

CIVIL DISCOURSE INITIATIVES in the STATE UNIVERSITY SYSTEM

Project Outline

I. Introduction

Board of Governors Chair Syd Kitson established the Board's Civil Discourse Initiative during his January 2021 "State of the System" address. Chair Kitson expressed concern regarding the steady decline in respectful discourse among those with differing viewpoints, and stated his belief that the university setting can provide a foundation for understanding, learning, and growth in this area. Chair Kitson tasked Governor Tim Cerio to lead the Initiative through the Strategic Planning Committee. Governor Cerio has stated that "Civic discourse, conducted in a civil manner without fear of reprisal, is critical to free speech and ensuring academic and intellectual freedom – not just on our university campuses, but throughout our country."

The work of the Strategic Planning Committee will be guided by the Board's April 2019 "Statement of Free Expression," which was adopted by the 12 state universities to support and encourage a full and open discourse and the robust exchange of ideas and perspectives on all university campuses. (Statement will be appended)

II. Civil Discourse Initiatives: Best Practices

A. The State University System

Each State university submitted key activities and initiatives that promote and support civil discourse in their campus community. Best practices gleaned from a review of their submissions and examples are highlighted within the following four categories:

1. Workshops & Professional Development - Presentations, lectures, workshops, or training designed to provide opportunities for faculty, staff, students, and campus partners to learn how to engage in and facilitate dialogue respectfully.
 - *New Student Orientation* at Florida Polytechnic University.
 - *Difficult Conversations and Practical Solutions* at University of North Florida
2. Speakers, Dialogue & Debate - Events or programs that provide opportunities for faculty, staff, and students to engage in, observe, or facilitate conversations and encourage civil discourse.
 - *The Breezeway Dialogues* at Florida Atlantic University.
3. Outreach (on and off campus) - Programs, workshops, and or campaigns designed to cultivate a campus culture of civil discourse and engage external partners on issues related to civil discourse.
 - *The Power of WE* at Florida State University.
4. Research and Academic Affairs - Research-based initiatives, web tools, and courses designed to provide opportunities for students, faculty, and staff to engage in or learn about issues related to civil discourse in a formal setting.
 - *Bob Graham Center for Public Service* at University of Florida

B. National Models

A review of national postsecondary system and institutional programs that promote meaningful interactions in support of civil discourse. Following is one such example.

The Program for Public Discourse - University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.

The Program for Public Discourse is housed in the College of Arts and Sciences and exists: "*To support a strong culture of debate and deliberation at UNC through the curricular and extracurricular program.*" The program's basic tenets are:

1. "*The university is a center for the creation, exploration, and dissemination of knowledge and it serves a unique role both in history and in our contemporary culture.*"
2. "*The proper functioning of the university requires a commitment to open, frank, respectful, and productive debate.*"
3. "*When our faculty, by practice and example, teach students how to think and argue well, with the processes and terms of rational justification open to examination, they strengthen our democracy and our public lives.*"

III. The Board of Governors as Advocate

The Board of Governors, responsible for the management and operation of the State University System, will make a clear and steadfast commitment to prioritize and support civil discourse at all levels of a campus community and to hold each university accountable for policies, programs, and actions that will operationalize the Board's commitment.

A. Strategic Priorities

Each member of a campus community has a unique and critical role in the prioritization of civil discourse and the ongoing support of civil discourse initiatives.

1. Boards of Trustees

State university boards of trustees have the powers and duties necessary for the operation, management, and accountability of each university. A university's civil discourse initiatives should be viewed as strategic priorities by its board of trustees.

2. University Leadership

University leaders have primary responsibility for establishing the campus culture and setting the day-to-day living, learning, and working environment for all university community members. The university president, as institution leader, directs and monitors these efforts.

All areas of a university campus, including classrooms, lecture halls, and offices, as well as extracurricular, residential, and social locales, provide important settings for civil discourse interactions and offer direct opportunities for learning, growth, and meaningful outcomes.

Academic deans and directors, student affairs administrators/counselors, and faculty are critical to, and share responsibility for, the establishment and reinforcement of tolerant, open-minded, and respectful civil discourse on a university campus.

3. Student Leadership

Student government and other student campus leaders should be engaged early and often to urge their participation in the development, implementation, evaluation, and support of civil discourse programs and initiatives.

IV. Next Steps