# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

**2019**

## Leadership and Democracy

The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

> 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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# BUILDING STUDENT CIVIC LEADERSHIP THROUGH SUSTAINED DIALOGUE

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*This article is substantially based on a chapter from the forthcoming book* Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education, *reproduced with permission of the publisher (Copyright © 2019 by Stylus Publishing, LLC).*

Maintaining a healthy democracy requires a serious and sustained effort from those in government, from citizens who shape their communities, and from the larger society as a whole. There are a variety of roles people can play in supporting a vibrant democracy, including serving in elected office, voting, teaching civic education, and organizing nonviolent protests to spur change. While these diverse roles involve different skills and training, all require leaders who possess skills for collaborating to create change. Collaboration skills are essential to tackling any public problem around which there are diverse viewpoints and competing interests. Providing opportunities for citizens to practice these collaborative skills is critical for supporting a healthy democracy.

## Sustained Dialogue

Sustained Dialogue (SD) is an intergroup dialogue process developed in 1993 by Harold Saunders, a pioneering US diplomat who is credited with coining the phrase "peace process" to describe US negotiation efforts in the Middle East. From insights gained during his two decades of experience in international diplomacy and his subsequent work leading international citizen-led dialogue initiatives, Saunders conceptualized a five-stage process that encompassed the patterns and phases through which groups in conflict move when working toward resolution. While Saunders first conceptualized the Sustained Dialogue process as a tool for international diplomacy and peace negotiations, its broader applications soon became apparent.

## The Sustained Dialogue Campus Network

In 1999, undergraduate students at Princeton University were the first to introduce the Sustained Dialogue process into the college context. Collaborating with Saunders, these innovative students adapted SD to address racial

tensions on their campus. For several years, Princeton students collaborated with interested students from other college campuses to spread the SD model in a grassroots fashion. In 2003, the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network (SDCN) was officially established as a branch of Saunders' newly formed international nonprofit, the Sustained Dialogue Institute.

Since that time, SDCN has supported the growth of over 40 campus programs in the United States as well as youth-led SD initiatives in Ethiopia, Sudan, and Kenya. SDCN staff helps college and university communities apply and adapt the Sustained Dialogue process to address issues facing their campuses by providing in-person and virtual trainings, dialogue resource guides, and ongoing coaching and support on program design, implementation, and evaluation.

When first applied to the college context, Sustained Dialogue was designed as a cocurricular program by and for students. This is still SD's traditional model, but over the past 20 years, the SDCN team has also helped campuses build additional models, including academic course and retreat formats. Regardless of structure, all programs share the particular SD framework and dialogue method, which has some key features that distinguish it from other models for intergroup dialogue.

Each campus program defines its programmatic goals differently, depending on the needs of its campus and the audiences involved. Addressing such diverse topics as bridging racial divides on campus, combatting Islamophobia, and creating more welcoming residential environments for trans students, campus SD programs may focus on problems that affect the well-being of particular communities or the campus as a whole. SDCN staff train campus participants on dialogue facilitation, understanding social identity, and navigating identity-related conflicts that might arise within a community. As campus programs work to pursue their specific goals, SDCN staff provide ongoing support and consultation to help campuses tackle complex problems. The training, resources, and support are focused on a broad set of goals:

- helping individuals and campus communities develop a deep understanding of the Sustained Dialogue process, including how to apply the process as a tool for collaborative community change through dialogue;

- providing program participants with skills for engaging in true dialogue with one another to improve communication, build or improve relationships, and develop shared understandings around the complexities of problems affecting their communities;

- equipping program participants with skills for taking collaborative action to address problems;

- helping program participants develop a lens for understanding how systems—both current and historical—have impacted their own identities and experiences as well as the identities and experiences of those around them; and

- providing program participants with a framework for analyzing conflictual intergroup relationships.

## The Sustained Dialogue Model

It is important to distinguish between dialogue as a mode of communication and the practice of specific dialogic models like Sustained Dialogue. By Saunders' definition, dialogue as a mode of communication can be defined as a process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to one another deeply enough to be changed by what they learn. Dialogue can thus be understood as the type of interaction that occurs when two or more people communicate with one another in a manner that reflects the authentic engagement and deep listening described above. Dialogue, in and of itself, can be transformative because of its potential for human connection and its contrast with the dominant modes of communication witnessed in much of today's public discourse. But additional civic possibilities arise when this mode of communication is coupled with a larger framework for ongoing communication and shared problem solving as is the case with the Sustained Dialogue model.

Sustained Dialogue has two core pillars that distinguish it from other dialogue methods and conflict transformation processes. One pillar is its five-stage dialogue-to-action process. The other is a relational paradigm that focuses on the dynamic relationships between groups and individuals in conflict.

### The Five-Stage Process

Through SD's five-stage dialogue-to-action process, groups develop insights that could not have been reached by any one participant alone. The *sustained* nature of the process is a key feature. The group meets over a span of several months (or potentially even years) and collectively moves from initial experience sharing and issue identification to developing and implementing a shared action plan for addressing community issues. It develops a cumulative agenda for meetings in which each dialogue session picks up where the last one

left off. This structure allows participants to engage deeply in the relationships they form through SD while also developing new skills and insights.

The first stage of SD—determining who should be in dialogue—involves identifying and recruiting participants based on the topics or relationships that dialogue initiatives aim to address. Stage one frequently involves tailored outreach to groups contributing to or affected by the community issues that have prompted the dialogue. Typically, dialogue groups contain 12 to 15 participants and 2 trained peer facilitators. For topics that affect the entire community, campuses will often run multiple simultaneous dialogue groups of this size to allow for large-scale participation. Peer facilitators are drawn from the communities affected by the issues being discussed. These dialogue facilitators undergo substantial training on the SD process, dialogue facilitation, and how to lead their group in thoughtful and analytical examination of the relationships involved in the community issues they are addressing. Stage one frequently takes the longest as it involves identifying and training dialogue facilitators, recruiting participants, structuring dialogue groups, and organizing logistics so that all groups affected by the topic are able to participate.

The second stage of the SD process involves developing trust and common purpose within the dialogue group as participants begin to share personal experiences and interrogate problems affecting their community.

During the third stage, dialogue group members work together to analytically examine the root causes of community problems and the larger social systems and structures that influence how issues play out at the local level.

Stage four involves developing a plan for action informed by knowledge built within the group, research about community needs, and insights gained from consultation with experts external to the dialogue group.

In the fifth and final stage of the SD process, the dialogue group works to implement the plan they have developed in collaboration with members of their community.

Although the stages in the SD process build on one another, they do not have to be experienced in a strictly linear fashion. Groups might revisit various stages throughout their journey together as new insights emerge and their action plans develop.

### *A Relational Approach*

The SD model's second core pillar is a relational approach to addressing community problems. It involves explicitly focusing on the dynamic relationships between groups and individuals within the community to build or improve

community relationships while also solving problems. SD groups focus on understanding how community members are affected by or contribute to issues and how they can work together as a group to identify and address root causes of problems. In utilizing this paradigm, dialogue participants and facilitators are asked to analyze five key elements when trying to create change within relationships: patterns of interaction; perceptions, misperceptions, and stereotypes; interests; identity; and power.

Amidst concerns about the costs of higher education and its increasing emphasis on workforce development, many colleges are interested in programs that help students learn how to build relationships across lines of difference and lead diverse teams. Sustained Dialogue provides opportunities for students to develop these skills through a structured process. By asking program participants to foreground relationships while moving through the dialogue-to-action process, SD participants must grapple with critical

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questions about how and why breakdowns in relationships have occurred within their community. It also forces participants to approach problem-solving efforts with both a focus on building reciprocal relationships and attention to the complex histories and unequal power dynamics within a community. In this way, SD programs provide valuable opportunities for students to practice civic and relational skills that are required for any members of a diverse democratic society who wish to effect change in their community.

## The Impact of Sustained Dialogue on Leadership Development

Sustained Dialogue has a long history of producing strong community leadership skills. This is especially true for SD facilitators, who develop competence in dialogue facilitation, intercultural fluency, and leading a group toward action. While students who serve as dialogue facilitators tend to exhibit particularly marked growth in their skill development, results from SDCN's

annual program evaluations also indicate statistically significant growth in skill development for SD program members as a whole.

The Sustained Dialogue Campus Network staff annually evaluates the impact of campus programs by collecting surveys from the network of colleges and universities running SD programs. Participants and facilitators are asked to complete pre- and post-dialogue surveys that measure their beliefs about their own skills and abilities, their attitudes and behavior, their feelings about particular campus topics, and their experiences participating in SD. Data collected through these surveys help SDCN staff evaluate and monitor the impacts of SD campus dialogue programs.

Results from SDCN's most recent set of evaluation data demonstrate the impact of campus SD programs on students' development as leaders and active contributors to a democratic society.[1] To assess program outcomes related to student civic development, SDCN draws on a framework of civic competencies put forth by the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement in their report *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future*.[2] In that report, the task force lays out 27 competencies for civic learning and democratic engagement meant to guide the development of undergraduate education plans that prepare students for active participation in a democratic society. SDCN uses this framework to analyze the impact of SD campus programs on student civic development as part of SDCN's broader program evaluation efforts.

The recent evaluation data also show significant positive outcomes around several of the competencies included in the National Task Force framework, particularly in the competencies of critical inquiry, analysis, and reasoning; deliberation and bridge building across differences; and public problem solving with diverse partners.

### Critical Inquiry, Analysis, and Reasoning

Sustained Dialogue helps strengthen program participants' capacities for critical inquiry and reasoning by prompting them to think deeply about their own perspectives and experiences as well as those of others. Results from pre- and post-dialogue surveys demonstrate a statistically significant increase in survey respondents' likelihood to "think critically about the experiences of others and how they can be improved" after having participated in Sustained Dialogue. Results also indicated a statistically significant increase in the frequency with which respondents "examined the strengths and weaknesses of

[their] own views on a topic." Students' testimonials about their experiences similarly reflect these themes, with countless students noting how engagement with SD taught them to listen, particularly to those who do not share their own perspectives or opinions.

### Deliberation and Bridge Building across Differences

The 2017-2018 SDCN survey results indicated that engagement with the Sustained Dialogue process helps participants improve their capacity to solve conflicts and build relationships across lines of difference, directly connecting to the "deliberation and bridge building across differences" competency identified by the National Task Force for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement. The survey results demonstrated statistically significant increases in respondents' abilities to both "help people resolve their disagreements with one another" and "resolve conflicts that involve bias, discrimination, and prejudice" after having participated in Sustained Dialogue. The ability to effectively resolve conflicts is a key skill for any civic leader, particularly those looking to build bridges and develop bold actions to address the complex public problems currently facing society. One student testimonial underscored this point:

> In this dialogue I learned that it is possible for people of differing backgrounds and beliefs to come together and have constructive conversations. The news and politics today make it seem like this could never happen, but it definitely can if people are willing to try.[3]

*Engagement with the Sustained Dialogue process helps participants improve their capacity to solve conflicts and build relationships across lines of difference.*

### Public Problem Solving with Diverse Partners

As mentioned previously, one of the two key pillars of the Sustained Dialogue model is its five-stage process leading from dialogue to action. Given this structure, the Sustained Dialogue process teaches participants a broad range of skills that are necessary for leading public problem-solving efforts with diverse partners, which is an important civic competency identified by the National Task Force. Through engagement with the SD process, students have opportunities to increase their abilities to build relationships and to lead

collaborative action to address shared community concerns. When asked about their ability to lead groups in which people from different backgrounds feel welcomed and included, SD program participants' pre- and post-dialogue survey responses demonstrated a statistically significant increase in their ability to do so after having participated in dialogue. Pre- and post-dialogue survey results from SD program participants also showed a statistically significant increase in the frequency with which respondents organized others to work on campus or local issues after having participated in dialogue.

## Preparing Civic Leaders

Among all these powerful civic outcomes for Sustained Dialogue program participants, one other result is particularly meaningful in relation to preparing students as future civic leaders. This outcome does not fit as neatly into the National Task Force for Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement's framework, but it is nonetheless important as it speaks to students' sense of civic agency. Survey results from the 2017-2018 academic year showed a significant increase in respondents' self-reported ability to contribute to the well-being of their communities after participating in Sustained Dialogue. This powerful finding suggests that SD not only helps students build tangible skills required for civic leadership, it also helps them build confidence in their own abilities to serve their communities and create change.

In a time of deep polarization in the United States, when it seems increasingly difficult to talk across lines of difference and when, simultaneously, students, faculty, and staff face an increasingly globalized world, Sustained Dialogue offers a method for building the important skills required for engaging constructively with one another, for understanding each other, and for effectively working together to improve campus and community life. Sustained Dialogue also provides a method for helping to equip students with the tools required for living—and leading—in a diverse democratic society.

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**NOTES**

[1]  Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, *Network Evaluation Results 2017-2018*, available upon request from INFO@SUSTAINEDDIALOGUE.ORG.

[2]  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): 3-4.

[3]  Sustained Dialogue Campus Network, *Network Evaluation Results 2017-2018*.

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