



FOR INFORMATION

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TO: UTM Campus Council

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DATE: May 7 for May 27, 2025

AGENDA ITEM: 6

ITEM IDENTIFICATION:

Final Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse and Administrative Response

JURISDICTIONAL INFORMATION:

The Terms of Reference for the UTM Campus Council state that campus and student services; co-curricular programs, services, and facilities; relations with the Campus's external community; and student societies and campus organizations on the UTM campus are within the areas of the Council's responsibility.

The Final Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse and the accompanying Administrative Response address items that fall within these areas, and both items are presented to the Council for information.

GOVERNANCE PATH:

1. Agenda Committee [for information] (May 20, 2025)
2. University Affairs Board [for information] (May 21, 2025)
3. UTSC Campus Council [for information] (May 26, 2025)
- 4. UTM Campus Council [for information] (May 27, 2025)**
5. Academic Board [for information] (May 29, 2025)
6. Executive Committee [for information] (June 12, 2025)
7. Governing Council [for information] (June 24, 2025)

PREVIOUS ACTION TAKEN:

None.

HIGHLIGHTS:

In January 2024, the Vice-President and Provost appointed Professor Randy Boyagoda to serve as the Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse for an 18-month term, from January 1, 2024 to June 30, 2025. As part of his mandate, Prof. Boyagoda was asked to chair a Working Group on Civil Discourse, comprised of faculty and students, to contribute advice, suggestions, and insights towards strengthening a culture of civil discourse on campus, including the cultivation of dialogue across different points of view and the discussion of challenging subjects. During its term, which began in March 2024, the group considered activities both in and beyond the classroom, and also within and across programs, departments, divisions, and the institution itself. Group members participated in consultations about civil discourse in a variety of settings and formats, involving diverse constituencies, including administrative staff. Under its terms, the Working Group was asked to convey the results of the consultations, along with any working definitions, suggestions, guidelines, and recommendations, in a final report, to be delivered to the Provost by the end of June 2025.

The Working Group conducted internal and external landscape scans, facilitated broad consultations across all three campuses of the University, and held robust discussions that led to the development and delivery of its final report at the end of April 2025. The Vice-President and Provost has offered an administrative response to the report. The recommendations and response refer to areas that fall within the jurisdiction of this governing body. Both documents are provided here.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

Not applicable.

RECOMMENDATION:

For information.

DOCUMENTATION PROVIDED:

Final Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse
Administrative Response to the Final Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse
Presentation on Final Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse and Administrative Response

University of Toronto

Working Group on Civil Discourse

Final Report and Recommendations – May 2025

Submitted to the Vice-President and Provost by
Professor Randy Boyagoda
Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse
on behalf of the Working Group on Civil Discourse

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Final Report of the Working Group on Civil Discourse

1. Executive Summary

The Civil Discourse Working Group at the University of Toronto was established to address the growing challenges in sustaining productive and respectful dialogue within the University community. The group, led by Professor Randy Boyagoda, was tasked with developing recommendations to foster civil discourse across the University's tri-campus community.

The Working Group, composed of faculty and students, met on a monthly basis from March 2024 to April 2025, and it also conducted extensive consultations from October to December 2024. These consultations included online surveys, in-person meetings, and open sessions, engaging over 1,500 participants.

The consultations, along with an internal landscape scan, revealed many successful examples of civil discourse across the University of Toronto that span classroom settings, community programming, and student-led activities. Across our campuses, faculty, librarians, staff, and student leaders have all demonstrated activities that work to foster civil discourse within our community. Awareness of these initiatives is often limited, however, suggesting a need for more promotion, refinement, and/or expansion of this programming to enhance its effectiveness.

We also heard that the University faces several obstacles to civil discourse, among which are power imbalances among and between faculty members, librarians, staff, and students; intensifying polarization both within and outside of the University; perceived political biases of faculty members and the institution itself; negative perceptions and a lack of understanding of U of T leadership, senior administration, and governance processes; and confusion about the relationships among academic freedom, free speech, and civil discourse.

In light of what was expressed in the consultations, and related deliberations on the part of the Working Group itself, the Working Group has made eight recommendations (Appendix 1), each with specific action items, that we believe will contribute to an atmosphere that will allow the University of Toronto to further develop the skills and environment for civil discourse in all aspects of its activities.

We recognize that the challenges to civil discourse go far beyond U of T itself. 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. We are hopeful that the recommendations we make in this report will go some distance to contributing to this goal.

2. Introduction

In its earliest incarnation, the university, derived from the Latin *universitas*, was made up of “a body of teachers and students engaged in giving and receiving instruction in the higher branches of study”¹. By the modern era, the term evolved to include within its definition the idea of academic freedom, which allows scholars to express ideas and pursue knowledge without risk of institutional interference or professional disadvantage. In its Statement of Institutional Purpose (1992), the University of Toronto reflects and affirms this idea, holding that it

is dedicated to fostering an academic community in which the learning and scholarship of every member may flourish, with vigilant protection for individual human rights, and a resolute commitment to the principles of equal opportunity, equity and justice.

Within the unique university context, the most crucial of all human rights are the rights of freedom of speech, academic freedom, and freedom of research. And we affirm that these rights are meaningless unless they entail the right to raise deeply disturbing questions and provocative challenges to the cherished beliefs of society at large and of the university itself.

It is this human right to radical, critical teaching and research with which the University has a duty above all to be concerned; for there is no one else, no other institution and no other office, in our modern liberal democracy, which is the custodian of this most precious and vulnerable right of the liberated human spirit.

These rights ground our academic endeavours and are central to the teaching and research activities of the University of Toronto. Where there is fierce or passionate disagreement and where the subjects at hand are high-stakes and emotionally charged, the exercise of these rights can become fraught and contested, even as they are still core to the mission and work of the University. In an institution as diverse as U of T, where a multitude of personal experiences, beliefs, disciplines, teaching and learning and research methods, and worldviews come together, differences are inevitable even as they can be sources of strength.

In recent years, however, we have witnessed fractures in our community that have threatened our capacity to disagree well with each other – to learn from our differences and

¹ Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. “university (n.),” December 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/4071930742>.

forge new understandings that advance knowledge and provide insights about ourselves and our world. As an institution that declares that “radical, critical teaching and research [are what] the University has a duty above all to be concerned,” this capacity is crucial. Without this “radical, critical” right to raise challenging and even disturbing issues, scholarship risks stagnation and blind adherence to a status quo or majority power – what might be seen in today’s terms as “cancel culture,” which leads to a narrowing of perspectives in favour of singular political or ideological positions.

Discourse at U of T and in society more generally is influenced by many phenomena, such as power imbalances, the effects of social media and its algorithmic echo chambers, misinformation and disinformation, and the polarizing, often personally experienced effects of societal and geopolitical events. In recent years, our campuses, like others around the world, have been the site of heated and sometimes personally painful clashes on issues of race, sex and gender, and most recently, responses to the war in Israel and Palestine. These conflicts have, in some cases, resulted in actions and behaviours that have undermined the capacity of our community to engage in vigorous and productive debate.

Historically, universities have also been the sites of important protests over many of society’s most significant issues. Indeed, the right to protest is foundational to the modern university and continues to be an important part of the fabric of U of T. The challenge before our community at this moment is not the act of protest itself, but of how to continue and foster dialogue and scholarship about difficult topics so that our work as scholars, learners, teachers, and supporters of higher education may continue to bring about new ways of knowing and perceiving our ever-changing world.

As President Gertler observed in an address to the Governing Council of the University of Toronto in December 2023:

[d]isagreements on our campuses can and will be heated. But they cannot be allowed to descend into hateful, demeaning, or harassing behaviour. Our university must demonstrate to the world how civil, informed debate about difficult issues can be conducted.²

To help guide the University in responding to the President’s call, on January 16, 2024, Vice-President & Provost Trevor Young announced the appointment of Professor Randy Boyagoda as Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse for an 18-month term, from January 1, 2024 through June 30, 2025.

² Meric Gertler, Meeting of the Governing Council of the University of Toronto, December 18, 2023.

As part of his mandate, Professor Boyagoda was asked to convene a working group to lead community consultations and develop a plan and recommendations for “tri-campus events, resources and other initiatives for students and faculty that develop and sustain sensibilities and capacities for productive civil discourse.”³ The following report provides an overview of the activities of the Working Group, its findings, and its recommendations for ways the University of Toronto, institutionally and across its many and varied parts, can develop and sustain a robust culture of civil discourse. These recommendations have been crafted to be consistent with the University’s mission and in support of the University’s institutional purpose, for the greater good of faculty, librarians, students, staff and the larger society that we serve.

3. Mandate and Process

The Working Group on Civil Discourse was drawn from faculty and student applicants, following an open Call for Nominations. In selecting members, the Provostial Advisor and Senior Assessors aimed to have representation from all three campuses, a breadth of academic divisions, and representatives of teaching and tenure-stream faculty, undergraduate students, and graduate students. The group was supported in its activities by staff from the Division of the Vice-President and Provost. The membership of the Working Group on Civil Discourse and the staff support may be found in Appendix 2.

The broad mandate of the Working Group on Civil Discourse was to contribute advice, suggestions, and insights towards strengthening a culture of civil discourse on campus, including the cultivation of dialogue across different points of view and the discussion of challenging subjects. Specifically, the group was asked to organize consultations about civil discourse in a variety of settings and formats, involving U of T’s diverse constituencies, including staff members – a group that was not represented on the Working Group.

In addition to holding these consultations, the Working Group was also asked to:

- elicit and develop a working definition of civil discourse in relation to University of Toronto activities;
- propose programming and other capacity-building activities that address and foster civil discourse at the University;
- participate in, engage with, and model civil discourse in programming and activities that follow from the activities of the group and of the Provostial Advisor;
- make suggestions and proposals to sustain an environment that is conducive to civil discourse across research, scholarship, teaching and learning; and

³ Trevor Young, Memo re: Appointment of Professor Randy Boyagoda as Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse (PDAD&C #23), January 16, 2024.

- convey the results of the consultations, along with any working definitions, suggestions, guidelines, and recommendations, in a final report to be delivered to the Provost by the end of June 2025.

The Working Group began its meetings in March 2024 and met a total of 12 times through April 2025. During its term, the group focused on meeting its mandate: crafting initial and consultation-informed definitions of civil discourse; drafting consultation questions and reviewing consultation feedback; exploring existing initiatives and activities at the University of Toronto and at peer institutions (see Appendices 3 and 4) and supporting civil discourse events across U of T's campuses (see Appendix 5). The recommendations at the end of this report emerged from the Working Group's discussions and consideration of the consultation findings, the internal and external landscape scans, and the recommendations and initiatives pursued by similar working groups and task forces at other universities.

4. Consultations

The first consultation period took place from October 1, 2024 through December 6, 2024. The following channels were used:

- online form (open to any U of T faculty member, librarian, staff member, or student)
- by-invitation meetings (particular groups of staff, students, faculty, and librarians)
- open in-person meetings at each campus
- open online sessions

The consultations were advertised on the Civil Discourse Working Group webpage, in the Provost's Digest, the Bulletin Brief, the SGS newsletter, college newsletters, just-in-time slides during class time, Student Life display screens, personal visits from committee members to large classes, an email to all employees, and via a link on Quercus visible to all students from November 15 to December 6. Approximately 1,500 people engaged directly in the consultation process (see Appendix 7 for breakdown).

The staff and student consultations were facilitated by the staff members supporting the Working Group, while the faculty and open consultations were facilitated by the Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse. Members of the Working Group were welcome to attend consultations as observers. The anonymous online survey was open from October 1 through December 6 and was completed by 574 people. Only one survey was allowed per person, and the survey was only available to current students, staff, faculty and librarians at U of T.

In the second consultation, the Working Group shared an overview of the themes that were brought forward by the community in the first round of consultations, as well as its preliminary recommendations. This consultation was conducted by online survey only and was open from April 7 – 22, 2025. It was publicized via the Provost's Digest, email and MS Teams messages to staff groups, and a link on Quercus. We received a total of 111 responses from faculty, librarians, staff, and students during this period. Consultation questions from both the Fall and Spring consultations can be found in Appendix 6.

Drawing on the feedback received in the consultations and with reference to the initiatives modeled by other institutions, the Working Group has compiled its findings, which are detailed below. We are immensely grateful to all the members of the U of T community who took part in the consultations and generously shared their time and reflections to enable a fuller picture of the state of civil discourse on our campuses.

5. Definition of Civil Discourse

The term “civil discourse” presented a challenge to the Working Group from the very outset. There was concern from some over the term's association with Western systems of knowledge that have long been subject to criticism, as well as the fact that it is perceived by some as a term of control that seeks to police expression and behaviour under the guise of promoting civility or politeness over candour. Others in the group viewed the term as a familiar way of conveying an approach to difficult conversations, in support of diversely understood goals such as increased understanding of an idea or issue, advancing knowledge, and the pursuit of truth.

Because of these divergent opinions, the Working Group would like to make clear that civil discourse as it is considered and used as a term in this report is not intended to perpetuate imbalances of power nor to silence voices and opinions that are critical of the University or of any particular points of view. Rather, it is used here to describe principles and practices that, imperfectly, correspond to the term civil discourse. This usage serves to reflect consistency and continuity of the term as part of this project, as well as the general familiarity and acceptance of the term that was in evidence both in consultations and externally.

These principles and practices were articulated through an iterative process of robust discussion, consideration, and reconsideration by the members of the Working Group, as well as reference to other definitions and feedback obtained in the consultations. What follows should be considered a “living definition” that is open to revision in future iterations of civil discourse-related projects at the University. It reflects our process, and it guided our

consideration of the challenges faced by the University of Toronto community and our subsequent recommendations:

Civil discourse at the University of Toronto is discourse that:

- *is guided by norms for people to engage in discussion as members of a shared academic community;*
- *seeks understanding, both about other points of view, and about difficult subjects marked by difference and disagreement;*
- *engages with ideas critically, but engages with individuals who hold those ideas respectfully, in recognition of the inherent dignity of all members of the community;*
- *requires participants to develop and deploy capacities for empathy, imagination, reason, and dialogue;*
- *invites a willingness to take risks, make mistakes, and learn from those mistakes, while supporting others to do the same; and*
- *depends on the recognition and affirmation of common standards to which discussion and inquiry are ordered, like the pursuit of truth, the advancement of knowledge, and the common good.*

The following is offered for context on the working definition:

Many factors can make discussion and inquiry difficult. Some of these factors are welcome and familiar to academic communities, including the diversity of personal experiences, beliefs and methods, and worldviews of its members. But there are also more challenging obstacles to discussion and inquiry, like imbalances of power, misinformation and disinformation, and the polarizing, often personally experienced effects of societal and geopolitical events. The existence of these factors and obstacles is undeniable, and it only underlines, rather than undermines, the University's commitment to civil discourse, both inside and outside the classroom, and for the benefit of the entire academic community and for society at large.

6. What We Heard

Aside from challenges related to the terminology of civil discourse, several other themes emerged from the consultations. It is important to note that the feedback generally reflected significant differences of opinion, and in many cases, for every observation or

suggestion made in support of a particular position, initiative, or action there was a parallel counter-observation or suggestion representing a differing position. In its discussions, the Working Group sought to identify the central issues and commonalities at the heart of the disagreements and develop recommendations designed to respond to these, rather than to take a position on the validity of one side or another.

Furthermore, this consultation was perhaps disproportionately informed by the ongoing war in Israel and Palestine, as well as by the actions of and reactions to the pro-Palestine encampment on the St. George front campus, due to the recency of these events relative to the consultations. Much feedback was received from both “sides” that focused primarily on these issues. Where possible, we have attempted to distill this feedback into common themes, which are discussed in the Challenges section below.

The consultations also revealed many other areas of concern and challenge. These included:

- varied perceptions and attitudes towards institutional statements and the concept of institutional neutrality, and towards academic freedom, freedom of speech, and the place of advocacy in research and teaching, and finally the place of protest on campus;
- observations about low levels of faculty and student morale manifested as a lack of willingness to participate in academic activities beyond the classroom;
- balancing the value of inviting dissenting voices to speak on campus against the risk of legitimating views considered hateful by some;
- the fear that making space for certain perspectives to be expressed could result in harm to or exclusion of some individuals or groups of people, or could lead to increased intolerance on campus;
- the sense that perceived orthodoxies, some of which are associated with equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI)⁴, can at times seem in tension with commitments to

⁴ A note on the usage of the term “EDI” in this report: While it was invoked during our consultations, we recognize that it is a contested term and, much like the term “civil discourse,” means different things to different people. As one respondent to our consultations noted, “some respondents may have used ‘EDI’ as a catch-all term ... EDI is not an ideology or a singular perspective—it is a practice rooted in multiple theoretical frameworks, human rights principles, and workplace legislation.” The Working Group further acknowledges that EDI as a practice was developed as a response to counter the systemic racism, sexism, homophobia, etc., that has underpinned barriers to access and success for marginalized groups in higher education and in society more generally. Where challenges to civil discourse were attributed to “EDI,” respondents were often talking about encountering topics that they felt were off-limits for discussion because, in their experience, discussion of these topics was disproportionately determined by perceived orthodoxies guiding the practice of equity, diversity, and inclusivity. Similar observations were also made about issues not related to EDI (such as vaccine and mask mandates during COVID).

free inquiry and dissent within the University's research, teaching, and work settings; and

- concerns about the negative effects of technology use in academic settings, whether classrooms or department meetings.

We would also like to note that many staff members expressed frustration at being excluded from membership in the Working Group itself, which explicitly focused on faculty members and students. Staff at the University noted that they are often expected to be responsible for supporting faculty members and students in settings where civil discourse is both necessary and difficult, as well as to facilitate many of the co-curricular initiatives and programs that foster civil discourse.

Finally, the following findings, while wide and diverse, do not reflect every perspective or position on the state of civil discourse at U of T. Of necessity, they take into account the views that the Working Group heard through what was designed to be the widest possible set of consultations.

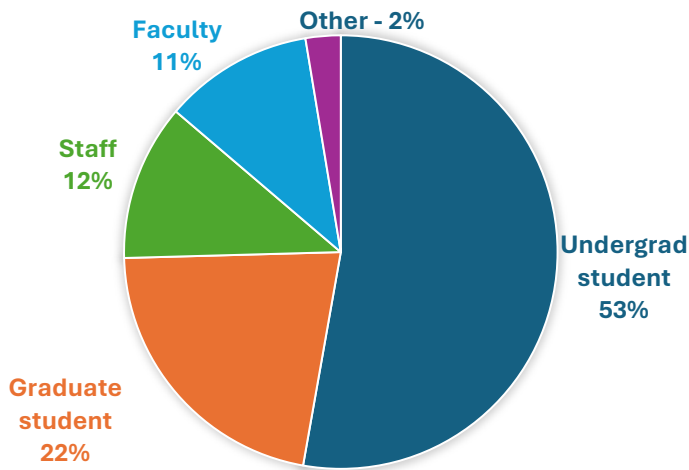
A list of the consultation questions and summary of participation may be found in Appendices 6 and 7.

A. Overview

The first online survey included simple demographic and ranked opinion questions to allow for a snapshot of the community's overall perception of the climate for civil discourse at the University. In total, 574 people completed the survey, over half of whom were undergraduate students, with a large majority of respondents affiliated with the St. George campus.

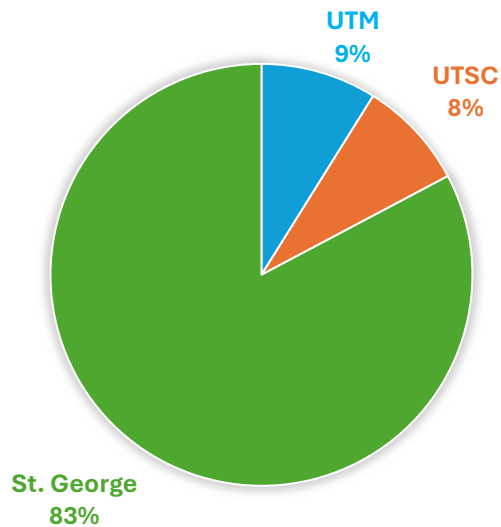
By way of contextualizing survey participation, the total tri-campus population of the University (including all faculty, librarians, staff, and students) in 2024 was 116,106. Of this population, 80,573 (69.3%) are undergraduate students, 21,858 (18.9%) are graduate students, 3,694 (3.2%) are faculty members, 169 (0.1%) are librarians, and 9,812 (8.5%) are staff members. In our survey, all categories except undergraduate students were overrepresented relative to the actual population, while undergraduate students were underrepresented.

Figure 1: Primary role at U of T



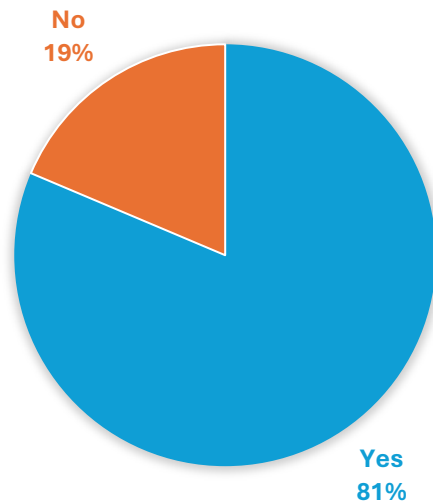
By campus, UTM has a total population of 18 814 (16.2%); UTSC has a total population of 16 598 (14.3%); and St. George has a total population of 80 694 (69.5%). In our survey, respondents from the St. George campus were overrepresented relative to UTM and UTSC.

Figure 2: Campus affiliation



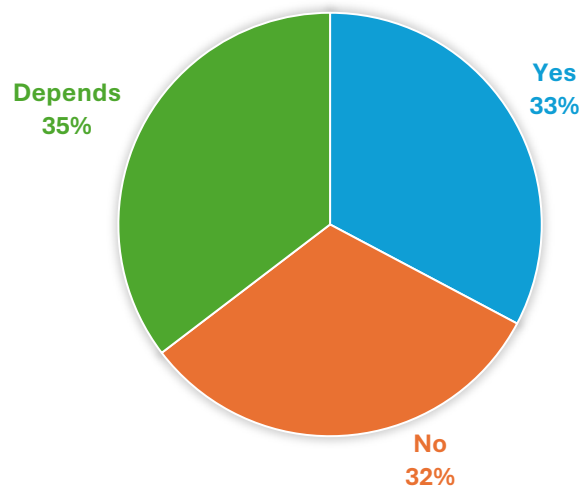
Overall, most respondents felt that the definition of civil discourse appropriately described their sense of civil discourse (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Definition captures sense of civil discourse



Respondents were nearly equally split among “yes,” “no,” or “it depends” on the question of whether they felt they could express their views freely on campus (Figure 4).

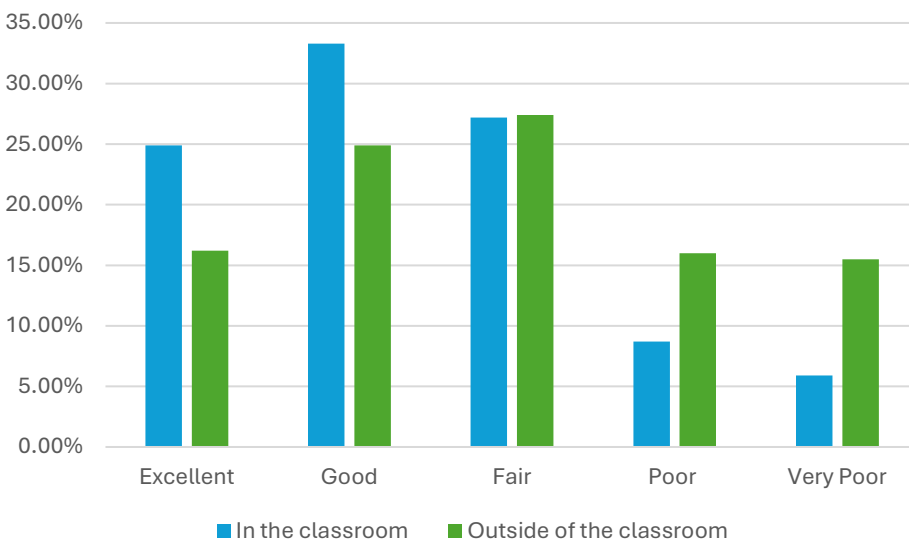
Figure 4: Free expression of views on campus



Over 58% of respondents rated their experience of civil discourse in the classroom as being Excellent or Good, while just over 41% rated their experience outside of the classroom as positively. On the other hand, 14.5% reported that their experience in the classroom was

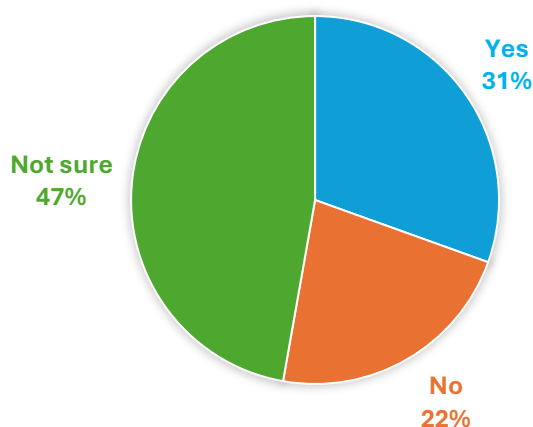
Poor or Very poor, while 31.5% rated their experience outside of the classroom negatively (Figure 5).

Figure 5: Experience of civil discourse at U of T



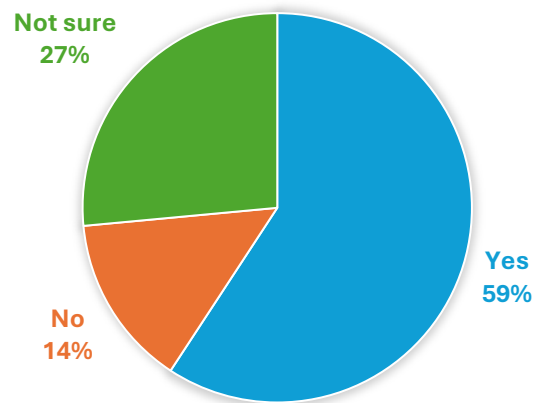
Just under half (47%) of respondents reported being unsure of whether U of T currently has activities or initiatives that are successful at fostering civil discourse, compared to 30% who believe there are such initiatives, and 22% who believe such initiatives are lacking (Figure 6).

Figure 6: Current successful initiatives for civil discourse at U of T



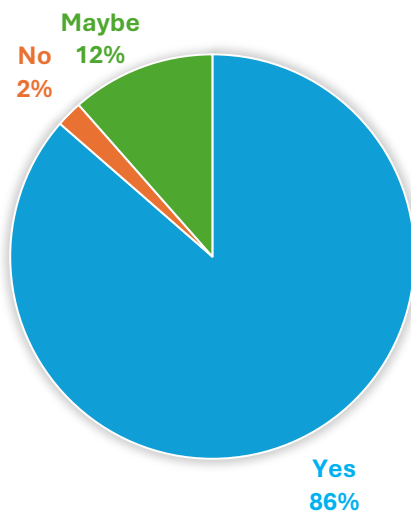
59% of respondents believed that there are current features, trends, or components of U of T that obstruct civil discourse on campus, with 26% reporting that they are unsure if there are, and 14% believing that there are no such obstacles (Figure 7).

Figure 7: Current obstructions to civil discourse at U of T



An overwhelming majority (86%) of respondents believe that universities have an important role to play in promoting civil discourse in society (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Universities have an important role to play in civil discourse



B. Current initiatives

The consultations and internal landscape scan made it clear that across the University of Toronto there are many places where civil discourse is already being fostered, modelled, and experienced. These range from the actions and practices of individual faculty members to public and community events, to student-focused and student-led initiatives.

i. Classroom successes

We heard numerous examples of ways that faculty are working to set the conditions for productive discourse and debate in their classes, such as:

- structured debate on non-contentious issues or those at a historical remove;
- assigning argument and counter-argument positions on course material;
- designing exercises that feature rotational leadership and encourage multiple perspectives;
- embedding concepts and approaches in courses that encourage students to reason from other people's points of view;
- including language in the syllabus and on the first day of class stressing the importance of disagreeing well and affirming/setting the values and behaviours that will be expected in the classroom;
- being consistent about including opportunities for productive discourse in class rather than implementing them in a crisis;
- explicitly affording students the opportunity to be wrong or dissent from a majority view, in the service of learning, without being penalized;
- designing courses where students have multiple opportunities to practice skills for rigorous and informed disagreement; and
- offering co-curricular programming, associated with programs like the Faculty of Arts and Science's "College Ones" courses, that encourage students to forge connections between in-class learning and discussion and structured, organized encounters with diverse perspectives and difficult subjects outside the classroom.

That these strategies have been successfully implemented in many of our classrooms already indicates an opportunity to capitalize on the expertise available within our faculty community. There is potential to build on this expertise and expand it to assist other faculty members and instructors in fostering in students a capacity for civil discourse and engagement in the classroom.

ii. Community programming

On the topic of community programming, we heard that high-profile events beyond U of T itself, like the Munk Debates and the Massey Lectures, were seen as excellent models for

civil discourse. Likewise, campus-wide events, such as UTSC's townhalls, were noted as valuable opportunities for the campus community to discuss important issues and hear directly from campus leadership. Other events that are targeted at communities external to U of T, such as the high school ethics bowls held at UTM and UTSC, were seen as strong and promising models for building civil discourse outside of our campuses. Another effective example is the dyadic model for difficult conversations that has been developed and promulgated by healthcare professionals at Sunnybrook Hospital, an affiliated teaching hospital of the University.

iii. Student-focused initiatives

The University has several divisional and unit-level initiatives for students that focus on building familiarity and skills for productive inquiry and challenging discussions. On the St. George campus, we heard about many such undertakings from several offices and units. Additionally, many student clubs indicated that they strive to hold events that encourage engagement in diverse and sometimes contrary viewpoints. Examples of these include:

- Student Debates and Dialogue and Social Justice Committees (Hart House)
- Living Library Project (Hart House)
- Interfaith friendship circles, leadership opportunities, and social events (Multifaith Centre)
- Community Days (Centre for Community Partnerships)
- Intercultural learning opportunities (Centre for International Experience)
- Ideas for the World program (Victoria University)

We are confident that there are many more similar initiatives across our campuses but also note that several respondents to our online survey indicated that they were not aware of these types of activities. We also heard that the activities themselves do not always achieve hoped-for levels of participation. The question is whether this low attendance is because the programming itself needs to be subject to active, ongoing refinement in its conception and description, or whether it needs to be promoted more effectively to a broader audience of students. Likely, it is a combination of these, and work on these factors could be explored to generate greater awareness.

C. Challenges

The Working Group acknowledges that consultations of this type can attract feedback from those most frustrated with the current state of affairs, and as a result, may tend to skew towards negativity. Even so, most of the discussion and submissions offered thoughtful and

constructive comments that demonstrated a great diversity of views and a deep concern for the current and future health of productive discourse, inquiry, and debate at the University of Toronto. Below is a brief discussion of the key obstacles and challenges identified in our consultations.

Note that these are not discussed in any particular order of importance.

i. Campus environment for civil discourse

Shortly after the Working Group began its meetings, in May 2024, a group of students, faculty, and others established an encampment on King's College Circle at the St. George Campus as part of their efforts to support Palestine, an action consistent with those at many university campuses elsewhere in Canada and the United States. The group's stated goal was to secure a commitment from U of T to disclose all its investments, divest of any financial holdings that derive income from investments that directly or indirectly support Israel, and terminate all partnerships with Israeli academic institutions. The encampment lasted two months before protesters were ordered to leave by a court injunction obtained by the University.

Attitudes regarding the University's actions during the protests were sharply divided. On one side were those who felt that the University had acted in bad faith and disregarded students' right to protest and faculty members' academic freedom. On the other were community members who were excluded from a central campus space and who felt that the University had willfully overlooked and therefore condoned harmful and antisemitic speech in allowing the encampment to continue as long as it did.

These divergent opinions were strongly reflected in the consultations, in nearly equal measure, and clearly influenced many of the responses. The Working Group recognizes that this issue is extremely important to many in our community but also that our group's role is not to make recommendations that specifically pertain to the encampment or the University's response to it. Rather, we have noted this varied set of responses as a signal example of how discourse on our campuses may be affected during significant geopolitical events.

ii. Fear of speaking out

Across all of the constituencies we heard from – unionized and managerial staff; undergraduate and graduate students; librarians; and tenure-stream and teaching stream faculty, and other instructors – the fear of expressing a contrary or dissenting view, or even a deeply-held personal belief, was raised as a critical challenge to civil discourse. Many different reasons for this were identified. We discuss the most common below.

a) Power imbalances

Students expressed fear of disagreeing with or questioning the view or argument of an instructor or professor who was responsible for grading them and could influence their future prospects. Likewise, individual faculty expressed concern about disagreeing with senior colleagues, such as Chairs and Deans. Some faculty – particularly early-career and non-tenured faculty and CLTAs and sessional instructors – reported fear of speaking out on issues that may be contentious. People reported fears of “cancellation” or of complaints by students or other faculty members that could have negative career impacts. For their part, staff indicated that they were hesitant to speak out about some issues to their superiors or to faculty, and that while they were often responsible for managing difficult issues and supporting faculty and students, they themselves lacked the same kinds of protections and rights as faculty and students. Likewise, some managerial staff noted that a lack of job security relative to their unionized counterparts also played a role in their lacking the confidence to express their views on a number of subjects.

Potential consequences of speaking out more generally were often raised as a salient factor. Social media condemnation, formal employment sanctions, social or professional ostracization, cancel culture, and offending others were the consequences that were most frequently cited.

b) Polarization

Respondents reported that atmospheres where viewpoints were seen as highly polarized often served to shut down discussion. It was observed that in such environments, emotions are often heightened, leading to conflict, upset, and personal attacks. Some raised the point that in these situations, people who do not hold strong views on the subject are often silent (i.e., the silent middle), which gives the impression that polarization is the norm when it may not be. Others reported that in strongly polarized environments, “neutrality seems like the safer option.” Examples cited included the subject of Israel and Palestine, as well as sex and gender, U.S. politics, and vaccines.

c) Bias

Some undergraduate students noted that the readily-perceived political biases of their instructors in the classroom did not leave room for counterarguments. These students reported feeling that they had to express views that aligned with their instructors in order to do well in the course, even when their own views diverged.

Likewise, public statements on world affairs – in particular, the war in Israel and Palestine – made by staff unions and student groups were seen as biased and silencing

by members who did not necessarily agree with the positions taken on behalf of the groups to which they belonged. Perhaps even more frustrated were those whose opinions weren't already formed, who expressed a lack of opportunity to do so in polarized settings.

It is worth noting that many observed during consultations that civil discourse is often particularly challenging in situations where emotions are running high, and also that the physical, embodied experience of difficult ideas and subjects needs to be recognized, rather than just treating these as intellectual or conceptual matters. Additionally, differences in culture, personal experience, and background were noted as factors that should be acknowledged when considering challenges to civil discourse.

iii. Perception of University administration and leadership

Some of the criticism leveled at University administration and leadership, which referred broadly to the President, Provost, Vice-Presidents, Vice-Provosts, Deans, Principals, and Chairs, stemmed directly from actions related to the encampment. However, these observations also revealed other concerns as follows.

a) Hierarchy

Respondents indicated that the University's basic and inherent hierarchy (which is beyond the scope of the Working Group to address) could make it difficult to voice opinions or have them heard. They perceived that this hierarchy contributes to a perception of undemocratic decision-making, undermining faculty self-governance, eroding trust, and breeding resentment. This hierarchy was most often noted in conjunction with centralized decision-making at the University. Respondents noted that hierarchy and hierarchical structures were present at a variety of levels at the University – from University leadership at the Presidential and Provostial levels to Deans and Chairs at the divisional and departmental levels, to the University of Toronto Faculty Association (UTFA) and student group leadership, to faculty in relation to administrative staff. However, this was not a unanimous opinion; we also received feedback expressing frustration that the decentralized nature of U of T's structure contributed to a lack of common discussion of challenging issues.

b) Transparency

Several respondents expressed frustration over a perceived lack of transparency from the University administration. Overall, the consultation feedback revealed that several students, faculty members, librarians, and staff felt that decisions made by the University (particularly about the encampment) were not transparent and lacked clear, or at least clearly articulated guiding principles. This frustration came from “both sides”

of the encampment debate. Several respondents expressed a more general concern that a lack of transparency about decision-making thwarts efforts towards “civil discourse.” One respondent articulated this problem as “[c]ivil discourse dies in darkness. Transparency is the name of the game as an institution that claims to promote civil discourse.” Another wrote that “[u]nclear communication and lack of transparency makes civil discourse difficult to do. If you're not being honest with me, how can I trust you?”

c) **Communication**

There was strong support for better and more timely communications from the University’s senior administration, although not necessarily more professionalized, impersonal communication. We heard that the communications during the encampment seemed defensive and opaque. At a broader level, many people noted that there should be more opportunities for communication among U of T community members across viewpoints and that these opportunities should be encouraged and supported by the administration. Many recognized the challenges in communicating across such a large group of constituents but expressed the belief that clearer communications from leadership – as fellow members of the academic community – would provide a better framework for productive discourse at the University.

d) **Accessibility of the Administration**

We heard from several respondents that senior University leadership is perceived to be inaccessible to students in particular. This was interpreted in a number of ways, including that the administration did not care to hear the views of students, did not respect student perspectives, is conflict avoidant, and is afraid to speak with students directly when challenging subjects arise. Faculty respondents observed that senior leadership were too constrained in their statements to fellow academic colleagues, perhaps due to advice from legal and communications professionals. Several people pointed out that this approach does not model civil discourse and called for University leaders to be more directly accessible to the University community.

iv. University of Toronto culture and structure

Cultivating an environment that supports productive dialogue, debate, and inquiry may require a reconsideration of several different factors. The following aspects of U of T’s unique environment were raised as possible impediments to fostering such a milieu.

a) **Perception of certain orthodoxies**

The consultations revealed a perception in the community that some positions and ideologies have become orthodox at the University. With respect to the encampment,

both pro-Palestine and pro-Israel respondents felt that the orthodox view was the one that opposed their own perspectives. Others observed that support for “leftist” or progressive views, often associated with “EDI” (as qualified in footnote four of this report), is always assumed, allowing for no dissent except on pain of formal or informal punishment and exclusion, whether at the institutional level or in the classroom, whereas conservative views are frequently dismissed out of hand or treated as sources of endangerment.

These orthodoxies, whether perceived or real, were widely seen as obstacles to civil discourse and free expression, and some expressed fear of the consequences of falling outside of this orthodoxy. In the words of one respondent: “on many issues my views don’t depart much from the prevailing orthodoxy, so I may express them freely. On other matters ... I would never dream of saying openly what I think; the costs of being shunned would be too high.”

The concern about orthodoxy was also expressed about staff unions, the Faculty Association, and student unions and groups, with a number of respondents indicating that they felt that the leadership of these organizations espoused and upheld particular political and social positions that constituted an orthodox view and dismissed other perspectives, including minority views from the people they are supposed to represent.

b) Competition

The University of Toronto has a reputation for having a demanding and competitive academic environment. Some respondents expressed concern that competition for grades, grants, awards, and/or promotion could have the effect of stifling civil discourse out of fear of falling out of favour due to divergent opinions. Others noted that a highly competitive atmosphere can be an important contributing factor to exhaustion, which can undermine people’s capacity to engage in challenging conversations. This was summarized by one of the online consultation responses: “Emotional/mental burnout ... seems to be a major obstruction to civil discourse ... Most, if not all, elements of the working definition require emotional/mental energy/skill to practice, and this energy/skill is challenging to maintain in a university environment where there is often information/task overload, academic rigour/competition, and local impacts from societal and geopolitical events.”

c) Decentralization

In both in-person and online consultations, the University’s decentralized structure was raised as an obstacle to establishing the conditions for civil discourse. Some faculty and staff respondents indicated frustration with the seeming inconsistency of institutional communications that emerged in the period following the Hamas attack of

October 7, 2023, and Israel's military campaign in Gaza and elsewhere. Others noted that some units or divisions were more or less proactive in supporting efforts to surface the tensions at play during this time, while others talked about the challenges of holding discussions and building community across an institution with such a decentralized physical and administrative structure.

One faculty member wrote: "A fundamental problem, in my experience, lies in the decentralized and fractured composition of the U of T, where there are few spaces for people to intersect outside formal settings like the classroom and faculty meeting. This is especially apparent at [my campus], where students and faculty tend to come to campus only when they have class and/or meetings. The result is that we only encounter one another in high-stakes, highly structured contexts, and feel little accountability to one another as human beings. Social media makes this even worse."

d) **Decision-making structures**

Some student and staff respondents indicated that they would like to see more opportunities for engagement in governance and other decision-making bodies for their constituencies. In the words of one student: "Students do not have enough democratic representation on university decision-making bodies. When these mechanisms fail, that is when students resort to sit-ins, encampments, and the like."

e) **Policies and guidelines**

During the consultations, facilitators differentiated between the concept of "civil discourse" and concepts of civility/harassment as outlined in policies that pertain to members of the University community. Nonetheless, examples of the latter issues were frequently cited as impediments to civil discourse. Within the Working Group, concerns were raised about how to address behaviour or speech that does not rise to the level of punishable harassment but might nonetheless be considered "uncivil." There was no appetite for creating a policy to govern civil discourse at U of T, but members did note that there is an important difference between legality and morality, and that we should aspire to not just "toe the line" of civil discourse. With this in mind, some members felt that there may be value in exploring ways to register or address behaviours that do not cross the line of legal harassment, but that intentionally disrespect others and undermine the University's capacity to foster an environment that is conducive to civil discourse.

f) **Academic freedom and free speech**

While defining and determining the limitations of academic freedom and free speech are out of the scope of the mandate of this Working Group, these ideas were also identified as potential challenges to civil discourse, insofar as not everyone appeared to

understand these concepts, their relationship to hate speech, or the difference between freedom of speech/academic freedom and civil discourse. The Working Group observed that the privilege of academic freedom enjoyed by faculty members comes with the duty to avoid presenting overly biased views in the classroom, to recognize the limits of one's expertise, and to treat others with dignity and respect even in disagreement. As one member of the Working Group put it, civil discourse in academia should mean that "ideas are addressed critically, people are treated respectfully."

Moreover, there was some confusion as to whether staff, as opposed to faculty, enjoy academic freedom and, if so, under what circumstances. Noting this, there may be value in ensuring that the U of T community is more generally aware of the information contained on the University's website on free speech (www.freespeech.utoronto.ca), which also includes a list of relevant policies and guidelines that inform free speech and academic freedom at the University.

7. Discussion

As noted previously, the work of this group took place against the backdrop of the war in Israel and Palestine. This particular geopolitical situation naturally influenced the tenor of both the consultations and the discussions of the Working Group. The Working Group recognizes that the recommendations put forward in this report reflect a historicity that it hopes that future readers will acknowledge. However, the group was also mindful of the need to broaden its consideration of civil discourse beyond the lens of this particular historical moment, and as much as possible, attempted to view the campus response to the war as exemplary of an extreme challenge to civil discourse at the University. Throughout its deliberations, the Working Group has been mindful that there will always be new and emergent pressures on civil discourse. Even over the course of the group's approximately 18-month term, we have seen developments that may have a profound impact on civil discourse in higher education – such as the challenges to protest and academic freedom that are currently being experienced by American universities.

With this in mind, the goal of the Working Group was to compose recommendations that would aid U of T in preparing its community for civil discourse in the face of similar disruptive events that could occur in the future.

The Working Group would also like to recognize that its composition was limited in the diversity of its membership by the characteristics of its applicants and its provostial mandate. There was representation from all three campuses, as well as students and faculty from a variety of divisions and levels (i.e., undergraduate and graduate students; assistant, associate, and full professors; tenure-stream and teaching-stream). Obviously, a

totality of perspectives was not present on the Working Group, and where voices were missing, these were sought out during the consultations. This was the case particularly for staff members of the U of T community.

Over the course of its deliberations, the Working Group heard directly from both the President and the Provost, who offered their perspectives on the challenges for civil discourse at the University. They also heard directly from Student Life staff who articulated how their roles often intersected with civil discourse. These perspectives were especially important for the group in their consideration of the institutional goals of U of T alongside the feedback received from the consultation process.

Throughout its term, the Working Group's goal was to balance personal perspectives and experience, institutional aims, consultation responses, and information gleaned from peer institutions to make recommendations for initiatives and actions that will help the University better foster an environment for civil discourse in the near and distant future. In doing so, the Working Group heard many experiences, suggestions, and complaints that, while valid and important, did not fall within the scope of its mandate. These included changes to labour agreements, hiring practices, admission requirements, policies and codes, governance bodies, and institutional values. At times, these may well have overlapped with issues of civil discourse, but on further consideration were deemed to not be within the overall scope of this particular working group or not actionable or practical due to legal or structural reasons.

The many diverse, divergent, articulate, and thoughtful responses to the consultation questions form a picture of a truly heterogeneous community. The Working Group approached the task of building recommendations with a view to identifying specific actions the University can take to foster a robust and sustainable culture for civil discourse – or productive dialogue, debate and inquiry – at the University of Toronto. The recommendations that follow were agreed upon by Working Group members as a result of deep and thoughtful consideration and discussion. Ultimately, they seek ways to build and develop the skills, spaces, and approaches that will enable our community to confront challenging issues and learn to agree – and disagree – well.

8. Recommendations

Based on the challenges that we heard, and also on the examples of successful civil discourse across the University, the Working Group proposes eight recommendations for consideration by the Provost and University leadership. While each recommendation and its associated action items address different aspects of civil discourse at the University of Toronto, the recommendations largely fall into three broad categories:

- clear communication of an institutional commitment to civil discourse, including an explanation of expectations for civil discourse on campus;
- greater transparency regarding University leadership decision-making, intended to exemplify a commitment to civil discourse; and
- investments to support local efforts and scale existing efforts at civil discourse through the research, teaching, co-curricular, and working activities of the University, across all its campuses, divisions, and units.

R1: Make an institutional commitment to civil discourse in the research, teaching, co-curricular, and working activities of the University

The need for this Working Group, as well as the feedback we received through the consultations, indicates that the University must ensure that a commitment to respectful and productive dialogue, discourse, and inquiry is recognized as a central part of our shared culture. We heard strongly that this commitment should not take the form of a policy. Rather, we recommend that the University embed its commitment in consistent and institution-wide communications and support for civil discourse as an explicit value. We recognize that any success in this respect depends upon both centralized commitments as well as commitments and initiatives originating in academic divisions, departments, programs, individual classrooms, and various other learning and research settings. Many of our subsequent recommendations are made with the goal of fostering and modeling this attitude across the University in local academic communities, classrooms, and co-curricular spaces and initiatives.

Action items

- a. Create a University-wide statement of commitment to civil discourse
- b. Convey leadership support and expectations for civil discourse, in all orientation and introductory materials for faculty, librarians, staff, and students joining U of T
- c. Raise awareness and literacy about how the University's commitment to civil discourse fits with other University statements and commitments (e.g., academic freedom, Statement of Institutional Purpose)

R2: Provide ongoing institutional support for activities and initiatives that foster civil discourse

Due to U of T's size and decentralized structure, local initiatives that foster civil discourse should be encouraged in ways that will engage people from many perspectives. To stimulate and reward the development of such initiatives, the University should consider

devoting funds and/or administrative support for activities that further the training or practice of productive dialogue, debate, and inquiry across our communities.

Action items

- a. Appoint a faculty member (or members) to serve as University Advisor(s) on civil discourse who will convene meetings with faculty colleagues and staff across the University, with a remit to promote initiatives in this area
- b. Establish an institutional fund to support civil discourse-related research and programming with particular attention to initiatives that feature interdisciplinary collaboration, collaborative teaching, and creating space for diverse viewpoints. This fund should be open to the full U of T community to seed, sustain, or scale civil discourse activities across the University
- c. Encourage and develop expertise and resources on civil discourse institutionally and within academic units that may be referred to by faculty, librarians, staff, and students at U of T who seek ways of fostering civil discourse

R3: Promote familiarity and experience with civil discourse in the classroom

Teaching is one of the University's core responsibilities and arguably plays the most important role in developing the skills and expertise that enable students to contribute meaningfully to society and to achieve success in their chosen fields. The capacity to encounter difference, challenge ideas, and participate productively in disagreement and debate is crucial to a well-rounded and sophisticated education, grounded in critical thinking and rhetorical skills. The University should ensure that its students build these competencies in core courses throughout the curricula of its various academic programs.

Action items

- a. Explore the idea of creating common curricula for all incoming students, undergraduate and graduate, that allows for a common basis for critical thought whereby students can develop a shared base of skills, capacity, and disposition towards challenging discussions and issues
- b. Create resources for faculty to draw on in their courses to create a culture of civil discourse (e.g., language for syllabi on civil discourse, establishment of "Chatham House rules" for the classroom, sample text on civil discourse to include as an optional question on course evaluations, social media guidance, case studies and other exercises to use in class, training on holding difficult discussions, modules on civil discourse – especially for STEM courses where ideas that generate conflict or

disagreement are encountered less frequently in the course content than in the humanities and social sciences)

R4: Enhance and improve opportunities for civil discourse within individual divisions and departments

We heard clearly in consultations that many faculty members and staff feel that civil discourse is threatened or lacking in their own divisions and departments. The University should encourage and support Deans and especially Chairs to implement practices and structures to encourage better communication, engagement, and dialogue within their departments and divisions on a regular basis, such that a culture of discourse, even about challenging issues, is the expected norm.

Action items

- a. Encourage and support divisions and departments to develop or draw on existing meetings, fora, and channels to foster civil discourse and ensure broad access to trainings, events and initiatives, and to identify and pursue new opportunities for the practice of civil discourse (e.g., time outside of departmental meetings for discussion of difficult issues)
- b. Encourage and support the creation of division-specific leads to sustain local civil discourse activities and contribute/connect with other division-specific leads across the University

R5: Offer training on facilitating civil discourse across constituencies and encourage the formation of local networks and communities of practice to generate ongoing grassroots engagement in discourse opportunities, best practices, and problem-solving

One of the key challenges to civil discourse can be a lack of skill or familiarity with managing difficult conversations. While some people may have more capacities in this area, training on how to facilitate and engage in controversial subjects and likewise be prepared to deal with the pressures of social media in these situations, can help create better environments for discussion.

Action items

- a. Develop programming and training on civil discourse in the classroom for teaching assistants, instructors, and faculty
- b. Establish training programs for staff and students on fostering civil discourse and the importance of encouraging, engaging with, and respecting multiple perspectives

in co-curricular and work settings (e.g., student group training, employee onboarding, staff professional development)

- c. Encourage and support the establishment of informal communities of practice for civil discourse, especially in non-classroom settings (e.g., student leaders, etc.)

R6: Improve transparency, visibility, and approachability of University leadership and senior administration and encourage engagement with the whole University community

To foster trust in University leadership and create an atmosphere where civil discourse is modeled at the highest levels of University administration, leaders should take steps to improve their accessibility to students, staff, librarians, and faculty as well as increase transparency with respect to how and why decisions are made. As an example, senior leadership might consider holding regular townhalls with the community.

Action items

- a. Increase clarity about decision-making (i.e., guiding principles, rationale, and reasons for confidentiality where necessary)
- b. Create channels and/or events for University leadership to explain to new students, staff, librarians and faculty how the University works (e.g., decision-making processes, timeframes, roles, etc.) and for two-way discussion to occur between the University community and leadership (e.g., open townhalls, Q&As)
- c. Adopt a more personalized, approachable style for leadership communications and re-examine what many perceive as a highly controlled, risk-averse communications strategy and approach

R7: Create channels, spaces, and events to promote civil discourse across the University and develop incentives for facilitating, engaging in, and modeling civil discourse within the University community

One of the challenges of a large university such as U of T is finding information about particular topics. Civil discourse is no exception. We know that currently there are many initiatives that already support civil discourse at the University. However, knowledge of these is limited. The University should take a proactive position and establish consistent spaces and vehicles for dialogue on which the University community can rely on an ongoing basis and recognize those who are pursuing exemplary work in this area. This need not conflict with the University's position on institutional neutrality; rather such spaces and vehicles could emphasize this position while also allowing space for civil discourse to occur.

Action items

- a. Explore different forums through which to provide information about commitments and actions, resources, and wayfinding regarding civil discourse at U of T, list relevant events, and set institutional expectations around civil discourse
- b. Establish a plan for staging high-profile institutional events (e.g., conference on civil discourse, speaker series featuring public intellectuals and/or top scholars on contentious topics) to maintain momentum and model a consistent approach to civil discourse
- c. Establish a recognition program for civil discourse at the institutional level, identifying members of the community who are engaged in this work in exemplary and influential ways, whether through their research, teaching, or community engagement
- d. Explore the creation of outlets where civil discourse can be promoted/exercised (e.g., community news/issues source that is not a “brand outlet” but that allows for debate to occur on issues that are important to the University community)

R8: Deepen engagement with the broader external community beyond U of T

As an anchor institution in the greater Toronto region and a leader in the Canadian, North American, and global post-secondary landscape, U of T is in a unique position to collaborate on, model, and innovate practices and initiatives that further civil discourse in our societies more generally. We should aspire to be a leader in this area, and to encourage other institutions locally, nationally, and internationally to focus on preparing young people to participate fully in democratic processes through civil discourse.

Action items

- a. Collaborate with other Canadian and international universities on supporting civil discourse in the sector
- b. Identify and expand opportunities to work with community partners to support civil discourse skill building (e.g., ethics bowl)

9. Conclusion

This report seeks to underscore the importance of sustaining a culture of respectful and productive dialogue at the University of Toronto. Despite the challenges identified, the University of Toronto community has collectively demonstrated its commitment to addressing these issues and promoting civil discourse. The successful initiatives already in place provide a solid foundation upon which to build.

Looking ahead, U of T can lead by example, creating a vibrant environment of academic inquiry where diverse perspectives are valued and challenging conversations are embraced. By implementing the recommendations put forward here and continuing to support civil discourse, the University can strengthen its community and contribute positively to society at large.

Together, we can cultivate a culture of curiosity, intellectual excellence, and mutual respect, ensuring that the University of Toronto continues to generate world-changing knowledge, offer inspiring educational experiences to our students, and contribute to the ongoing betterment of our communities, societies, and the world at large.

Appendix 1: List of Recommendations

R1: Make an institutional commitment to civil discourse in the research, teaching, co-curricular, and working activities of the University

Action items

- a. Create a University-wide statement of commitment to civil discourse
- b. Convey leadership support and expectations for civil discourse, in all orientation and introductory materials for faculty, librarians, staff, and students joining U of T
- c. Provide clarity as to how the University's commitment to civil discourse fits with other University statements and commitments (e.g., academic freedom, Statement of Institutional Purpose)

R2: Provide ongoing institutional support for activities and initiatives that foster civil discourse

Action items

- a. Appoint a faculty member (or members) to serve as University Advisor(s) on civil discourse who will convene meetings with faculty colleagues and staff across the University, with a remit to promote initiatives in this area
- b. Establish an institutional fund to support civil discourse-related research and programming with particular attention to initiatives that feature interdisciplinary collaboration, collaborative teaching, and creating space for diverse viewpoints. This fund should be open to the full U of T community to seed, sustain, or scale civil discourse activities across the University
- c. Encourage and develop expertise on civil discourse within academic units that may be referred to by faculty, librarians, staff, and students at U of T who seek ways of fostering civil discourse

R3: Promote familiarity and experience with civil discourse in the classroom

Action items

- a. Explore the idea of creating a common curriculum for all first-year, first-entry-division undergraduates that allows for a common basis for conversation whereby students can develop a shared base of skills, capacity and disposition towards challenging discussions and issues
- b. Create resources for faculty to draw on in their courses to create a culture of civil discourse (e.g., language for syllabi on civil discourse, establishment of "Chatham House rules" for the classroom, social media guidance, case studies and other exercises to use in class, training on holding difficult discussions, modules on civil discourse – especially for STEM courses)

R4: Enhance and improve opportunities for civil discourse within individual divisions and departments

Action items

- a. Encourage and support divisions and departments to develop or draw on existing meetings, fora, and channels to foster civil discourse and ensure broad access to trainings, events and initiatives, and to identify and pursue new opportunities for the practice of civil discourse (e.g., time outside of departmental meetings for discussion of difficult issues)
- b. Encourage and support the creation of division-specific leads to sustain local civil discourse activities and contribute/connect with other division-specific leads across the University

5: Offer training on facilitating civil discourse across constituencies and encourage the formation of local networks and communities of practice to generate ongoing grassroots engagement in discourse opportunities, best practices, and problem-solving

Action items

- a. Develop programming and training on civil discourse in the classroom for teaching assistants, instructors, and faculty
- b. Establish training programs for staff and students on fostering civil discourse and the importance of encouraging, engaging with, and respecting multiple perspectives in co-curricular settings (e.g., student group training)
- c. Encourage and support the establishment of informal communities of practice for civil discourse, especially in non-classroom settings (e.g., student leadership groups, etc.)

R6: Improve transparency, visibility, and approachability of University leadership and senior administration and encourage engagement with the whole University community

Action items

- a. Increase clarity about decision-making (i.e., guiding principles, rationale, and reasons for confidentiality where necessary)
- b. Create channels and/or events for University leadership to explain to new students, staff, librarians and faculty how the University works (e.g., decision-making processes, timeframes, roles, etc.) and for two-way discussion to occur between the University community and leadership (e.g., open townhalls, Q&As)
- c. Adopt a more personalized, approachable style for leadership communications and re-examine what many perceive as a highly-controlled, risk-averse communications strategy and approach

R7: Create channels, spaces, and events to promote civil discourse across the University and develop incentives for facilitating, engaging in, and modeling civil discourse within the University community

Action items

- a. Explore different forums to provide information about commitments and actions, resources and wayfinding regarding civil discourse at U of T, list relevant events, and set institutional expectations around civil discourse
- b. Establish a plan for staging high-profile institutional events (e.g., conference on civil discourse, speaker series featuring public intellectuals and/or top scholars on contentious topics) to maintain momentum and model a consistent approach to civil discourse
- c. Establish a recognition program for civil discourse at the institutional level, identifying members of the community who are engaged in this work in exemplary and influential ways, whether through their research, teaching, or community engagement
- d. Explore the creation of outlets where civil discourse can be promoted/exercised (e.g., community news/issues source that is not a “brand outlet” but that allows for debate to occur on issues that are important to the University community)

R8: Deepen engagement with the broader external community beyond U of T

Action items

- a. Collaborate with other Canadian and international universities on supporting civil discourse in the sector
- b. Identify and expand opportunities to work with community partners to support civil discourse skill building (e.g., ethics bowl)

Appendix 2: Working Group Membership

Chair

- Randy Boyagoda, Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse; Vice-Dean, Undergraduate, Department of English, Faculty of Arts & Science

Faculty Members

- Eyal Gruntman, Department of Biological Sciences, UTSC
- James John, Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Nasim Niknafs, Faculty of Music
- Gurpreet Rattan, Department of Philosophy, UTM
- Alison Thompson, Leslie Dan Faculty of Pharmacy
- Brian Silverman, Rotman School of Management
- Robert Wright, Daniels Faculty of Architecture and Landscape Design

Graduate Students

- Haidy Giratallah, Temerty Faculty of Medicine
- Noah Khan, OISE
- Emmanuel Taiwo, UTSC

Undergraduate Students

- Valentina Bravo, UTM
- Hugh Considine, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Lydia Dillenbeck, Faculty of Arts & Science
- Sam Guevara, Faculty of Arts & Science

Senior Assessors

- Joshua Barker, Dean, School of Graduate Studies
- Sandy Welsh, Vice-Provost, Students (to May 31, 2024)
- Dwayne Benjamin, Vice-Provost, Strategic Enrolment Management (from June 1, 2024)

The group was supported in its work by Alexis Archbold, Executive Director, Strategy, Programs & Operations in the Office of the Vice-Provost, Students, and Andrea Kwan, Senior Writer and Special Projects Officer in the Office of the Vice-President and Provost. Justine Cox, Executive Assistant, Office of the Vice-Provost, Faculty and Academic Life offered administrative support, and additional research assistance was provided by Bridgid McNulty, Student Placements and Project Manager, Office of the Vice-Provost, Students.

Appendix 3: Internal Landscape Scan of Civil Discourse Initiatives

October 2024

Department	Name	Description
University of Toronto Mississauga	The Ethics Bowl	UTM hosted the Ontario 2024 Championships of the Ethics Bowl, a high school debate competition. UTSC is set to host the Regionals in Spring 2025.
Pharmacology and Toxicology	CEL Course - PCL389H	Students debate a "grey" health policy or discussion that is ongoing in the drug using/harm reduction community. Further, students work with community members with "lived" experiences. Students are asked to reflect on their own bias and views of drug use, drug users and their discipline.
Munk School of Global Affairs & Public Policy	Scholars in dialogue: six conversations on the modern Middle East	A series of live, online lectures on the Middle East
Hart House	Social Justice Committee	The committee raises awareness of social justice issues through student engagement activities, opportunities for dialogue and social justice education for the student body.
Hart House	Debates & Dialogue Committee	The committee provides students with opportunities to find and develop their capacity for leadership, planning, and self-expression.
Hart House	Hart House Global Commons Initiatives	An opportunity for U of T students to connect with students participating from international partner universities, to engage in dialogue and action around important and timely issues.
Multi Faith Centre	Interfaith Leadership Certificate	This workshop series is an introduction to engaging in interfaith dialogue and works towards building leadership competencies.
Multi Faith Centre	Interfaith Friendship Circles	On a monthly basis, the Multi-Faith Centre has mini-trips to local sites of worship and engage in interfaith discussions.
Multi Faith Centre	Exploring Gender Justice	An event hosted by the Multi-Faith Centre to explore how gender rights, justice and spirituality are connected on International Women's Day.
Multi Faith Centre	World Interfaith Harmony Week	A celebration of unity in diversity, and the divine connection between people and their faith.
Student Life	Communication and Conflict Resolution Series	A workshop series on effective communication and conflict resolution tailored for both graduate and undergraduate students.

Student Life	Leadership and Equity Series	A series of opportunities for students to exchange knowledge about equity, diversity and inclusion. Topics include: Equity 101, Creating Inclusive Environments, and Intro to Anti- Oppressive Practices.
SCSU	Lobby Week	In 2022 SCSU organized a lobby week where students get to meet with administration and lobby their interests.
UTMSU	Lobby Week	During UTMSU's lobby week, students speak with UTM administration regarding their concerns and push for change on campus.
Hart House	Literary and Library Committee	The committee offers students the opportunity to work on crafting and understanding language.
Hart House	Talking Walls	Use of the Hart House hallway space as a platform to work within an arts-based framework to display visual exhibits that engage in social issues; indirectly promoting discourse around the various ideas.
Hart House	Our Black Futures programs	Our Black Futures programs have focused on building Black and Indigenous solidarity building and on larger questions of humanity through an Afrocentric lens. An example the event - What Makes Us Human? AI, Spirituality and Race featuring Rhonda McEwen.
Centre for International Experience	Intercultural Learning Program	Program for undergraduate and graduate students to build their intercultural skills at home or abroad.
Centre for International Experience	Cultural Intelligence workshop	Workshop in partnership with the University of Amsterdam to develop cultural intelligence.
Faculty of Music	<i>In Development</i>	A skills training series focusing on academic dialogue and the expectations of scholars to engage and collaborate across difference as a way to better understand their peers and their field of research.
Faculty of Music	Statement of Values and Community Guidelines	Documents which lay out the foundation for how the Faculty of Music community will engage with one another.
Faculty of Law	Summer Reading & Attending an Indigenous Reading Circle	Students are required to attend an in-person Reconciliation Reading Circle prior to the start of classes. Students are broken down into groups which are led by elders, setting the stage for how to engage with one another.
Department of Anesthesiology, Temerty Faculty of Medicine	Civility Awareness Week	Focuses on nurturing civility, an opportunity for all members of the department to share, learn, and engage in crucial discussions.

Centre for Faculty Development	Social Media & Academic Freedom	Workshop for faculty engaging in social media.
Accessibility Services	Accessibility Dialogues	Monthly meetings, led by peer facilitators from Accessibility Services with special guests to foster connections and allow for the exchange of diverse perspectives and experiences.
Student Group	Hart House Debating Club	Oldest debate club
Student Group	University of Toronto St. George Debate Club (UTSGDC)	UTSGDC aims to improve members' logical and argumentative skills through fact-based debates.
UTSC	Bridging the Gap: Israel/Palestine Student Panel Discussion	UTSC assisted in the organization of the Bridging the Gap Event with York.
UTSC	Tipsheet for Managing Difficult Conversations	Tipsheet provides strategies for building confident, when approaching difficult conversations.
UTSC	Connection and conversations	The office of Student Experience & Wellbeing regularly speaks with and consults with students and student leaders on a range of everyday issues. The ongoing conversations build relationships, making difficult conversations easier.
Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision	Workshops	The Centre for Graduate Mentorship and Supervision typically holds workshops on aspects of the supervisory relationship, including one on having difficult conversations.
University College	Training Sessions	R Residence and commuter dons receive training sessions dealing with community management and student support. They are trained to navigate difficult student community conversations especially during heightened and divisive geopolitical events.
UTM's Centre for Student Engagement	Multifaith student conversation circles	Safe spaces to have facilitated group conversations around a variety of faith and interfaith based topics.
UTM Student Group	UTM Debate Club	A student organization providing a competitive platform for students from diverse disciplines to hone valuable skills and techniques.
Temerty Faculty of Medicine	Conflict Resolution and Dialogue Strategies Training Sessions	The Office of Inclusion & Diversity has hosted conflict resolution and dialogue strategies training sessions for those in Temerty Faculty of Medicine who are in academic leadership roles and faculty/staff who have EDI roles in their departments.
New College	New Pedagogy: Where political conflict meets the classroom	A college-wide discussion series
New College	Training Sessions	Don staff receive training on communication and conflict resolution. Training includes topics on supporting students

		during global conflicts, boundary drawing and student support referrals. Dons they should strive to be politically neutral on potentially controversial topics and should avoid posting anything to social media on that might be considered overtly partisan. The goal of the session was to reduce the chances of dons inadvertently alienating students who have differing opinions on sensitive topics.
New College	Peer mediator certificate training program	A peer mediator certificate training program that will help students address difficult conversations with each other and peers.
New College	Courses in Critical Studies in Equity and Solidarity	Courses which teach difficult and controversial issues such as disability politics, prison abolition, Palestine, settler colonialism and race, food sovereignty, youth activism in such a way that students both feel represented and that their divergent perspectives are honored and engaged with.
Faculty of Law	Courses	Courses on negotiation and mediation. The Faculty of Law's mandatory moot program requires all students to develop skills in civil debate.
Dalla Lana School of Public Health	Dialogue Strategies for Difficult Conversations: Gaza Conflict	A full-day professional development workshop for Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work (FIFSW) and Dalla Lana School of Public Health (DLSPH) staff, faculty, sessional instructors, course instructors, and adjunct lecturers.
Organizational Behavior and Human Resources Management, Rotman School of Management	Courses	Developing leadership competencies, including effectively navigating differences within and across organizations.
Victoria College	Think against yourself	A panel discussion on civil discourse for students in the Vic One program.
Jackman Humanities Institute	Provocation Ideas Festival	A sponsor of the festival.
School of Graduate Studies	Conversations with SGS	A series of sessions for faculty in administrative roles in graduate education. The session, <i>Civil Discourse on Campus</i> is planned for this fall.
UTSC	Curriculum Review - Working Circles	A curriculum review led by a Working Circle made up of students, faculty, librarians, staff, and community partners. Its process - the intentional, structural emphasis on a non-hierarchical space that prioritizes listening across difference.

Appendix 4: External Landscape Scan of Initiatives at Peer Institutions

October 2024

University	Program Name	Description	Audience
Canada			
University of British Columbia	The Phil Lind Initiative	An annual dialogue series and course presented by the School of Public Policy and Global Affairs at UBC.	Students, university community
University of Calgary	Courageous Speak Series	Speaker series	General public
Simon Fraser University	Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue	Offers dialogue and engagement consulting services. Amplifies resources that enrich dialogue experience.	University community and members of the public
McGill University	President's Advisory Council for Engagement (PACE)	Student initiative	Students
United States			
Frameworks and Committees			
Northwestern	Advisory Committee on Free Expression and Institutional Speech	Panel of scholars from across disciplines to address issues on free expression and institutional speech	University community
University of Texas at San Antonio	Respectful Discourse Initiative	University framework: taskforces, response teams	Faculty and Staff
Johns Hopkins University	Four-part plan on civil discourse / dialogue for 2024/2025	Communication on the ongoing working and new initiatives that support civil discourse and dialogue for the 2024 and 2025 academic year.	University community
Orientation Programs			
Princeton	Orientation event on academic freedom and free expression on campus	Free speech orientation	First year students
Curricular programming			
American University	The Project on Civic Dialogue	For credit courses	Students
Appalachian State University	Agree to Disagree Seminar	First year course	First year students
University of Chicago	Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse	Undergraduate curriculum, in public speaking, science communication, political rhetoric, rhetorical theory, and freedom of expression	Undergraduate students
Georgetown University	Georgetown Dialogues Initiative	GDI Spotlight Courses focus on promoting productive dialogue across differences. In some cases,	Students

		this will involve faculty co-teaching in areas where there may be significant disagreement within and across disciplines.	
Harvard University	Perspectives module	Program which helps learners develop the mindset and skills essential for constructive dialogue across differences	First year students
MIT	Civil Discourse Project	Curricular activities in 1 st year program, e.g. seminars discussing the history and practice of freedom of expression, roundtable discussions, and student-led debates	First year students
University of Notre Dame	Become a Better Conversation Partner	Online course	General Public
University of Pennsylvania	Civil Dialogue Seminar: Civic Engagement in A Divided Nation	Undergraduate course with aim for students to develop concepts, tools, dispositions, and skills that will help them engage productively in democracy	Undergraduate students
University of Virginia	Engagement Courses	First year students are required to take engagement courses with aim to foster critical thought across difference.	First year students
Washington University	Dialogue Across Difference Course	Eight-week undergraduate course exploring perspectives a	Students
Co-curricular programming			
American University	The Project on Civic Dialogue	Co-curricular programming for students, e.g. Café Dialogues, Disagree with a Professor, dialogue grants, training student peer facilitators	Students
University of California, Berkeley, School of Law	Effective Communication Across Differences	Participatory workshop series with federal judges	Successful law student applicants
University of Denver	Braver Angels	Student debates	Students
The University of New Hampshire	Civil Discourse Lab	Partnerships with student organizations to facilitate discussion and events	Students
The Ohio State University	Shop Class for Democracy	Deliberative in-person or online forums. Online forums are through the Common Ground for Action platform	First year students

Vanderbilt University	One Small Step	Students with opposing views coming together for one-to-one conversations.	University community
Speaker Series, Campus Events and Guest Lecturers			
University of California, Berkeley	Words Over Time intergenerational dialogues	Intergenerational conversations	Undergraduate students and Osher Lifelong Learning Institute members
Columbia University	Dialogue Across Difference	Events	University community
Cornell University	Freedom of Expression theme year	Year of events focusing on the free exchange of ideas	University community
University of Denver	Denver Dialogues Braver Angels Disagree Better	Speaker series Student debates Conferences	General public
Georgetown University	Dialogues Initiative Signature Events	Event series	General Public
Harvard University	Harvard Dialogues	Event series designed to model productive dialogue	University community
Johns Hopkins University	Democracy Day	Orientation Event	First year students
	Public Events	Events on several divisive topics US Election , Israel/Gaza, high-profile speakers	General Public
University of Michigan	Conversations Across Differences	Event series	University community
MIT	Civil Discourse Project	Speaker series	First year students
	Dialogues Across Difference	Modeling disagreement through guest lectures and campus conversations	University community
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	Orientation Event	Interactive orientation event led by School of Civic Life and Leadership	Students
University of Richmond	Sharp Viewpoint Series	Speaker series	University community
Vanderbilt University	Dialogue Vanderbilt	Speaker series, trainings.	General public
	Civil Discourse lab	Hub for student civil discourse education	
Yale	Dean's Dialogue	Panel discussions	University community
Workshops and Trainings			
American University	The Project on Civic Dialogue	Training student peer facilitators	Students

University of Arizona houses the National Institute for Civil Discourse	Engaging Differences is one program the institute provides	Toolbox Resources	General public
Brown University	The Community Dialogue Program	A "Perspective-Taking Workshop" introduces students to strategies for perceiving or understanding a concept from another person's point of view.	Students
University of Colorado Boulder	Supporting Communication in the Classroom	Resources for faculty	Faculty
University of Chicago	Parrhesia Program for Public Discourse	Undergraduate workshops Community outreach - seminars and workshops	Students and General public
Colorado Mesa University	Free Speech Practice and Civil Discourse	Offers web page aimed at students; student trainings	Students
Columbia University	Dialogue Across Difference	Faculty professional development workshops, staff training, student workshops	University community
Dartmouth College	Dialogue Project	Training for students, faculty and staff	University community
Duke University	The Civil Discourse Project	Faculty workshops on teaching civil discourse in the classroom	Faculty
Harvard University	Navigating Social Issues in the Classroom	A Toolkit for educators as community bridge-builders	Faculty
Johns Hopkins University	RA Training	Incorporating dialogue into residential programming by training RAs	Students
University of Maryland	5 Tips for Talking Across Differences and Disagreements	Intergroup Dialogue Training Center provides guidance for productive conversations	University community
The Ohio State University	Civil Discourse Project Other programming through the Center for Ethics and Human Values	Student certificate program, student moderated civil discourse forums, trainings. Staff and faculty toolkit	University Community
University of Texas at San Antonio	Respectful Discourse Initiative	Faculty and staff trainings	Faculty and staff
	Civil Discourse Faculty Learning Community	Tools and resources for faculty	Faculty
Towson University	Resources for Civil Discourse	List of resources	University Community
	Dialogue Vanderbilt	Speaker series, trainings	University community

Vanderbilt University			
	Faculty development workshops by Prof. Dana Nelson	Faculty development workshops with faculty/instructors at their dialogue across difference' in classrooms	Faculty
University of Wisconsin La Crosse	Civil Discourse Toolkit	Toolkit	University Community
Fellowship Programs			
University of California houses the National Centre for Free Speech and Civic Engagement		Fellowship program	Success applicants from university community (faculty, staff, students)
Claremont McKenna	CARE Center Fellows	Student fellowship program	Successful student applicants
Davidson College	Deliberative Citizenship Initiative		Successful student applicants
Duke University	The Civil Discourse Project	Student fellowship program	Successful student applicants
Georgetown University	Georgetown Dialogues Initiative First-Year Seminar Faculty Fellows	Faculty Fellowship program - cohort of faculty teaching first-year seminars exchanging ideas, receiving support and funding	Faculty
Intercollegiate Civil Disagreement Fellowship	Intercollegiate Civil Disagreement Fellowship	Fellowship Program	Successful undergraduate student applicants from St. Philips College, California State University at Bakersfield, Santa Fe College, Stanford University, Harvard University
The University of New Hampshire	Civil Discourse Lab	Fellowship program	Students and alumni
The Ohio State University	Civil Discourse Fellows	Student fellowship program	Successful undergraduate student applicants
University of Texas at Austin	Civitas Institute	Fellowship Programs, summer symposium	Successful undergraduate student applicants

Vanderbilt University	Open Dialogue student ambassador	Ambassadors design programs for their peers, host visiting speakers and serve as representatives of the program to the Vanderbilt community.	Students
Funding			
Dartmouth College	Discourse Fund	Fund for student organizations for promoting discourse	Students
Johns Hopkins	Seed grant program	Exploring a seed grant program on dialogue	
University of Massachusetts Amherst	Dialogue Grant Funds	Grant funds available to support grassroots efforts to promote diverse discourse	University community
Vanderbilt University	Micro-grants	Micro-grants for work related to dialogue in instructional settings	
Communications			
Georgetown University	Remarks to new students in the Walsh School of Foreign Service at Georgetown University	Communication to students	Students
Harvard University	President letter to Harvard community	Community Message	Community
Stanford University	Letter to Undergraduate Students	Communication to students	Students
York University	President letter to York community	Community Message	Community
United Kingdom			
University of Birmingham	Speech! Speech!	Project culminating in a three-day festival	General public
University of Cambridge	Vice-Chancellor's Dialogues	Speaker series	General public
University of Cambridge	Global Issues Dialogue Centre	Conducts research projects on global issues and conducts dialogues with leading figures	Peer institutions and researchers
University College London	Disagreeing Well	Website with event listings, resources and news	University Community
University of Oxford	Debating the Difficult	Student Debate	University Community
Cardiff University	https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/research/explore/find-a-project/view/682034-	Funded research project seeks to develop and test practical interventions to reduce arrogance in debate.	

	changing-attitudes-in-public-discourse		
Europe			
KU Leuven	Meaningful Interactions Lab	Research group	
Asia			
Universiti Malaya	Centre for Civilisational Dialogue		
National University of Singapore	Writing and Critical Thinking: Civic Discourse in a Fractious World	For credit course	University Scholars Programme students

Additional Initiatives and Readings

Global

- [Heterodox Academy \(HxA\) - The Importance of Learning to Argue: From Ancient Greece Through the Present](#)

United States

- [Washington Post Magazine – Good Talk](#)
- [Campus Free Expression: A New Roadmap](#)
- [Harvard Magazine – Dialogue not Debate](#)
- [Stanford University - Letter sent to students admitted to the Class of 2028](#)

United Kingdom

- [Equality and Human Rights Commission - Freedom of expression: A guide for higher education providers and students' unions in Scotland](#)
- [Kings College London – Freedom of speech in UK higher education: Recommendations for policy and practice](#)
- [The Higher Education Policy Institute - Cultivating controversy ... with civility](#)
- [The British Universities' International Liaison Association - HE has “unique” civil discourse potential](#)
- [London Universities' Council for Academic Freedom](#)
- [StandWithUs UK hosts roundtable at the House of Lords with parliamentarians to hear university student testimony on abuse and mistreatment on their campuses since October 7th](#)
- [St. Andrews Law Review - The UK's "Free Speech and Academic Freedom Champion"](#)

Europe

- [ETH Zurich - alliance F and ETH Zurich set up Switzerland's first foundation for online public discourse](#)

Asia

- [University World News - An academic freedom deficit comes with a cost to society](#)
- [National University of Singapore - Writing and Critical Thinking: Civic Discourse in a Fractious World](#)
- [The University of Hong Kong - Hong Kong Universities: Re-imagining Spaces for Dialogue](#)

Appendix 5: Civil Discourse Events at U of T Arising from the Activities of the Working Group on Civil Discourse and the Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse

As part of their mandate, members of the Working Group on Civil Discourse assisted the Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse in identifying and participating in select civil discourse events at the University, as follows:

- Panel event on civil discourse and campus life featuring Pamela Paul, Ian Williams, and Janice Stein, moderated by Randy Boyagoda, and jointly presented with the Victoria College Ones Program (September 19, 2024, Hart House)
- “Civil Discourse in the Classroom: What’s the State and What’s at Stake?” panel event featuring Working Group on Civil Discourse members Professors Jim John, Nasim Niknafs, Brian Silverman, Alison Thompson, and Working Group Chair and Provostial Advisor on Civil Discourse, Randy Boyagoda, presented by the Centre for Teaching Support and Innovation (December 5, 2024, Robarts Library)
- Thinking Out Loud: The Honourable Judge Marion Buller, Chief Commissioner of the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, in Conversation with Randy Boyagoda (January 20, 2025, University of Toronto Mississauga)

Appendix 6: Consultation Questions

In-person and virtual consultation questions (Fall 2024):

1. Does the Working Definition describe your sense of civil discourse? Are there aspects that are missing from this definition or that you feel should be included?
2. What has been your experience of civil discourse, both inside and outside the classroom, at the University of Toronto?
3. Do you feel that you can express your views freely on campus? Please offer any examples where you feel like it has gone well, or when it has not gone well. What do you think were the reasons for these outcomes/experiences?
4. What aspects of the University do you feel already foster civil discourse in our campus communities? Why do you think they work?
5. What aspects of the University do you feel obstruct civil discourse in our campus communities? How do you think they could be overcome/addressed?
6. What sorts of activities, initiatives, supports, policies, etc. do you feel would contribute to further building an environment that supports and promotes civil discourse both inside and outside the classroom at U of T?
7. In your view, what is the role of universities in promoting civil discourse in our society?
8. Please provide any additional feedback that you would like to share that you think would be relevant to the Working Group.

Online survey questions (Fall 2024)

The online survey was accompanied by the Working Definition of Civil Discourse for reference and responses were collected anonymously.

Q1. What is your primary role at the University? *

- Undergraduate student
- Graduate student
- Staff
- Faculty
- Other

Q2. Which campus are you primarily affiliated with? *

- UTM
- UTSC
- St. George

Q3. Does the definition above describe your sense of civil discourse? *

- Yes
- No

Q4. Please elaborate (e.g., are there aspects that are missing from this definition or that you feel should be included? Are there things you feel should not be included?)

Q5. Do you feel that you can express your views freely on campus? *

- Yes
- No
- Depends

Q6. Please elaborate (i.e., why you answered “No” or “Depends” to Question 5)

Q7. Please rate your experience of civil discourse (as proposed in the Working Definition) at U of T *
(options Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, Very Poor)

- In the classroom
- Outside of the classroom

Q8. Please share examples where you feel like your experience of “civil discourse” at U of T has gone well, or when it has not gone well. What were the reasons for these outcomes/experiences?

Q9. Do you feel that there are currently activities or initiatives at U of T that are successful at fostering civil discourse (as proposed in the Working Definition)? *

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q10. Please elaborate, i.e., What are the activities or initiatives? Why do you think they work?

Q11. Do you feel there are current features, trends, or components of U of T that obstruct civil discourse (as proposed in the Working Definition) in our campus communities? *

- Yes
- No
- Not sure

Q12. Please elaborate, i.e., what features, trends, or components? How do you think they could be overcome/addressed?

Q13. What sorts of activities, initiatives, supports, policies, etc. do you think U of T should consider/implement/promote in order to build an environment that supports and fosters civil discourse (as proposed in the Working Definition) both inside and outside the classroom?

Q14. Do you believe that universities have an important role to play in promoting civil discourse (as proposed in the Working Definition) in our society?

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Q15. Please elaborate.

Q16. Please provide any additional feedback that you would like to share that you think would be relevant to the Working Group on Civil Discourse.

Online survey questions (Spring 2025)

The following questions were accompanied by a link to a summary of themes heard in the consultations (see Appendix 8) and preliminary recommendations. The survey was anonymous. Demographic questions were added on request of the Provostial Advisor after the survey had already launched, so demographic information is not available for all responses.

Q1. What is your main affiliation with U of T?

- Faculty
- Librarian
- Staff
- Student
- Other

Q2. What campus are you most closely affiliated with?

Q3. Please share your feedback on the consultation themes and preliminary recommendations. If you require more space, you may submit multiple responses.

Appendix 7: Consultation Participation Breakdown

Fall 2024 consultations

Online consultation

- 574 responses

31 by-invitation consultations

- 16 staff groups
- 6 faculty groups
- 9 student groups
- Approximately 800 people reached (includes PDAD&C @ 350 members)

3 days of open in-person meetings

- UTSC (9 sessions; 16 participants)
- UTM (6 sessions; 6 participants)
- St. George (21 sessions; 36 participants)

6 online sessions

- UTSG (41 participants)
- UTSG faculty only (10 participants)
- UTSC (6 participants)
- UTSC faculty only (10 participants)
- UTM (7 participants)
- UTM faculty only (2 participants)

In total, approximately 1,500 people engaged in the Fall 2024 consultation process.

Spring 2025 consultation (themes and preliminary recommendations)

The online consultations drew 111 responses from anonymous faculty, librarians, staff, and students, and 1 response from a member of Governing Council.

Appendix 8: Consultation Themes (as shared in the Spring 2025 consultations)

Introduction

We are presenting the following themes and preliminary recommendations to the University of Toronto community in advance of submitting our final report to the Provost. The Working Group has deliberated deeply and held many discussions based on what we heard during our community consultations, the results of the online survey, and initiatives and practices at peer institutions and on our own campuses.

This preliminary document should not be seen as a substitute for the full report, which will offer insight into the underlying rationale for each of the recommendations. Rather, it offers a **high-level summary** of the themes, observations, critiques, and suggestions that emerged from the consultations that were held in Fall 2024. While this is not an exhaustive list of every item we heard, we intend it to capture broadly the points we heard repeatedly in our discussions.

Because the war in Israel and Palestine was a major subject during the consultations, we received many comments that were focused specifically on how issues arising from the war were manifesting on our campuses. However, the focus of the Working Group is not on any singular event but rather how the University can better foster an environment that is conducive to productive dialogue, debate, and discussion. In this summary, we have attempted to distill the feedback related to specific incidents into common themes.

If there is something that you think we have overlooked or perhaps not heard that does not appear to be represented in the themes below, please let us know via our online form.

Summary of what we heard

Definition of civil discourse

- The term can be perceived as creating a chill on discourse itself and also derives from knowledge traditions and practices that privilege and ratify Western perspectives to the exclusion of others.
- “Civil discourse” is often confused with “civility,” which distracts from the core meaning of the term and the important aspects of the definition
- Should recognize that discourse can cause harm even when it is not intended
- Be careful when referring to “norms” and common standard; who determines what is normative?
- Should recognize that a “willingness to take risks” is easier for some people than others, depending on their personal experience of marginalization or precarity
- Some respondents expressed the worry that a focus on civil discourse could lead to the perception that every view should be given weight within the university context, including that that academic experts have deemed to be non-valid (e.g., “both sides”-ism)

Programming

- While programs that support civil discourse exist on campus, there should be more and these should be widely-publicized
- Many staff and student groups are already offering programs that intersect with and develop skills for challenging discourse and these should be acknowledged
- Frequent training opportunities should be offered for students, staff, faculty and librarians on facilitating and participating in “civil discourse”

- These should include information on the role of emotion and physical experience in dialogue, managing conflict, hearing difficult things, building empathy, and repairing working relationships
- There should be more town halls or other opportunities to engage with University leadership
- More events should be held across all our campuses that model civil discourse – not just one position on an issue but events that showcase how to disagree

Classroom environment

- There are excellent examples of pedagogical interventions that have strengthened the exposure to and practice of civil discourse in the classroom, for example:
 - structured debate on non-contentious issues
 - embedding concepts and approaches that encourage students to reason from other people's points of view
 - rotational leadership exercises that encourage multiple perspectives
 - including language in the syllabus and first day of class stressing the importance of disagreeing well and setting the values and behaviours that will be expected in the classroom;
 - consistent use of opportunities for productive discourse in class so students (and instructors) are prepared to use their skills when extreme challenges arise
 - explicitly affording students the opportunity to dissent from a majority view or make mistakes in the service of learning without being penalized
- Some undergraduate students noted that the readily perceived political biases of their instructors in the classroom did not leave room for counterarguments.
- Some students and faculty fear being canceled or socially ostracized if they disagree with particular opinions that correspond to perceived left-wing or progressive views associated with EDI, on subjects like sex and gender, vaccines, and Israel and Palestine, and likewise when it comes to interrogating the principles and practices of EDI itself.
- Some community members perceive that the leftist positions and ideologies noted above have become so presumptively orthodox at the University, this over-determines what material is taught in class and what views are legitimate and acceptable
- Instructors fear addressing contentious issues in the classroom, even if they are relevant to course material, for fear of cancellation and retribution on social media and elsewhere
- Instructors and others should be aware of how differences in culture, personal experience, and background can affect how people express themselves in challenging and contentious discussions
- Generally, students in STEM disciplines reported that civil discourse was not an issue in their classrooms, where those in the humanities and social sciences seemed to report more challenges

Faculty/division/departmental environment

- Like students, faculty and staff reported fear of retribution for expressing what they perceive as minority views within their departments and divisions
 - Especially pronounced for pre-tenure staff, CLTAs and sessional instructors on the faculty side and non-unionized staff
- Staff indicated a lack of clarity on what protections they have with respect to speaking freely about contentious issues
- There was some confusion about the difference between “civil discourse” and behaving civilly that illuminated that there are issues regarding some staff feeling like second-class citizens relative to faculty

- Staff would like to be more included in planning for civil discourse initiatives as they perform important front-line work with students and faculty in creating the conditions and sometimes the training for civil discourse at the University
- Some faculty reported significant polarization within their departments based on political viewpoints with respect to the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine
- People holding “conservative” viewpoints reported feeling isolated within their divisions and departments

Perception of University administration and leadership (i.e., President, Vice-Presidents, Provosts, Vice-Provosts, and Governing Council)

- Many respondents expressed frustration over a perceived lack of transparency about decision-making from University administration
- There is strong support for more timely and transparent communications from University administration and leadership, particularly during crises
- There is a sense that senior University leadership does not do enough to engage with students in particular, and is inaccessible to them
- Some faculty reported feeling that senior leadership is too constrained in statements to their academic colleagues by considerations determined by legal and communications professionals
- Some reported that they found the tone of communication from University leaders to be distant and condescending
- Some perceived University administration as hostile to protest
- Some perceived University administration as too permissive of protest

University structure and culture

- Decentralized structure means makes it challenging to have a centralized strategy to encourage civil discourse
- Structure of University feels opaque and overly complicated to many students, which makes knowing how to have their views heard difficult
- Students (and staff and faculty) have a lot to say and nowhere to say it; when it comes up, it bursts out; we need to provide more avenues for expression
- Power imbalances among different levels of staff, students, and faculty and librarians are a challenge civil discourse
- Competitive culture at U of T can be both inspiring and demoralizing, making the stakes for “being right” higher, which can lead to challenges to civil discourse
- Where commuting is common, there can be challenges in fostering community, which can make establishing a norm for civil discourse difficult
- Some respondents object to the principle of neutrality within the University and indicated that there are some issues that the University should be taking a stand on

Broader factors that negatively impact civil discourse

- Perceived orthodoxies associated with EDI inhibit freedom to express dissent or to pursue ideas that challenge these orthodoxies, thereby challenging teaching, learning, and research activities
- Post-COVID impacts that have affected how students are prepared for disagreement and challenging conversations
 - Mental health concerns
 - Challenges to resilience in younger generation

- Students coming out of COVID may rely more heavily on social media to model behaviour for dealing with conflict
- Increased polarization in society in general
- Impact of social media as well as mis- and disinformation and the erosion of trust in society
- Geopolitical events, such as the war in Israel and Palestine

Other

- Timing of civil discourse project and Working Group is suspect
 - Suspicion that it is an exercise intended to silence pro-Palestinian activist voices
- Exclusion from staff from Working Group was a significant point of unhappiness
 - Sense that staff contributions to creating an environment for civil discourse is not valued by the administration

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 Vice-President, 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 Vice-

Provost, 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