



AMERICAN UNIVERSITY

BUILDING MY VOICE

PROJECT ON CIVIL DISCOURSE





About the Project on Civil Discourse

The **Project on Civil Discourse** is a program that seeks to promote rigorous, productive, truthful, and inclusive inquiry and dialogue. The Project is based on two core principles:

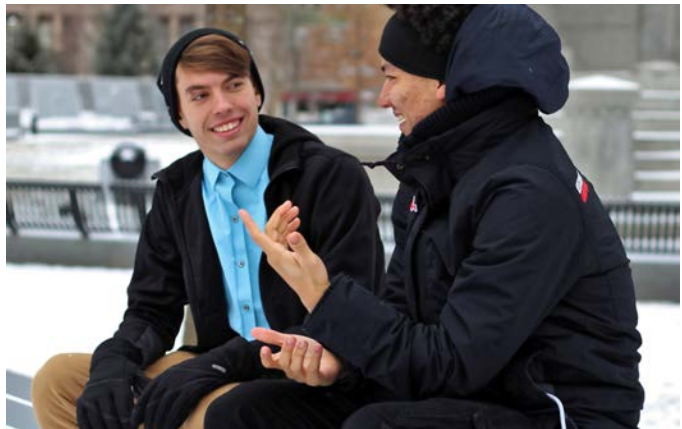
- That speech is not only a matter of rights, but of responsibilities, values, and opportunities, and that in the university setting, our speech is tied to the core missions of rigorous inquiry, commitment to truth, and pursuit of knowledge in service of the public good; and
- We are the architects of our own voices, responsible for our choices about how to communicate, inquire, and engage with others.

Building My Voice

Building My Voice (BMV) is a resource developed by the Project on Civil Discourse to support students in identifying their goals, values, and challenges as speakers, listeners, and learners.

BMV provides a shared framework for reflecting on civil discourse—including speaking, listening, reading, and learning. Students, faculty, student groups, and classes can use this when planning or having tough conversations, making decisions about guest speakers and events, considering classroom contributions, resolving student disputes, and dealing with challenging events such as bias incidents. Students can refer to their goals and values statements when making decisions about how they use their voices, and evaluating their progress as productive, engaged members of the academic community and the world.

It encourages students to move from thinking about what they can say to why they speak, listen, and study.





What does it mean to be the architect of our voices?

Our choices of how to communicate, what conversations to engage in, and whether and how we listen to others are at the core of our learning experience. Our voice is ours to build; we are the architects.

Building our voice involves actively deciding how best to communicate in service of our goals and values; taking responsibility for our choices as a member of the university community; pushing ourselves to engage in rigorous inquiry; and challenging ourselves to make the most of our education.

What is Civil Discourse?

IT IS **NOT**
SHOWING OFF



IT IS
OURS TO
DEFINE &
PRACTICE

IT IS **NOT**
MARTYRDOM



IT IS
TRUTHFUL



IT IS
PRODUCTIVE

IT IS **NOT**
MERE
POLITENESS

IT IS
AUDIENCE-
CENTERED



IT IS **NOT**
TELLING
OTHERS WHO
THEY ARE

IT IS **NOT**
ONLY ABOUT
WHAT WE
HAVE TO SAY



IT IS
ABOUT
LISTENING





How to Use This Resource



Students: Take the time to consider these questions and if possible, write your answers. Your answers are yours alone—you don't need to share them unless you want to (and the electronic BMV survey will not store and share your information). Write the date next to each entry and revisit your answers often, adding new comments and dates through your years at American (and beyond).

Faculty and staff: We encourage you to consider these questions, too. You can also choose to assign your students any or all of these questions in advance of your first class, and/or introduce this material in discussions about classroom expectations and learning objectives.



Step 1: Exploring Your Values

In this section, you will be exploring your values, goals, and beliefs about productive discourse. Your answers to these questions and will be a starting point for building your individual voice.

1. What is the purpose of higher education? What do you believe AU values are, and how do they intersect with the purpose of going to college?

2. What are your goals for your time at AU? You might include academic goals, skills you hope to develop, relationships, reputation, professional development, personal growth, service.

3. In your opinion, what is the purpose of speech? What kind of speech is useful, and what is not? Consider speech in the classroom, in professional environments, or in social or political conversations.

4. Why do you speak? Why is it important to use your voice?

5. Are there limits to our freedom to speak? Should there be?

6. What do you expect from other speakers? What makes you more likely to listen to another speaker? What might make you tune out?

7. Do all ideas deserve equal time? Where do lies fit in the marketplace of ideas?

8. What kind of speaker are you? Think about your Sensitivity to audience, Interest in relevance, Openness to criticism or correction, and commitment to truth.

9. Do you listen to understand or to respond? Do you interrupt? How carefully do you listen?

10. Do you actively seek information and perspectives that are new to you?

11. How do you want your peers to see you?

12. Think about someone whose ways of communicating you admire. This could be someone you know or a public figure. What makes him or her effective? What can you learn from this speaker in building your own voice?

Step 2: Setting Your Goals



You now have explored your values and beliefs. This step will ask you to set some individual discourse goals. As the architect of your own voice, use this framework to help you service the values listed above.

1. I want to try to use my voice in academic space by doing:

2. I want to try to be an active listener in class by:

(Some examples could be listening to understand rather than respond, asking more questions, challenging yourself to engage with your peers' ideas)

3. Highlight the option of your choice and then fill in the corresponding blanks. For example: I like when I feel like people give me a chance to explain myself, so I'm going to try to do the same by waiting to respond or ask questions).

I like/dislike it when others _____, so I'm going to try to _____.

4. I want my peers to see me as someone who _____. I can try to accomplish this by doing:

5. To build good relationships, I want to try:



Step 3: Achieving Your Goals

List 5 things you will do to help achieve the things you described in Exercise 3. For example, a student might decide to:

- Attend an event held by a political group with which they disagree;
- Practice listening while peers are speaking in class;
- Encourage their student organization to collaborate with another that has opposing views;
- Read books by diverse authors.

1. I want to _____ . I'm going to try
_____ to achieve it.

2. I want to _____ . I'm going to try
_____ to achieve it.

3. I want to _____ . I'm going to try
_____ to achieve it.

4. I want to _____ . I'm going to try
_____ to achieve it.

5. I want to _____ . I'm going to try
_____ to achieve it.



Step 4: Identify Examples from Your Experience.

***Re-visit This Step Often**

1. A time when you felt a classroom discussion (student or teacher) was not productive. Why?

2. An example of someone discussing a highly-contentious issue in a manner that you respected even if you disagreed.

3. A time you wish you'd spoken up but didn't.

4. A time you wish you'd been more open to what someone else was saying.

5. Something you feel strongly about but know you need to study to truly understand (for example, health care).



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PUBLIC AFFAIRS

www.american.edu/spa/civilDiscourse