Asking the Questions: Re-Imagining Public Spaces to Promote Better Discourse

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Abstract

As higher education can seem overwhelmed with the growing polarization and division of contemporary politics, this article offers an example of how college campuses can commit to more healthy and engaging practices of democracy. Drawing on the efforts of the Dialogue, Inclusion and Democracy (DID) Lab at Providence College, the authors argue for the importance of re-imagining public spaces to promote better discourse. It offers a concrete civic intervention—the development of "dialogue walls"—as part of a broader effort to build a culture of constructive dialogue on campus. It shows how these kinds of civic spaces can teach the art of listening and asking questions and help build the civic infrastructure necessary for civic studies.

Keywords: civic education, constructive dialogue, deliberative democracy

And when you want to stop listening so you can react or respond or judge—which will be often!—mind that gap between what you know and what you most certainty don't and ask one more curious question.

—MO NICA GUZMAN,

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Civil discourse is the cornerstone of democracy. After all, responding to the seminal question in civic studies—What should we do?—requires deliberative, participatory practices where people engage in democratic dialogue about what matters most. As Peter Levine succinctly explains: "I will not decide what we should do; we will" (Levine, 2014, p. 29). Nevertheless, finding the common ground necessary for becoming a "we" through constructive conversations and joint public work is becoming more challenging as our commonwealth crumbles under public distrust, rising polarization, and attacks on democratic institutions. Research indicates significant "democratic backsliding" in the U.S. and across the globe (International IDEA, 2024), with studies showing just 2 in 10 Americans trust the government to "do the right thing," while more than 6 in 10 are dissatisfied with the way democracy is working in the U.S. (Pew Research Center, 2023).

And yet events such as the recent gathering on civic studies in higher education hosted by the Minnesota Humanities Center in St. Paul (from which this and other articles in this special issue of The Good Society emanated) demonstrate the potential in higher education to address this growing crisis of democracy. This diverse, multinational group of scholars and practitioners offers insights and lessons from an emerging field. In this article, we add our collaborative work at Providence College (PC) as an experimental effort to how higher education can promote "better discourse"—respectful, informed, and purposeful conversation across lines of difference. By engaging in this kind of dialogue, people discuss various viewpoints with the intent to learn, understand, and, sometimes, collectively decide (Campus Compact, 2024). It is important to realize that students learn most about democracy by how it is practiced—or, more often, not practiced—on campus and in their lives. As a result, if we want to build a more democratic society, we need to create spaces where students can engage in genuine experiences with the kind of productive discourse that undergirds democracy.

The importance of creating space to practice democracy has led us to think about new ways to catalyze civil discourse. Led by student leaders, the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy (DID) Lab at Providence College has created "dialogue walls" on campus to catalyze public voice and a more inclusive culture (Longo, 2024). We see these public spaces as important for demonstrating how civic studies can promote the full participation and flourishing of communities.

Conversations for Change

While college campuses most often mirror the polarization of the broader culture—for example, it may come as no surprise that college students have become more polarized than at any time in recent history (Eagan et al., 2017), with a majority of students unwilling to live with or date someone who voted for an opposing presidential candidate (NBC News/Generation Lab, 2022)—colleges and universities are also uniquely situated to be civically engaged. Higher education prepares future civic professionals and acts as anchor institutions in local communities. Colleges and universities also increasingly integrate deliberative practices in teaching, learning, and campus life. Building on research from social science, campuses are more engaged in promoting constructive conversation about divisive issues, even though it is often under the radar of the broader narrative about higher education (Longo & Shaffer, 2019; Blake & Palmer, 2024; Campus Compact, 2024).

These dialogues across lines of differences are best when not simply organized as one-time events or isolated programs. Rather, conversations need to connect with ongoing civic action. After all, as Beverly Tatum recognized, "You can't solve a problem, if you can't talk about it" (Kenney, 2017). The most challenging problems we face in society simply cannot be addressed unless we learn to have respectful conversations with those we disagree with—even though it is tough to do.

Our work together in the DID Lab offers some promising lessons. The DID Lab aims to develop a practical philosophy of "what works" to engage with complex issues and disputed questions. The DID Lab creates inclusive spaces that support deliberative, community-based engagement to promote a more vibrant democracy. This includes facilitating courses, learning communities, and workshops. Our DID Lab is an engagement collaboratory, serving as an incubator for innovative civic practices. Our approach draws on the findings from a multiyear research project sponsored by the Kettering Foundation on "deliberative pedagogy" that led to the publications of Deliberative Pedagogy (Shaffer et al., 2017) and Creating Space for Democracy (Longo & Shaffer, 2019). Further, our work has been shaped by several civic spaces over the past few years, such as the development of the Center at Moore Hall, a new cultural space on campus, and the PC-Smith Hill Annex, a hub located in the community adjacent to campus that promotes campus-community dialogue, along with a national institute on civil

discourse hosted at PC in November 2019 in partnership with leading civil discourse organizations, including Campus Compact, Essential Partners, and the Sustained Dialogue Institute.

We see the power of student leadership in promoting civil discourse efforts, which was embodied in the creation of "dialogue walls" on campus. After learning to integrate deliberative practices in a course on dialogue, diversity, and civic engagement taught by Bevely and Longo, a team of students designed a public space for participatory engagement on issues that matter. Launched in 2018, we call these spaces Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy Walls—or DID Walls—initially in the Feinstein Academic Center and soon thereafter in the Center at Moore Hall. More recently, DID Walls have been added in the Athletics Center, the Ryan School of Business, and the Science Complex. The newest building on campus for our school of nursing which opened in January 2025 also includes a centrally located digital dialogue wall. These public spaces have become a signature initiative of the DID Lab and are designed to "create a safe space that supports the development of well-informed and engaged citizens through civil discourse."[1]

As a practical matter, the DID Walls pose regular questions in topical matters that invite the community to engage in constructive community conversations. Once a question is posted, any member of the PC community is invited to respond with their personal experiences and opinions. For example, the first question posed in Fall 2018 asked: "What differentiates hate speech from free speech?" Responses were analyzed and helped the DID Lab frame future dialogues and programming. Since 2018, we have asked hundreds of questions and received thousands of responses on the seven civil discourse boards on campus.

In Fall 2022, we expanded these efforts to launch Conversations for Change, a campus-wide initiative to promote civil discourse with support from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations. Our work now includes not only a yearlong student dialogue fellowship program but also supports a faculty learning community on integrating civil discourse into coursework, which has involved more than 30 faculty members, along with public dialogues on topics like housing and economic development with the local neighborhood led by a community dialogue fellow, in collaboration with faculty, students, and community residents. We also host professional development programming and are working to embed civil discourse into campus life, in areas such as community standards.

Over these past five years, we have used the dialogue walls to engage the community in dialogue on various public issues. For instance, we asked

questions on complex and tense issues at our Catholic campus, such as race relations, abortion, and LGBTQ rights, where there is a great deal of disagreement. We have also asked about everyday issues, such as housing policies, study abroad, and campus beautification, where student voice is often neglected in decision-making.

With controversial speakers and counter-protests being stoked by national leaders and garnering disproportionate media attention, our campuses are staging grounds for polarization and partisan culture wars. Seemingly, civil discourse is not without controversy at Providence College. As a Catholic institution, PC encounters the sometimes-competing demands of free speech and the harm caused by hate speech, alongside understandings and interpretations offered by Catholic social teaching. These ideological differences can lead to complicated tensions. Providence College has dealt with controversy surrounding the "hot button" issues before the DID Walls, and the difficulty in addressing them has not gone away.

For this reason, the initial proposal to use public spaces for a democracy wall was met with concerns from administrators who worried that the boards would invite comments that could not be monitored and might lead to wider divisions. To address these concerns, we worked with a team of students studying public art and community engagement to devise guidelines that now appear beside each dialogue wall. They include reminders to "engage responsibly," "be respectful of people's humanity and dignity," and to avoid "offensive language and profanity." Disagreements may arise, one guideline notes, but "personal attacks are not acceptable." If a comment violates a guideline, which happens on occasion, the student leaders overseeing the wall confer with DID Lab faculty and fellow students and, if necessary, remove the response. Student dialogue fellows engage as local leaders and bridge builders on campus, so like public murals done by local artists or youth are often not sites for graffiti (Project for Spaces, 2008), a level of connection and accountability appears to develop that leads participants to engage constructively and become more invested in a climate of respectful dialogue.

Naming and Framing Strategic Questions

Through this practice, in hallways and public spaces across Providence College, chalkboards, electronic screens, and whiteboards invite people to share their thoughts on timely and often contentious topics. Questions such

as "What does American democracy mean to you?" and "Is there hope for American democracy?" prompt students, faculty, and other campus community members to crowd the boards with responses. Some comments: that democracy means the ability to "have my own opinion," "be able to agree to disagree," and "work together to solve problems" and that many voices are "not heard as much as it is promised." Other responses demonstrate hope for the future: "We must put in effort to work together to form a better tomorrow." And, democracy is possible through "grassroots activism," "conversations and food," and, perhaps most presciently, "the education of new generations" (Longo, 2024).

With questions like these on the meaning of democracy developed by student leaders, the DID Walls help to name issues and frame campus-wide dialogues around timely issues. Many topics ask for community input on the student experience at Providence College, along with concrete recommendations on ways to improve campus life and program offerings (with questions such as "What are some important topics you want to see discussed on campus?" and "How can we help LGBTQ+ individuals feel safe?"). Topics sometimes connect to current events and national or cultural celebrations (with questions such as "What injustices are leading to social unrest and what responses/actions would you like to see?" and "What about your culture makes you most proud?"). And community responses invite self-reflection, offer feedback, and recognize student agency (with questions such as "How can you commit yourself to advocating for others?" and "What is your role in changing the culture at Providence College?").

Most of the topics covered in our questions might best be understood as what have been termed "wicked problems" (Rittel & Webber, 1973), challenges that cannot be solved with technical fixes or the usual way of doing business. They involve complex issues with competing values, multiple perspectives, and tough trade-offs. Martín Carcasson (2017) notes that wicked problems "call for ongoing communicative processes of broad engagement to address underlying competing values and tensions." As a response, Carcasson offers that a "deliberative mindset" can help "develop mutual understanding across perspectives, negotiate the underlying competing values, and invent, support, and constantly adapt collaborative actions" (p. 3).

A critical first step for developing this mindset—and ultimately addressing complex issues—is for students to invite the community to discuss fundamental challenges in a productive way. Thus, students learn the public skills of naming, framing, and asking strategic questions. Naming wicked

problems is a fundamental step for addressing them because it identifies the specific issue we need to discuss publicly. People name problems in conversations all the time, a process that helps them capture their experiences and concerns. When we ask somewhat mundane questions, such as: "What's bothering you?" "Why do you care?" and "How are you going to be affected?" (Mathews, 2016), we are identifying what is valuable to them and how they are naming issues.

This is a complex act because experts and professionals often name problems differently from the people and communities affected by a problem. For instance, professional stakeholders in education, such as school administrators, will often name problems differently from parents or students. This can be seen with an issue such as a chronically absent student forced to move during the school year: The challenge for families might be homelessness and housing insecurity, whereas school officials seemingly name the problem "truancy." As noted above, provocative free expression or even discriminatory language can be called "free speech" by advocates of academic freedom but "hate speech" by vulnerable groups who feel harmed by the power of another's language. How do we approach such issues? Is there a correct option or choice for how to name the problem? Who decides?

People often name problems differently depending on their backgrounds, experiences, and positionality. These examples are meant to demonstrate that it is vital for people with direct experience with an issue to be involved in the initial naming of the topic—and that this work not be left to detached experts or outsiders. Encouraging participants to describe issues on their own terms in a public way is empowering and helps to make sure subsequent dialogues are relevant. Ultimately, an inclusive and deliberative process of naming issues affords a greater sense of ownership, allowing ordinary people to reclaim a civic identity and responsibility that is too often relinquished to experts in their professional capacities.

Framing wicked problems is also an essential aspect of public talk. With the DID Walls, and broader work cultivating constructive conversations, framing the right questions is critical for inviting the type of participation you most want to cultivate. "When people frame their strategic explorations as questions rather than as concerns or problems," according to Juanita Brown and her colleagues (Brown et al., 2002), "a conversation begins where everyone can learn something new together, rather than having the normal stale debates" (p. 2). Building on the wisdom of the Essential

Partners (Brown et al., 2002, p. 4), the following is offered as guidance for framing questions:

- Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question to which I/we do not know the answer?
- What "work" do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meaning, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognizable and relevant—and different enough to call forward new responses?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities, or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

Naming and framing an issue creates an environment for shared learning by acknowledging the full and messy scope of wicked problems. It also helps shape the kind of public talk that can lead to better discourse.

The DID Lab leverages the lived experiences and localized knowledge of students and other stakeholders to develop timely and relevant questions that help illuminate the community's views constructively. When our team asked, "How can civil discourse help us during a time of societal unrest?" one response pushed for open-mindedness: "We can learn from one another and explore perspectives we would have never considered otherwise." When we asked about people's experiences with education, a response helped to demonstrate why these educative public spaces are so valuable, with someone writing: "Education allows me to empathize with those I thought I could not."

Broader Trends

The DID Walls demonstrate students' capacity when given the opportunity to be co-creators of educational spaces and participate in experiences that

are humanizing, authentic, and productive. As the authors of Free Spaces (Evans & Boyte, 1992), The Great Good Places (Oldenburg, 1999), and Palaces for the People (Klinenberg, 2018) argue in unique but interrelated ways, places we might not first think of as sites for democratic innovation can be essential to community life and social change. When describing free spaces, third spaces, or social infrastructure, these scholars highlight the importance of creating spaces where ordinary people can share experiences, associate and organize, participate in public decision-making, and plan for collaborative action.

Sometimes, the process of developing these spaces involves reconceptualizing familiar locations—such as libraries or barbershops—as civic spaces. Other times civic spaces may utilize locations away from everyday life—such as retreat centers and folk schools. It can also involve re-imagining the role of walls or using images in public spaces.

Artists can be engines for transforming public spaces to dramatic effect. For instance, Candy Chang's Before I Die artwork asks members of communities to complete the sentence on their dreams before they die on public chalkboards, a meaning-making experience that is meant to "reimagine how the walls of our cities can help us grapple with mortality and meaning as a community today" (Chang, 2013, n.d.). This creative expression has been displayed on more than 5,000 walls in over 75 countries. Other public art, such as The World We Want, also uses chalkboards in public spaces by asking participants to "declare the world they want to live in, and the role they'll play in creating that world" (The World We Want, n.d.).

Other artists use visual images or interactive displays for community storytelling. The French artist JR, for instance, started the Inside Out Project to use his own artistic practice as inspiration to invite communities to display large-scale Black and White self-portraits in public spaces. This process has been used in more than 150 countries and territories across the globe (Inside Out Project, n.d.). Kwame Akoto-Bamfo created "Blank Slate: Hope for a New America," an interactive monument paying tribute to African American history and the ongoing struggle for racial justice. The Blank Slate statue features four figures that symbolize the generational struggles in the African American experience: an enslaved ancestor, a lynched union soldier martyr, a struggling mother activist, and a baby representing the next generation. The monument culminates with an interactive protest sign, a blank placard held by the mother figure at the top, representing "the voice of the ordinary people." The public shares ideas and hopes on the screen through a dedicated WIFI system and blank placards, which

are used during the traveling exhibition and integrated with a social media campaign (Blank Slate Monument, n.d.).

The use of public spaces for democratic engagement and revolution has a long history, including the use of "dialogue walls" in the Chinese democracy movement in the late 1970s. Referred to as the Beijing Spring, the Chinese Democracy Movement used posters on what became known as the "Democracy Wall" in central Beijing near Tiananmen Square starting in late 1978, as activists continued publishing unofficial newspapers and creating posters supporting democracy. While the public engagement grew in popularity and spread to major Chinese cities, by December 1979, the original Democracy Wall was removed and pushed to a remote location with many of its leaders imprisoned or exiled. While short-lived, this original democracy wall in an authoritarian setting provides a significant model for free speech and democratic innovation (Brodsgaard, 1981; Greene, 2009). These efforts continue to surface and be censored in areas under China's control, as a democracy wall at the University of Hong Kong was recently removed by authorities in a crackdown against free speech (Fung, 2021).

On college campuses in the U.S., dialogue walls have emerged, most notably with Democracy Plaza at IUPUI (now Indiana University-Indianapolis), launched during the 2004 presidential election. Led by student leaders called Democracy Plaza Scholars, IUPUI began by using several chalkboards in a prominent outdoor location and then expanded to include a three-wall board inside the Campus Center in 2012. "The visibility of the space encourages both active and passive participation," notes program leaders (Bonilla & Brown, 2019).

"Students (and others on campus) can actively engage in the discussion by answering a question or commenting on others' posts. But just as important in influencing IUPUI's campus culture is the opportunity for passive participation—reading comments on the boards and seeing what others think about current issues" (Bonilla & Brown, 2019, p. 194). While the plaza at IU-Indianapolis is undergoing a "re-imagining" (Division of Student Affairs, 2024), other campuses have implemented similar projects, including most recently at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside, which was led by their student government president and the Andrew Goodman Vote Everywhere Campus Team (Andrew Goodman Democracy Wall Project, 2024). In addition, University of St. Cloud (MN), Kennesaw State University (Georgia), and Maricopa Community Colleges (Arizona) in partnership with the Phoenix public library, have experimented with dialogue walls.

Moving Forward

Our work aims to build the civic infrastructure for ongoing and sustained conversations—offering lessons for others grappling with bringing about better discourse to our increasingly polarized society. This involves creating spaces for people to learn the stories, backgrounds, and experiences of those on all sides of complex issues. It includes studying underlying "problems beneath the problem," which require exploring tradeoffs, trust in experts, and the historical treatment of marginalized communities. And in contemporary public life, not having this space for deliberative conversations has real consequences, particularly for those most affected by a problem.

There is no one right way to develop public spaces for civic engagement; in-person or online, permanent or pop-up, dialogue walls are one example of design to meet the needs and norms of any community looking to amplify civil discourse. While it might be helpful to pilot a democracy wall in a place you can access and oversee, they tend to work best in high-traffic areas, which are also visible public locations. It helps if people feel comfortable in the space and feel they can stop and take time to answer the questions and reflect upon the responses of others.

What we recommend is:

- A comfortable space—online or in-person,
- Wall/public space for response,
- Thought-provoking and well-framed questions,
- Community agreements/guidelines, and
- A student-led team with diverse backgrounds, perspectives, and skills committed to facilitative leadership.

Once you have built your dialogue wall, it is vital to stay up to date on current events, both local to your institution's campus and global to societal issues. Be attentive, especially, to divisive issues where dialogue and deliberation may help bring about common ground and resolutions. Remember the importance of developing a "we" for civic studies. Consider topics that will spark interest and are relevant to the lived experiences of members of your community. Challenge participants to consider the experiences of local neighborhood residents in the broader community who are all too often exploited through the actions of colleges and universities (gentrifying neighborhoods, failing to pay property taxes, hoarding resources, acting unruly, and disregarding neighbors) and are not offered an organic platform

to voice their concerns. Be sure to frame questions in a way that does not suggest a particular preference or a predetermined outcome; instead, craft questions that invite a diverse range of identities and perspectives to feel brave enough to share their honest viewpoints.

Take the time to ask members of your community what they would like to discuss. Consider increasing accessibility by utilizing physical walls and online platforms that can invite responses and reflection from a broader range of people. Additionally, be mindful of the community's wellness and how content will impact the mental and civic health of community members. If things feel heavy, use the dialogue walls to create space for check-ins, celebrations, motivational quotes, and peer-to-peer advice.

It is also essential to assess the impact of the DID Walls. We are currently working with a research team to evaluate the impact of the process on participants around issues such as belonging, voice, and empowerment. We aim to bring more rigorous evidence to the practices that our initial feedback tells us are having a positive impact.

By itself, dialogue walls or even broader civil discourse programs promoting pluralism will not solve complex challenges dividing us as a society. However, we believe these civic spaces can teach the values and skills necessary for democracy—like listening with empathy, building a public voice, and acting collaboratively—while also serving as counter-symbols for something more significant: an alternative to the politics of division. Civic studies is calling upon society to take the health of our democracy seriously. As part of this larger task, let's create public spaces to ask questions that can lead to better discourse about the things that matter most for our shared future.

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Dr. Quincy Bevely is the inaugural vice president of Institutional Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Providence College and codirector of the Dialogue, Inclusion, and Democracy (DID) Lab. In this role, he coleads initiatives that foster inclusive excellence and cultivate meaningful dialogue across diverse

perspectives. Dr. Bevely engages the campus community through the DID Lab in deliberative, reflective, and community-based practices to promote civil discourse and bridge divides. In addition to his administrative leadership, Dr. Bevely is an adjunct faculty member and deeply committed to empowering students in their pursuit of higher education. A Chicago native, he earned a bachelor's degree in psychology and a master's in adult and higher education from Northern Illinois University before completing his PhD in counseling student development at Kansas State University.

NOTES

1. A short video, "Spaces for dialogue, inclusion, and democracy at Providence College" introducing the "dialogue walls" can be found at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-3xV4N_4_28.

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