

Civil Civic Engagement: Integrating Civic Engagement into the College Curriculum

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a study examining the effectiveness of an interdisciplinary high-impact practice aimed at improving skills central to civic engagement. This interdisciplinary project connects students in political science, sociology, and criminology with our community partner, Braver Angels of Wilmington, NC. Braver Angels is a nationwide citizens' organization that intentionally brings together liberal and conservative Americans in a working alliance to depolarize America. The goal for the project is to develop “soft skills,” like respectful engagement, empathy, community building, and teamwork. In the Fall 2024 semester, students participated in debates on issues of their choosing. Braver Angels provides specific procedures and methods for the respectful exchange of views with an appreciation of the diversity of thought. We will assess the effectiveness of our partnership through pretest/posttest data analysis using course Intentions/Reflections and survey data.

Project Summary

In partnership with the Campus Debate and Discourse Alliance (hereafter CD&D) and Braver Angels of Wilmington, the researchers helped organize two campus debates in the Fall 2024 and will host two additional debates in Spring 2025. We use the noncompetitive debate format practiced by Braver Angels. Moreover, these debates are student-driven given that the students are responsible for choosing the topic of the debate, marketing the debate to their peers, and running the debate itself.

In contrast to traditional debates, noncompetitive debates allow for a respectful exchange of ideas where no side is deemed the winner. These debates are open to both students and community members in the broader Wilmington area. Learning outcomes of these debates include the development of cultural competencies like respectful engagement, empathy, community building, and teamwork.

Most notably, these debates emphasize “LAPP skills”, soft skills aimed at increasing respectful dialogue. LAPP skills are as follows:

- **Listen** to understand.
- **Acknowledge** what you heard.
- **Pivot** to ask if you may offer your point of view.
- **Perspective**, offer your perspective, not to say, “I am more right.”

Community Partner

Braver Angels of Wilmington, is a chapter of a national non-profit group, Braver Angels, committed to decreasing political polarization (braverangels.org).¹ Braver Angels of Wilmington holds events where people from across the political spectrum can engage in a respectful exchange of ideas;

¹ Braver Angels is a national organization whose leadership has equal numbers of liberals and conservatives with the goal of reducing the political polarization that is dividing our country. The leadership at every level has equal numbers of liberals and conservatives who have joined together to reduce the political rancor that is dividing our country.

they also provide forums and communication tools for civil discourse. The goal is that each event is hopeful and heartening, because people with vastly different political views truly listen to each other's perspectives and find common ground.

Faculty/Student Fellowships

The College Debate & Discourse (CD&D) Alliance is comprised of three organizations. Braver Angels Braver Angels provides a proven debate methodology, programs, and workshops that teach students to engage with empathy and civility. The American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA) brings vast connections to college leadership and faculty, as well as project management and media expertise. BridgeUSA has a wide network of chapters on college campuses, led by students dedicated to civic engagement (from [CD&D website](#)). Since its launch in 1995, CD&D has partnered with over 400 campuses.

Faculty Fellows

The Faculty Fellow have several small responsibilities. Through various campus connections, they promote CD&D debates. In addition, they arrange CD&D logistics such as room reservations, campus security, and the like. The faculty fellows are provided with a stipend for their efforts.

Students Interns

The CD&D debate model is student driven. Two student interns head the process. Students on campus vote on debate topics.

Student Interns are given a stipend to:

1. Attend weekly meetings with CD&D Intern Coordinator.
2. Together with CD&D Coordinator, develop 5 possible debate resolutions.
3. Survey student peers via convenience sampling and with help of Faculty Fellows.
4. With Faculty Fellows, promote the CD&D debates across campus.
5. Recruit student peers.
6. Complete Debate Chair training.
7. Attend and help with the CD&D debates, including acting as Debate Chair.
8. Debrief with Faculty Fellows and CD&D Coordinator.

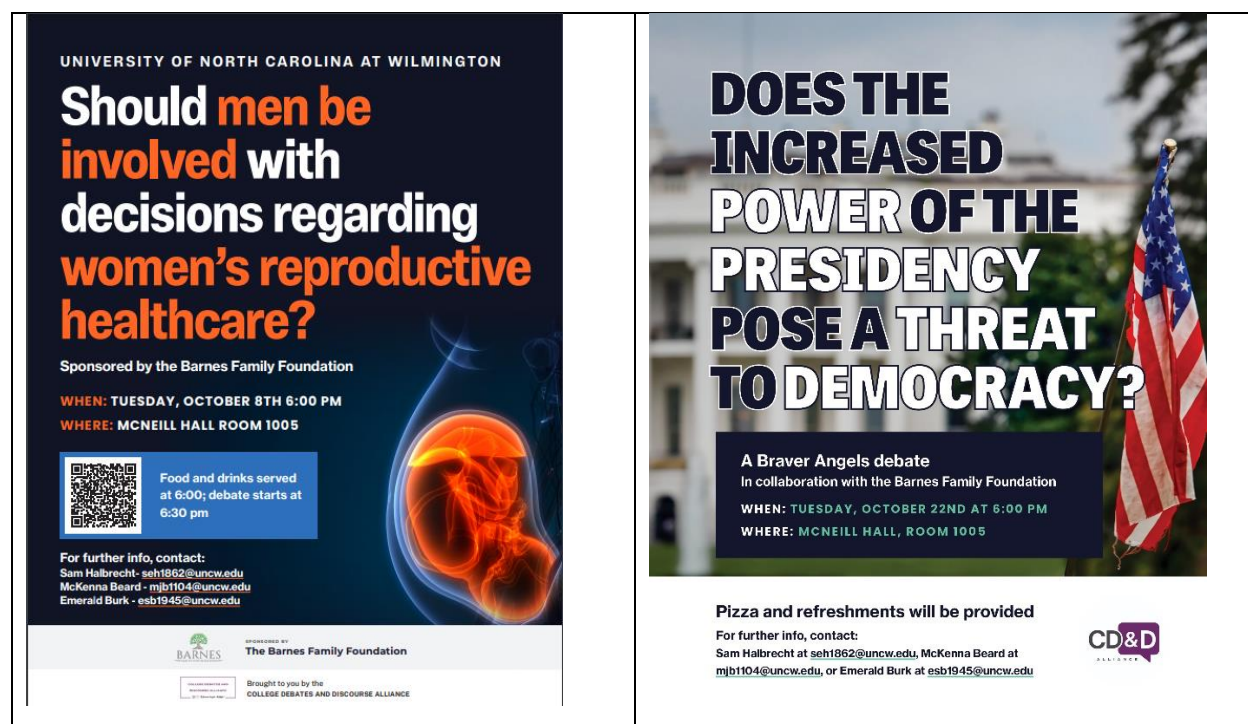
CD&D Debates

CD&D Debates are not competitive or performative events separating speakers and audiences. They are immersive and highly participatory, inviting everyone in the room to express themselves freely in a collective search for truth. Conducted in a light parliamentary format and chaired by trained experts, they teach students to express their views, frame persuasive arguments, listen deeply, and engage respectfully around the most challenging political and social issues dividing our nation today (from [CD&D website](#)).

Debates are conducted in a parliamentary style format guided by a trained CD&D chairperson. Each debate centers around a resolution that is chosen in advance by the students on campus. Figure 1 presents the flyers associated with the resolutions chosen by the students. Two speakers have up to four minutes each to present their argument, then answer questions from audience participants who address their questions to the chair. At the end of the debate, there is a short debriefing session. The debrief focuses on collective understanding.

Figure 1

Fall 2024 Debate Flyers



Research Questions

As we are in the preliminary stages of this project, we anticipate this project to generate two studies with the following research questions:

1. How does today's polarized political climate influence students' comfort in engaging in civic discourse?
2. Are CD&D Debates effective in increasing students' willingness to engage in civic discourse?

Hypotheses

Hostility Hypothesis (H1): When students perceive a hostile classroom environment, they are less likely to feel comfortable engaging in civic discourse.

Soft Skills Hypothesis (H2): Students who lack soft skills or are in proximity to others lacking soft skills relevant to civic discourse will be less likely to engage in civic discourse.

Development Hypothesis (H3): CD&D Debates are effective in developing students' soft skills for productive civic discourse.

Engagement Hypothesis (H4): CD&D Debates are effective in increasing students' willingness to engage in civic discourse.

Data and Methods

This data was approved by the University of North Carolina Wilmington IRB (H25-0379). This analysis consists of three surveys.

1. Pre-course survey on civic discourse (Spring 2025; N=73)
2. Post-course survey on civic discourse (Fall 2024, Spring 2025; N= 97)
3. Post-event survey (Fall 2024, Spring 2025; N= 59)

Pre-Course Survey

At the beginning of the Spring 2025 semester, students in political science, sociology, and criminology courses were given the opportunity to complete an online survey for extra credit.

Post-Course Survey

The post-course survey is an online survey administered in Canvas. This survey was given to all students in selected courses in political science, sociology, and criminology for extra credit. The first wave of the post-course survey was fielded in the final weeks of the Fall 2024 semester (late-November and early December 2024).

The second wave of the post-course survey will be fielded in late-March through April 2025 (Spring 2025 semester). In the Spring 2025 semester, students who completed the pre-course survey will be asked to complete the post-course survey. As a result, the Spring 2025 pre-course and post-course surveys can be merged to create a Spring 2025 panel dataset. This panel dataset will be leveraged in a quasi-experiment to estimate the effect of the CD&D Debates on civic discourse.

Post-Event Survey

At the conclusion of each CD&D Debate in the Fall 2024 and Spring 2025 semesters, attendees were asked to complete a post-event survey prior to exiting the event space. This survey was administered via Qualtrics, distributed by QR code, and anonymous.²

It should be noted that there is an inherent overlap in respondents between the post-event and post-course surveys. For this reason, the post-course survey data and post-event survey data cannot be combined. Instead, both survey results are presented separately in the following analysis.

² As this survey was anonymous, it was not possible to remove duplicate entries by the same respondent. As such, multiple entries may exist for students who attended multiple events.

Preliminary Findings

It should be noted that **data collection is on-going**. As such, the results presented below are preliminary.

Qualitative Results

Three Words

To capture broad trends in students' perception of political discourse in the United States, we asked students for "three words describe political discourse in the U.S. currently."

Figure 2

Word Cloud of Three Words Describing political discourse in the U.S., Pre-Course Survey



As can be seen in the word cloud presented in Figure 1, students view political discourse in the U.S. in largely negative terms. The words “polarized”, “divisive”, and “divided” emerging as commonly used adjectives to describe political discourse in the U.S.

In post-course reflections, students who attended at least one Braver Angels event were asked, “what three words describe how participating in this event has influenced your perspective on engaging in political discourse in the United States?” As seen in Figure 3, the CD&D Debates were

viewed in a largely positive light. The words “hopeful”, “respectful”, “political”, and “interesting” receiving the highest weights in the post-event word cloud. Overall, the difference in words featured in the word clouds is striking.

Figure 3

Word Cloud of Three Words Describing How Participating in This Event Has Influenced Your Perspective on Engaging in Political Discourse, Post-Course Survey

What three words describe how participating in this event has influenced your perspective on engaging in political discourse in the United States?



Quantitative Results

Post-Course and Event-Survey Results

The following analysis depicts students' level of agreement to the following statements:

- I can appreciate the point of view of others even if I disagree with them.
- I can listen to others express their opinion without preparing my response.
- I can participate in discussions with others who don't share my opinions without conflict.
- I am interested in hearing the opinions of others without thinking of ways to change their mind.

These statements represent soft skills relevant to civic discourse. Figures 4-7 present stacked bar charts of students' agreement with the statements above. The two left-most columns include respondents who answered the post-event survey (Event-Yes) and respondents who indicated that they attended at least one event (Course-Yes). The right-most stacked bar represents the responses from respondents who indicated that they did not attend any CD&D events (Course-No).

Figure 4

CD&D Debate Attendance on "I can appreciate the point of view of others even if I disagree with them", Post-Course & Post-Event Surveys, Fall 2024

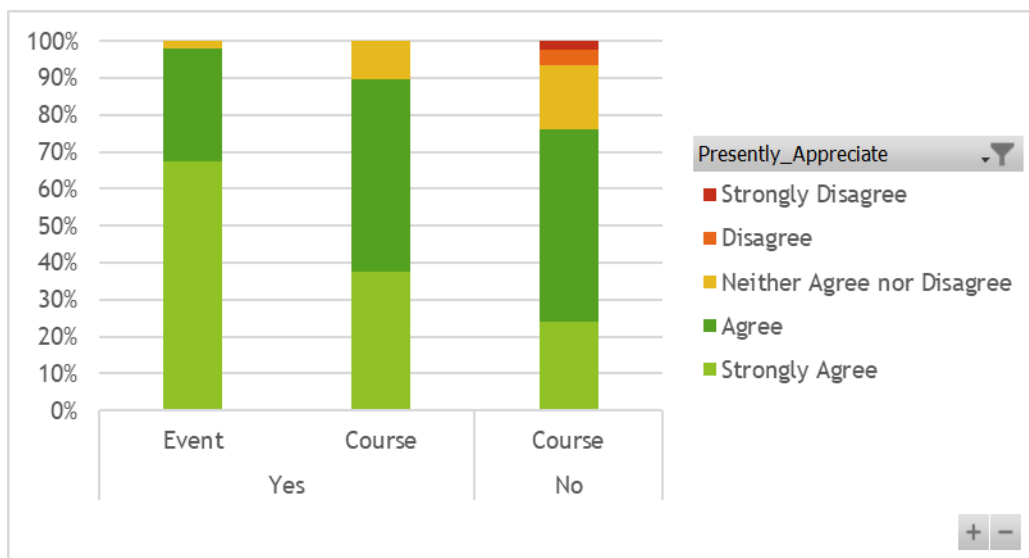


Figure 5

CD&D Debate Attendance on “I can listen to others express their opinion without preparing my response”, Post-Course & Post- Event Surveys, Fall 2024

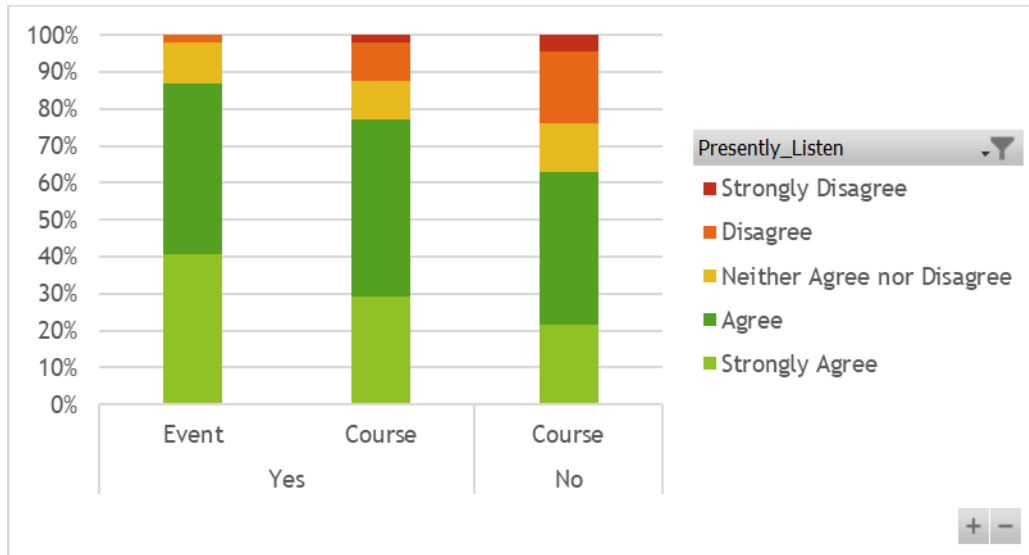


Figure 6

CD&D Debate Attendance on “I can participate in discussions with others who don’t share my opinions without conflict”, Post-Course & Post- Event Surveys, Fall 2024

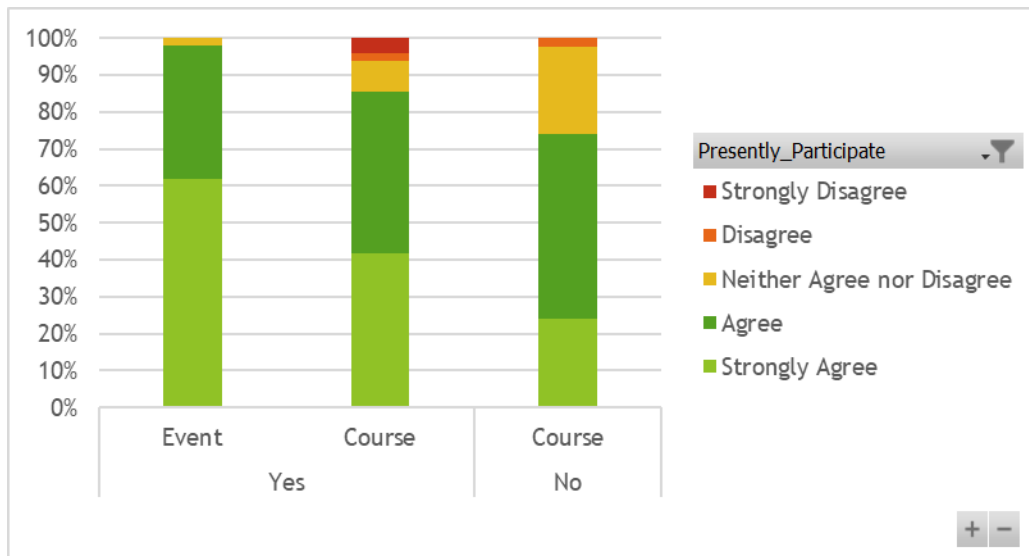
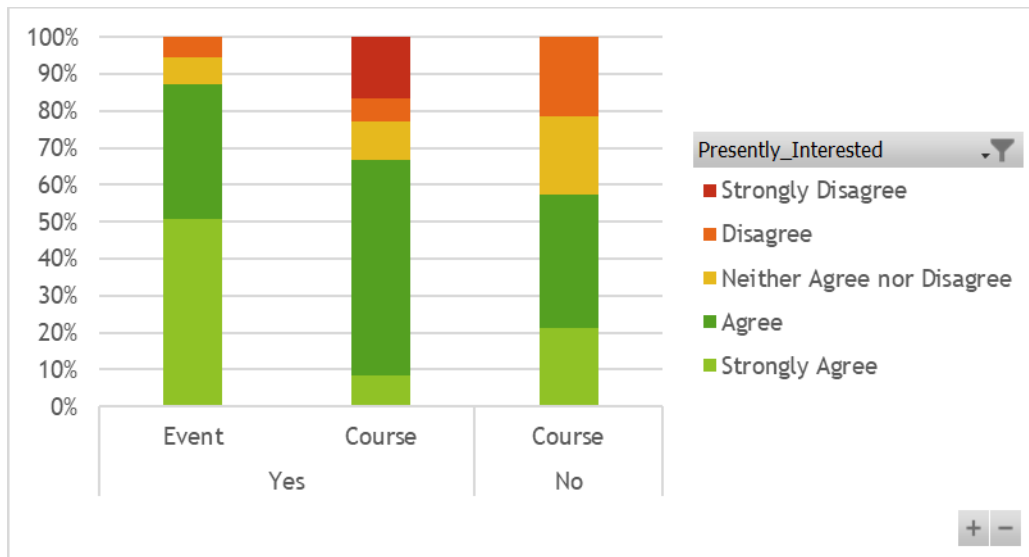


Figure 7

CD&D Debate Attendance on “I am interested in hearing the opinions of others without thinking of ways to change their mind”, Post-Course & Post- Event Surveys, Fall 2024



Noteable Trends:

- Students who did not attend the events (Course-No) were least likely to agree with the statements.
- We note that the effect of the CD&D Debates lose some durability as time progresses. The proportion of strongly agree for all statements appears to decrease between the event and course surveys.
- Compared to previous three statements, trends in agreement to “I am interested in hearing the opinions of others without thinking of ways to change their mind” differ most starkly.

Future Analysis

As noted in the introduction, we anticipate that this project will generate two studies. We envision a scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) study examining the effectiveness of the CD&D Debates as well as a political science study examining generational trends in civic discourse. In addition to completing the data collection, we plan on completing an open-ended survey data analysis as well as the analysis of a nationally representative sample of Americans.

Open-Ended Survey Data Analysis

In addition to quantitative data, we have asked students on the pre-course and post-course surveys several open-ended questions. We intend to conduct a thematic analysis using responses to the following survey items:

- In about 3-5 sentences share your thoughts on how you feel about sharing your views in college courses. Do you feel free to speak your opinion?
- In about 3-5 sentences, describe if/how political polarization impacts your participation in civic discourse.
- In about 3-5 sentences, share your thoughts on what role college campuses can play in reducing political polarization.
- In about 3 sentences explain how political polarization impacts your life.
- In about 3-5 sentence describe your feelings about political polarization in the U.S. currently?

Cooperative Election Study (CES)

To further investigate current trends in civic discourse, we have included two batteries of survey items on the 2024 CES (UNCW IRB H25-0172). These data will allow us to examine generational trends in civic discourse. Specifically,

- Is there a generational gap in engagement in civic discourse?
- Are there generational differences in civic discourse soft skills?

Question Text:

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

Presently,...

Rows:

NCW301	I can appreciate the point of view of others even if I disagree with them.
NCW302	I can listen to others express their opinion without preparing my response.
NCW303	I can participate in discussions with others who don't share my opinions without conflict.
NCW304	I am interested in hearing the opinions of others without thinking of ways to change their mind.

Columns:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Neither Agree nor Disagree
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

Question Text:

Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements.

Presently, I feel comfortable sharing my honest political opinions with

Rows:

NCW305	My family
NCW306	My neighbors
NCW307	My coworkers
NCW308	Acquaintances

Columns:

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Neither Agree nor Disagree
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree