

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



## Democracy Divided

### Articles

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I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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# DELIBERATION AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE

## A Student Affairs Approach

Diana Ali, Teri Lyn Hinds, Stephanie King, Kara Lindaman,  
Brent Marsh, and Erin Payseur Oeth

*Higher Education Exchange* frequently highlights stories of deliberation at colleges and universities. These examples often demonstrate deliberation's power as an educational practice to build students' democratic skills while also contributing to other academic goals. This article describes deliberation in another context and led by a distinct constituency in higher education: student affairs professionals.

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) is the leading organization of student affairs professionals in the United States. Founded in 1919, today NASPA is a membership-driven association of individuals and institutions focused on providing professional development and networking opportunities for student affairs educators. As the leading voice of student affairs, NASPA strives for innovation and evidence-based student-centered practice throughout higher education. NASPA supports a network of 15,000 individual members in all 50 states, 25 countries, and 8 US territories.

Recently, NASPA undertook a project to develop deliberative issue guides for use in student affairs programming at campuses across the country. Student affairs professionals developed issue guides and used deliberative forums aimed at addressing contentious campus issues. In this context, deliberation was truly democratic in the sense that it was a way for students to discuss with their peers issues of mutual concern and work together to collectively decide how campus life should reflect diverse principles and perspectives. Developing materials to support deliberation on campus also proved to be something of a deliberative exercise in itself as the student affairs professionals engaged in this project worked collaboratively to balance varied values.<sup>1</sup>

### **Growing Divisiveness across Campus Communities**

NASPA's interest in convening deliberative forums on college campuses was largely motivated by concern over increasing polarization of political conversations in higher education. NASPA recognized the opportunity to support

student affairs professionals in incorporating deliberative dialogue into campus programming. As political conversations have become increasingly fraught and divisive, NASPA staff believed that modeling deliberative dialogue within higher education might be a method of addressing polarization, as well as an approach to increasing student civic engagement.

Campuses have long been valued in our communities for fostering curiosity and learning by creating space to engage in uncomfortable conversations or wrestle with new ideas. Indeed, it is this very trait of open access and willingness to explore across the political spectrum that has resulted in campuses today

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becoming the stage—as they were during the Civil Rights Movement—upon which our national conversations about race, inequality, and justice play out. Despite this historic precedent, mainstream media headlines increasingly call into question whether today’s campuses are stifling some forms of expression.

These claims persist

despite research by Shawna Shapiro, that found that today’s students actually want to engage with those who hold differing opinions while engendering respect, if not all opinions, for all participants.<sup>2</sup> Similarly, the resurgence of campus organizations committed to confronting political polarization points toward more solutions than conflict.<sup>3</sup> Far from squelching free speech and intellectual diversity, campuses across the country hold events on a wide variety of topics and host speakers who hold a diversity of views and opinions, challenging attendees to broaden their perspectives and engage in deliberative discourse.

Student affairs professionals are no strangers to campus controversies and, as the national professional association representing them, NASPA frequently works to provide resources and tools to help engage directly with students and community members. For instance, when the use of safe spaces became part of the ongoing campus controversy, prompting accusations of coddling students or shielding them from facing opposing viewpoints, the NASPA associate director for research and policy authored the policy and practice brief *Safe*

*Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals* to provide a historical perspective on the use of safe spaces.<sup>4</sup> Recognizing the need to develop capacity among student affairs professionals to engage in dialogue around a variety of problems that arise on college campuses, NASPA partnered with the Kettering Foundation to develop issue guides specifically related to campus conversations.

The purpose of the partnership was to learn how best to engage campus communities in deliberative dialogue. While the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) and the Kettering Foundation maintain an excellent library of issue guides dealing with “wicked” problems (problems that cannot be solved easily or through technical solutions) facing our society, NASPA staff were concerned that the issues lacked the voice of their own constituency—student affairs professionals. By developing issue guides specifically for student affairs professionals to utilize, NASPA staff hoped to create a tool kit for campus leaders to address conversations around such topics as controversial speakers and freedom of speech, support for undocumented students, and how to manage guns on campuses. NASPA staff hypothesized that deliberation could be recognized as a method for approaching both campus-based issues and broader societal issues typically covered by NIFI issue guides.

Toward that end, a team of NASPA staff and members engaged in an 18-month process with the Kettering Foundation to create issue guides for use in campus forums. The first issue guide, *Free Speech and the Inclusive Campus*, was released in spring 2020. Several team members who were new to the deliberative dialogue process provided valuable perspectives. Their reflections lent helpful insight and realistic expectations to others who might be exploring the creation of their own issue guides and investing in deliberative practice.

## **A History of Deliberative Practice**

Vice presidents for student affairs and NASPA have been engaged in work to promote deliberative dialogue for meaningful civic engagement for some time. In 2012, a task force within the federal Department of Education and the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) partnered to publish the report *A Crucible Moment*, which “call[ed] for investing on a massive scale in higher education’s capacity to renew this nation’s social, intellectual, and civic capital.”<sup>5</sup> NASPA was one of more than 60 organizations that made commitments to help fulfill this bold national agenda. NASPA committed to “mov[ing] students past simple service learning to deeper levels of involvement and leadership through four specific opportunities for civic

engagement . . . [and] work[ing] with its professional members and partners, as well as directly with its student contingents, to encourage civic engagement and reflection.”<sup>6</sup>

To fulfill this new commitment, NASPA created the NASPA LEAD Initiative, a community of practice for student affairs professionals specifically focused on civic learning and democratic engagement within higher education institutions. The NASPA LEAD Initiative is an application-based program. If accepted into the program, campus representatives meet with association staff monthly during the academic year.

Constituents of the NASPA LEAD Initiative have the opportunity to cocreate resources and opportunities for learning that focus on civic learning and democratic engagement. In 2017, in partnership with the American Democracy Project initiative, a need arose between the two organizations to highlight the available tools relating to dialogue and deliberation. During the 2017 Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement meeting (CLDE) in Baltimore, Maryland, the American Democracy Project and NASPA LEAD Initiative organized a deliberative forum using the National Issues Forums issue guide *Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?*<sup>7</sup> The plenary session provided opportunities for people to consider the options and difficult choices that our communities and the nation face if we are going to make progress together and to explore how to carry out this form of democratic practice in classrooms, campuses, and communities.

The 2017 CLDE meeting was a springboard for the NASPA LEAD Initiative to work more closely with NIFI and the Kettering Foundation in creating dialogue and deliberation resources specific to student affairs educators. Leading up to the 2017 CLDE meeting, colleges and universities engaged with NASPA’s LEAD Initiative collaborated to create free online facilitator training courses through NASPA’s Online Learning Community.<sup>8</sup> The first course, *Moderating Deliberative Forums: An Introduction*, addressed the importance of deliberative forums and neutral moderators to the success of forums. The second course, *Implementing Dialogue and Deliberation Programming and Resources*, shared suggestions for vice presidents for student affairs and other student affairs professionals to implement deliberative forums on their campuses or in their communities.

Representatives from the NIF network and NASPA LEAD Initiative campuses also offered in-person moderator training in a preconference session of the 2017 CLDE meeting. That session provided a hands-on, interactive opportunity for attendees and moderators to practice the skill of deliberation with the intent

of providing participants with the know-how to facilitate similar classroom, campus, and community deliberations.

## **Adapting Deliberative Processes for Professionals without Deliberative Experience**

NASPA members at colleges and universities across the nation face a complex sociopolitical environment with issues ranging from the MeToo movement and student financial security to reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. After much consideration, the topic of free speech surfaced as the first wicked problem that NASPA would seek to tackle with student affairs professionals.

With no easy answers, the salience of free speech on college campuses ignited a shared level of heightened concern. The free-speech issue may be considered from multiple perspectives, depending on the personal stake or narrative of diverse individuals. Deciding on the content of an issue guide on this topic provided a natural experiment for the deliberative process. The naming and the framing of issues involving free speech were entirely constructed with NASPA members and stakeholders, who mirrored the diverse representation of college campus life. Teri Hinds, then director of policy research and advocacy for NASPA, noted:

Student affairs professionals are embedded both in the broader sociopolitical history of our country and also in the immediate lived experiences of the students they work with on a daily basis. This leads them to consider not only the current legal interpretations and case law surrounding free speech on college campuses, but also the role of structural racism in the creation of laws and policies around which speech is protected and for whom. Advocates for historically marginalized communities point out the often unseen racist underpinnings that influences public policy from the framing of the Bill of Rights through today. Challenges to the status quo and the pervasive White privilege embedded in US culture were—during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement and [continuing today]—frequently met with violence by both civilian and official police representatives. Student affairs professionals are charged [with] both the need to adhere to the policies and practices of the law and their institutions *and* with supporting and uplifting the students they serve. This can lead to conflict—internally and externally—when the need to protect students from possible violence requires lawful and necessary limitations on some speech.

The collective learning produced through this process was indicative of not only the democratic benefits of deliberation based on the issue guide in

its final form, but also of democratic learning and deliberative practice through the process of gathering concerns and writing the guide. This kind of evidence of difficult choice making and deliberative practice through concern gathering and naming and framing of issues does not always receive due attention. Coproduced with student affairs professionals and NASPA members, the development of the issue guide reflected their experiences and challenges and the voice of their concerns for their profession.

While some constituents of the NASPA membership, particularly among the LEAD Initiative, were already connected to deliberative practices, rolling

***“In higher education we adamantly espouse the need to break down the silos between academic affairs and student affairs, but we have no idea how to do this.”***

this concept out to the full membership involved multiple angles and engaging a large number of student affairs professionals with little or no familiarity with the practices. “While the LEAD Initiative campus

representatives had various levels of engagement with dialogue and deliberation, their leadership in engaging their colleagues about the process was vital to the broader engagement strategies utilized by our team regardless of their previous experiences with the process” said Stephanie King, formerly NASPA’s director of civic engagement and knowledge community initiatives. NASPA’s core team also had a range of experience levels with public deliberation, including several members with no prior experience in the deliberative process. As such, one of the primary tasks for our team was translating the typical processes involved in public deliberation to an audience with little familiarity or understanding of it.

For example, Brent Marsh (a familiar name to the NASPA network), the incoming director of the NASPA public policy division, joined the team enthusiastically, welcoming the opportunity to learn more about the practice of deliberation. Marsh’s reflections are especially telling given his role as a seasoned student affairs professional:

I was thankful for the opportunity to join this project team. At the time, however, I was completely unfamiliar with the deliberative dialogue process. I eagerly began discovering terms like “concern gathering,” “naming and framing,” “wicked problems,” and more, a process that was greatly enriched when I traveled with two project teammates to the Kettering Foundation’s

beautiful Dayton, Ohio, campus in late September 2018 to participate in a two-day learning exchange. The learning exchange proved to be an incredibly valuable opportunity for a novice like me. I began to more clearly understand the process and could visualize myself and my teammates engaging in it with our student affairs colleagues.

Initially, Marsh's optimism was not universally shared. Members of the team were skeptical of the ambitious process and timeline. Those who were familiar with the deliberative process often had little to no experience in student affairs. As a faculty member, Kara Lindaman respected student affairs professionals tremendously as her colleagues and friends but had little experience in fully understanding their roles and responsibilities. By working with this team, she not only discovered the value of her colleagues' work but better understood the challenges, complexities, and trade-offs student affairs professionals experience in their daily lives:

In higher education we adamantly espouse the need to break down the silos between academic affairs and student affairs, but we have no idea how to do this. As such, we rarely talk and listen to our colleagues in student affairs to better understand their decision-making, and students suffer as a result. From this process, I learned so much from student affairs professionals, and I was deeply humbled by sitting at the same table. Now I see my colleagues differently, my students more holistically, and new opportunities for me. I don't think I will ever be the same faculty member again.

Others were also timid to fully grasp or make sense of the deliberative process. Diana Ali, the associate director of policy research and advocacy at NASPA, also shared some reservations in the beginning:

I first learned about the Kettering Foundation in the same way I've learned about most practitioner-focused work in higher education—through my colleagues at NASPA. With a background in community-based nonprofit work, I arrived with fresh eyes to the world of student affairs four years ago at my first NASPA interview. I have learned to greatly trust my colleagues' expertise and defer to their insight. Conversely, working in policy and advocacy at a generalist student affairs association presents a series of challenges, including that of determining tangible professional development outcomes. Therefore, when my colleagues introduced me to the work initially, I met them with a hint of skepticism. I asked how we would get our members to care. Our colleagues? We struggle enough to highlight the importance of staying abreast of an ever-evolving and currently deregulated higher education policy landscape.

With these sprinklings of skepticism, the core team was created under the leadership of Hinds and King, who individually shared a productive and meaningful relationship with every team member. The shared experience of the team through the process of gathering concerns and naming and framing the issue led to collegial trust and enduring relationships. The lessons learned through this process illustrated the struggle to thoughtfully listen to and combine multiple meanings and perspectives into a collective or cohesive narrative. King had this to share about the creation of the team:

When looking to create the project team, Teri and I wanted to ensure that we brought together diverse perspectives from the association's civic learning and democratic engagement and public policy networks. Prior to this project, while well intentioned, the association often operated in silos lacking the intentionality to bring together various constituent groups to work on projects of this caliber, ironically mimicking the silos often seen on campuses related to academic and student affairs. While the work of dialogue and deliberation was new to some team members, it was equally a strength of others. Having these various perspectives involved in the process allowed us to be thoughtful in our planning and execution of the first issue guide.

## **Concern Gathering**

To start the process, the team opted to move forward by hosting multiple concern gatherings to obtain member feedback from a broad representation of student affairs professionals across positional level, functional area within student affairs, geographic area or region, and institutional type. These gatherings were offered in person at several NASPA-sponsored conferences as well as via four virtual online sessions.

An initial step in framing an issue for deliberation is concern gathering—soliciting a wide range of considerations about a topic from a diverse group of people. For this project, virtual concern gatherings were piloted as a method to reach and engage as many concerned people as possible. While no process is ideal, virtual concern gathering permitted greater access to many different voices across geographical barriers and constraints. This allowed the strength of NASPA in its large membership to be intentionally included during concern gathering. Indeed, voices were heard, and experiences shared, that we may not have experienced in larger in-person, traditionally modeled concern gathering sessions.

These two-hour listening sessions were structured similarly, in person or online. In order to streamline the session and provide as much opportunity for listening as possible, we provided ground rules beforehand as part of the registration confirmation process, along with technical guidance for the virtual sessions. We had a moderator script that was used to guide the conversation and ensure consistency in questions across sessions and moderators.

For introductions, we asked participants to refrain from using last names or identifying their institution, seeking to balance power differentials in the room of those perceived to be topic experts or senior administrators. As a personal stake question, we also asked participants to share one concern they had about the topic as they introduced themselves to ensure everyone participated early.

Most of our sessions were comprised solely of student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators. At one in-person conference session, we did have a few undergraduate students participate. This student feedback was a valuable addition to our concern gathering efforts. While our guide is geared toward student affairs professionals, our focus is on the student experience, so their voices in the process were much valued and appreciated.

To connect with a variety of individuals at various professional levels, invitations to participate were sent out to many groups, including the full NASPA membership, particularly on campuses participating in the LEAD Initiative; several NASPA divisions, including those focused on public policy, small colleges and universities, community colleges, equality, inclusion, and social justice; and various stakeholders in campus life, including vice presidents of student affairs, undergraduate fellows, and graduate assistants.

Student affairs professionals often engage in communities of practice through which they share information with each other, problem solve, and explore collaborative efforts. There are existing collaborative spaces and work groups for each of the groups identified above. In addition, NASPA has a number of established knowledge communities that bring together professionals around a range of issues and offer opportunities for connection and collaboration.

From a recruitment and technology standpoint, this space was likely an advantage as we tapped existing resources and offered a similar experience to other NASPA offerings either as a conference session or a virtual online community of practice. Many participants had likely participated in other NASPA professional development opportunities and had familiarity with the platform used for virtual concern collecting sessions.

From a facilitation standpoint, this similar space posed some additional challenges. It was important to distinguish the concern gathering process

from these existing collaborative conversations in which participants are often looking for answers, seeking information on best practices, and advocating for specific policies or viewpoints. Team member Erin Payseur Oeth offered her perspective on the process:

As student affairs professionals, we often love connecting with other professionals to talk about issues on our campuses, share tips, and problem solve together. In these concern gathering sessions, however, we had to remind participants that this was a listening phase that would inform the framing of the issue and ongoing discussion. At times, several participants wanted to share best practices and start problem solving immediately.

While we provided ground rules prior to each session and referred to them at the beginning of the call, for the sake of time, we did not explicitly review them. On several occasions, participants would veer toward looking for information or advocating for a policy. They displayed a tendency to view

***“The concern gathering process was, to me, inspiring and enlightening . . . it challenged my thinking and increased my capacity to empathize with others who hold different viewpoints.”***

the gathering as a collaborative space to delve into the issue and to start identifying best practices. In some cases, they asked questions about existing efforts or policy updates, forgetting that they were there to provide feedback and not to receive answers.

In such cases, we relied heavily on our moderators to keep the conversation on topic. As we went forward, we added some additional explanatory language to the moderator script to spend additional time on framing the project and the deliberative process in general.

While the concept of concern gathering was new for some and the virtual concern gathering process was new for the team, participants engaged well and provided valuable insight that would inform our naming and framing of the issue. Team members found the sessions to be valuable experiences and highly engaging, as Marsh reflected:

I had the opportunity to moderate our first virtual session. I recall feeling a bit nervous and ill-suited for this responsibility, but ultimately it was a fascinating two-hour session filled with rich discussion and broad-based participation. I felt prepared to facilitate because our team had undertaken the necessary planning, including a well-written moderator’s guide that

included a few technical details, questions to push through lulls, and more. Despite our best efforts to set forth ground rules in advance and at the outset of each concern gathering session, we were met with a few interesting moments. Ultimately, however, the concern gathering process was, to me, inspiring and enlightening because it afforded me opportunities to hear from colleagues with diverse and divergent lived experiences, perspectives, and world views, and, quite frankly, it challenged my thinking and increased my capacity to empathize with others who hold different viewpoints.

The many voices and multiple perspectives embedded in student affairs work was always enlightening and a little overwhelming. “Through the use of carefully constructed ground rules and participant-centered facilitation, the virtual boundaries constricting

discussion began to crumble,” described Ali. She added perspective into her role as facilitator: “About an hour into the two-hour session, participants became surprisingly vulnerable and spoke to how their multifaceted identities intersect with the presenting challenges of addressing free speech issues on campus. We followed, rather than led, these conversations.”

Following these concern gathering sessions, the team arrived at an important observation: student affairs educators embraced the potential of deliberation, and free speech represented a timely issue with which everyone was struggling. This nexus provided a meaningful opportunity to carefully name and frame free speech for student affairs professionals, and the core team embraced this responsibility.

***“Participants became surprisingly vulnerable and spoke to how their multifaceted identities intersect with the presenting challenges of addressing free speech issues on campus. We followed, rather than led, these conversations.”***

## **Naming and Framing Issues**

Whereas the concern gathering phase required adapting deliberative processes to a broad student affairs audience, the naming and framing phase required our team to engage its own deliberative processes in new ways and across a range of experience. As the concerns were sorted and organized around themes, the team found themselves deliberating internally to find compromise and commonality. “The sheer volume of information we amassed across four

virtual and two in-person concern gathering sessions was initially daunting,” shared team member Marsh. “But as our project team began to work together on organizing the responses, the process felt increasingly manageable. Teamwork was essential, and the unique insights each member contributed were invaluable.”

Our team brought together professionals with experience in public policy, civic learning and democratic engagement, and deliberative practice. While all of us had some exposure to public deliberation prior to joining the project team, the naming and framing process was an area in which many of us lacked

***“Naming and framing was a fascinating process, enriched greatly by working alongside colleagues who have become friends through our work together.”***

experience. At the beginning of the project, team members were introduced to the process during a Kettering learning exchange on developing materials for deliberative forums. Since only a couple of team members had previously been a part of writing a full deliberative issue guide, Erin Payseur Oeth, who had experience in both naming and framing *and* in student affairs, expertly shepherded the team through the process.

Important considerations and guiding questions emerged as we began the process of naming and framing the issue guide. NASPA has a public policy division and takes official policy stances on specific issues. Writing an issue guide that included a range of perspectives therefore had the potential to appear to negate or replace official legal or policy stances by NASPA or other policy-making entities. In part, this was a challenge of separating NASPA’s institutional voice from the voices of campus stakeholders, such as faculty, student affairs administrators, and students. Respecting NASPA’s institutional voice while fostering a deliberative conversation that included a broader range of perspectives implicated not only policy positions but also values. For example, NASPA has a strong ongoing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. We sought to respect and honor those values while creating a guide that reflected broader values as well.

Another framing challenge for our team was that NASPA is a professional membership association whose primary focus is student affairs professionals, but we also wanted to create an issue guide that could be used more broadly on campuses by faculty and students. We sought to balance the different ways this guide might be used: for making decisions on campus-level policy, generating

awareness of free speech policies, and creating opportunities for productive dialogue across differing perspectives. We asked ourselves how to provide enough context and background information around free speech and the First Amendment for practitioners while avoiding jargon with which students and non-administrators might be unfamiliar.

As we worked through the naming and framing process with these questions in mind, we committed to writing as a team. Even though our remote locations made convening in person challenging, we committed to an in-person, two-day writing session to begin the framing process and then to ongoing virtual writing sessions during which we would collaboratively write, edit, and revise. This time together developed a sense of agency and trust in the difficult value-based choice work of compiling hundreds of voices into holistic and acceptable options. Again, Marsh's thoughts on the naming and framing provide a welcome snapshot of its effects:

We wrestled mightily with the number of options that seemed to emerge from the concerns shared by our colleagues, finally reducing our options from four to three, a process that required both compromise and creativity. We also struggled to best frame our problem statement. While we felt sure the guide's lead title would be *Free Speech and the Inclusive Campus*, we listed at least eight potential problem statements before we landed on, "How do we foster the campus community we want?" Naming and framing was a fascinating process, enriched greatly by working alongside colleagues who have become friends through our work together.

This collaborative process was crucial in avoiding our own biases, wrestling with questions together, and ensuring that we were intentional with our language, our approaches, and our process. Equally important, the core team cocreated a shared understanding of the issue at hand, engaging in listening and choice making, and, perhaps unintentionally, developing deliberative internal practice and capacity. "We listened, researched, and created something. I'm so glad I trusted my colleagues, even now as the inner voice that first hesitated at the onset of the project gets louder during unprecedented times," said Ali.

During the two-day, in-person meeting, we worked to narrow our problem statement and developed several possible framings for the topic. We also reviewed the notes from our previous concern gathering sessions, enumerated specific themes and comments that emerged in the sessions, and then began to categorize these individual items into larger color-coded categories. At least four initial categories emerged from this process: (1) Prioritize campus safety and student welfare; (2) Cultivate intellectual curiosity and lifelong learning;

(3) Develop fair and equitable policies and processes; and (4) Uphold the ideals of free speech. We then assigned a team member to lead the writing for each section, with two members working on the introduction and background information. We then reconvened to review and discuss the sections collectively. Through Google Docs, we engaged in synchronous live editing, which simplified the process.

As is often the case in naming and framing issues, our initial framework evolved as we worked through the writing and editing process together. We focused on the different roles of the university as protector, educator, curator, and defender. We consolidated approaches into three distinct options and rewrote action steps, consolidating “equity and marginalization of student voices” into “student safety and welfare.” We debated whether to include action steps relating to the classroom since our guide was geared toward student affairs professionals. We wrestled with language (for example, What is fair and equitable?) and with how much to explicate technical concepts like time, place, and manner restrictions (legal standards for how colleges and universities may or may not restrict speech). And we had to consistently avoid our own biases to ensure we were representing the concerns, action steps, and trade-offs fairly and accurately.

After much deliberation, the resulting framework presented three distinct approaches:

- Option 1: Prioritize student safety and well-being
- Option 2: Affirm the educational value of intellectual curiosity and engaging with ideas across difference
- Option 3: Uphold the ideals of free speech

As noted in the concern gathering phase, student affairs professionals often are trained with an eye toward best practices or promising practices. This tendency surfaced for us throughout the process. We routinely checked ourselves to ensure we were not promoting a specific approach but rather representing all three approaches well and honoring the values that drove them. At times, we would refer to our concern gathering notes to remind ourselves of the voices that were reflected to us. For instance, at one of our concern gathering sessions, two student leaders with shared marginalized identities engaged in the conversation with each other from two different perspectives with articulate arguments and passion from their lived experiences. One student embraced the idea of controversial speakers and issues and the other suggested it made her feel unsafe and threatened.

These two student leaders came to embody two of the three approaches in our guide. We would often picture these students as we were writing to give voice to the legitimacy and power of their perspectives.

Voices such as these were critical to drafting an issue guide that was inclusive and accessible. The result was an intentional experiment in democratic practice through the equitable

coproduction of the guide with people who had diverse voices and experiences. Through deliberately and methodically considering each option and weighing its actions and trade-offs as a team, the issue guide evolved

***Through deliberately and methodically considering each option and weighing its actions and trade-offs as a team, the issue guide evolved into a document of deliberation and for deliberation.***

into a document *of* deliberation and *for* deliberation. Rather than providing an expert-based, best-practices document to NASPA members and their campuses, the final issue guide, framed around the issue of free speech, encourages them to engage in the democratic practice of deliberation. Indirectly, albeit intentionally, this process introduced deliberation to a crucial new audience in higher education. Diana Ali elaborated on the experience:

We worked collaboratively in tying together similarities and differences experienced in the threads of participants' stories. We sought equitable input from the members of our team and utilized the very ground rules we had constructed for our participants in the process. We pulled from our disparate skill sets to identify the sticking points and created deliberation options representative of our findings. My background in social work was challenged by my colleagues' backgrounds in civic engagement, administrative leadership, data assessment, and political science.

In conclusion, naming and framing this issue guide posed some unique challenges. Early on, we identified several key considerations and guiding questions to keep in mind as we were writing. Throughout the naming and framing process, we committed to a team-based writing approach so that we could navigate these challenges together.

NASPA's formal release of the guide was delayed from March to May to accommodate transitions and organizational adjustments in light of COVID-19. NASPA will host forums and encourage campuses to adopt the guide for use in the summer and fall of 2020. As post-forum questionnaires and campus

reports are submitted, we will have data to indicate whether and how these forums shaped participants' awareness and thinking around the issue. It will also provide insight into whether campuses found public deliberation useful in addressing wicked problems and controversial issues on their respective campuses. We hope that the release of this guide will also engage more student affairs practitioners in public deliberation as a tool for student learning and civic engagement. Ali reflected:

My initial concern popped up yet again in my head: How do we get student affairs professionals [who are] unfamiliar with dialogue and deliberation to care about this work? But I also realize it is in this very moment that we need to remember what matters to each of us, that we need to peel back the layers and think about what we value and the structures at play in shaping our priorities. In times of crises, the cracks in our system widen, often deepening existing disparities.

In his recent book *Free Speech and Liberal Education*, Donald Downs recommends a nuanced approach to the free speech dilemma, in which the higher education community “must avoid becoming either Chicken Little or the proverbial ostrich with its head in the sand.”<sup>9</sup> In his writing on the prevalence of racist incidents on college campuses in 2016, educator and public speaker Lawrence Ross pointed to the hypocrisy that “a Colin Kaepernick, who kneels before the flag as a challenge to America to be better . . . is held up as a point of ridicule, whereas the racist just melts back into society.”<sup>10</sup> From his vantage point, Ross

***In order to hear emerging and evolving perspectives, we need to keep engaging in conversations across differences.***

underlines how the First Amendment is used as a tool to perpetuate White supremacy. Downs and Ross are both experienced and knowledgeable in the field of higher education and

hold highly disparate philosophies regarding free speech on campus. Both perspectives are valuable, even now, and both involve a consideration of trade-offs—the cost of compromise against the cost of agitation.

In order to hear emerging and evolving perspectives, we need to keep engaging in conversations across differences. Evolving tensions and unprecedented challenges to the mission of higher education and our democratic principles highlight a continuing need to invest in strategies to create a metaphorical table expansive enough that everyone should have a seat. NASPA's first issue guide offers one of these strategies.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Much of this article concerns the first deliberative issue guide created by NASPA, *Free Speech and the Inclusive Campus*. This guide and materials to support moderators in holding forums are available on NASPA's website at <https://www.naspa.org/project/issue-guides-for-deliberative-dialogue> (accessed August 6, 2020).
- <sup>2</sup> Shawna Shapiro, "Snowflakes and Free Speech on Campus," *Inside Higher Ed*, June 18, 2018, <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2018/06/18/middlebury-professor-surveys-student-attitudes-about-free-speech-opinion#.XxsBtwdMsO8.link> (accessed August 6, 2020).
- <sup>3</sup> Amy Binder and Jeffrey Kidder, "If You Think Campus Speech Is All Angry Confrontation, You're Looking in the Wrong Places," *Washington Post*, October 30, 2018, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2018/10/30/if-you-think-campus-speech-is-all-angry-confrontation-youre-looking-in-the-wrong-places/> (accessed August 6, 2020).
- <sup>4</sup> Diana Ali, *Safe Spaces and Brave Spaces: Historical Context and Recommendations for Student Affairs Professionals*, NASPA Policy and Practice Series Issue 2, (October 2017), [https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Policy\\_and\\_Practice\\_No\\_2\\_Safe\\_Brave\\_Spaces.pdf](https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Policy_and_Practice_No_2_Safe_Brave_Spaces.pdf) (accessed August 6, 2020).
- <sup>5</sup> The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2012): 2.
- <sup>6</sup> The National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement, *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future: CLDE Action Network Commitments 2012-2014 Statements of Commitment from National Organizations, Local Organizations, Higher Education Institutions, and Scholars/Practitioners*, Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2014): 4.
- <sup>7</sup> *Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?* National Issues Forums Institute, <https://www.nifi.org/es/issue-guide/safety-and-justice> (accessed August 6, 2020).
- <sup>8</sup> More information about the LEAD Initiative is available at <https://www.naspa.org/division/lead-initiative/resources> (accessed August 6, 2020). NASPA members can sign up for training in dialogue and deliberation at <https://olc.naspa.org/catalog/dialogue-and-deliberation> (accessed August 6, 2020).
- <sup>9</sup> Donald Alexander Downs, *Free Speech and Liberal Education: A Plea for Intellectual Diversity and Tolerance* (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2020), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Lawrence Ross, "Blackface on College Campuses Isn't About Freedom of Speech; It's About White Supremacy," *The Root*, October 31, 2016, <https://www.theroot.com/black-face-on-college-campuses-isnt-about-freedom-of-spe-1790857482> (accessed August 9, 2020).

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