution of Jews at the Danube. She went to the Danube along with Swedish diplomats and helped victims escape the river. By early 1945, the Russians began to bomb Budapest as well. In 1945, Agnes and her family finally made their way out of Hungary. The journey lasted months as they were detained. When she finally arrived in Sweden, she found out that her visa to the United States had cleared, and in May of 1945, she settled in Philadelphia with her parents. She met her husband, a Japanese doctor, at the symphony. They married quickly and went on to have two sons. Agnes helped create a foundation, named after Raoul Wallenberg, to help encourage humanitarianism in youth.

This interview took place on March 29, 1996, in Forest Hills, New York.

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### Nicholas Winton Biography

Sir Nicholas Winton was born on May 19, 1909, and was a young British stock broker at the onset of World War II. After Germany marched on Czechoslovakia, he organized the Czechoslovakian Kindertransport and safely transported 669 children, most of whom were Jewish, from Czechoslovakia to Britain. Winton became involved in rescue when he received a letter requesting his assistance with hundreds of children displaced or at risk due to the German invasion. Winton flew to Prague to learn more and soon after, he got to work facilitating refugee emigration to Britain, initially posing as an associate of the British Committee for Refugees from Czechoslovakia before joining them in an official capacity. Winton helped to secure residence permits for children, organizing necessary funds, guarantors, foster families, and supporting organizations. These children traveled to the UK unaccompanied due to hostility and suspicion towards adult refugees and lived with foster families. Winton worked with counterparts in Prague to arrange logistics and train transportation carrying 669 Jewish children safely from Prague to Britain before the outbreak of World War II sealed international borders. Most of the children's parents were later killed at Auschwitz. Winton went on to volunteer in several capacities during the war but rarely spoke of his rescue efforts; his heroic actions were not known publicly until 1988, when his wife found his scrapbook with documents and names of rescued children from the war in their attic. Nicknamed "the British Schindler," Winton was knighted by the Queen in 2003 and reunited with many of the children he saved – now grown, with children and grandchildren of their own. It is estimated that over 6,000 people in the world are alive today because of his actions.

This interview took place on September 17, 2013, in Maidenhead, Berkshire, in the UK.