

Promoting Students' Engagement in Civil Dialogue: A Pilot Study and Randomized Controlled Trial

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June 26, 2024 (updated)

Abstract

In this report, I describe the results of a pilot study and a randomized controlled trial that were conducted to investigate the possibility that engaging in a structured conversation with someone of differing political views can increase students' willingness to express their views on controversial topics and improve students' attitudes toward individuals who do not share their views.

The pilot study (n=47) occurred during the fall 2023 semester. Students from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire (UWEC) were asked to participate in a Unify America *College Bowl* – a virtual one-on-one conversation with a politically different student from a different university. Afterward, students reported on their experience through an online survey. As a whole, the students reported enjoying their conversations very much and rated their conversation partner and themselves as acting very respectfully. They reported that they went in to their conversation feeling quite nervous and that they left their conversation quite optimistic and inspired. In addition, over half of the students reported that, coming out of the conversation, they placed more value than before on viewpoints that differ from their own and felt more comfortable than before interacting with people with opposing views.

However, the students in the pilot study were a select group of students; directly or indirectly, they had *chosen* to participate in the virtual conversation. They may have been particularly interested in engaging in civil dialogue, open to hearing diverse viewpoints, or willing to take the psychological risk of meeting a stranger online. Perhaps the positive trends in the pilot study had less to do with engaging in the civil dialogue than with the type of students who chose to engage in the civil dialogue.

Thus, a randomized controlled trial was conducted during the spring 2024 semester. To launch the study, continuing first-year students were encouraged by an email from the chancellor to participate in a semester-long study of “constructive conversations.” Participating students reported their attitudes about viewpoint expression and viewpoint diversity at the beginning (Phase 1), middle (Phase 2), and end of the semester (Phase 3). By random assignment, students in the “conversation” condition were asked to engage in a one-hour civil dialogue through Unify America College Bowl just prior to the Phase 2 survey, while students in the control condition were asked to watch a one-hour neutral video prior to the Phase 2 survey.

For the 50 students in the conversation condition who completed all three phases, there were key changes that aligned with expectations: First, their perception of how much disagreement exists between them and other college students of differing viewpoints decreased from baseline to immediately after the College Bowl, and their perception of how much agreement exists increased. Second, the degree to which they felt favorably toward students of differing viewpoints increased after engaging in the College Bowl, and this change was maintained in the Phase 3 follow-up. For the 116 students in the control condition who completed all three phases of the study, changes in attitudes over the three phases were inconsistent.

Notably, more students in the conversation condition than in the control condition essentially dropped out during Phase 2 by virtue of not completing the online task. During Phase 3, we learned that students in the conversation condition who did not proceed with the College Bowl commonly reported it was because they didn't want to talk to a stranger online (64%) or weren't interested in engaging in an online conversation about political issues (44%); students who did engage in the conversation said it was because they wanted the financial incentive (92%) and they were curious about what the online conversation would be like (70%). The responses from students who did engage in the conversation were nearly all positive (mean rating of 9 on a 0-10 scale).

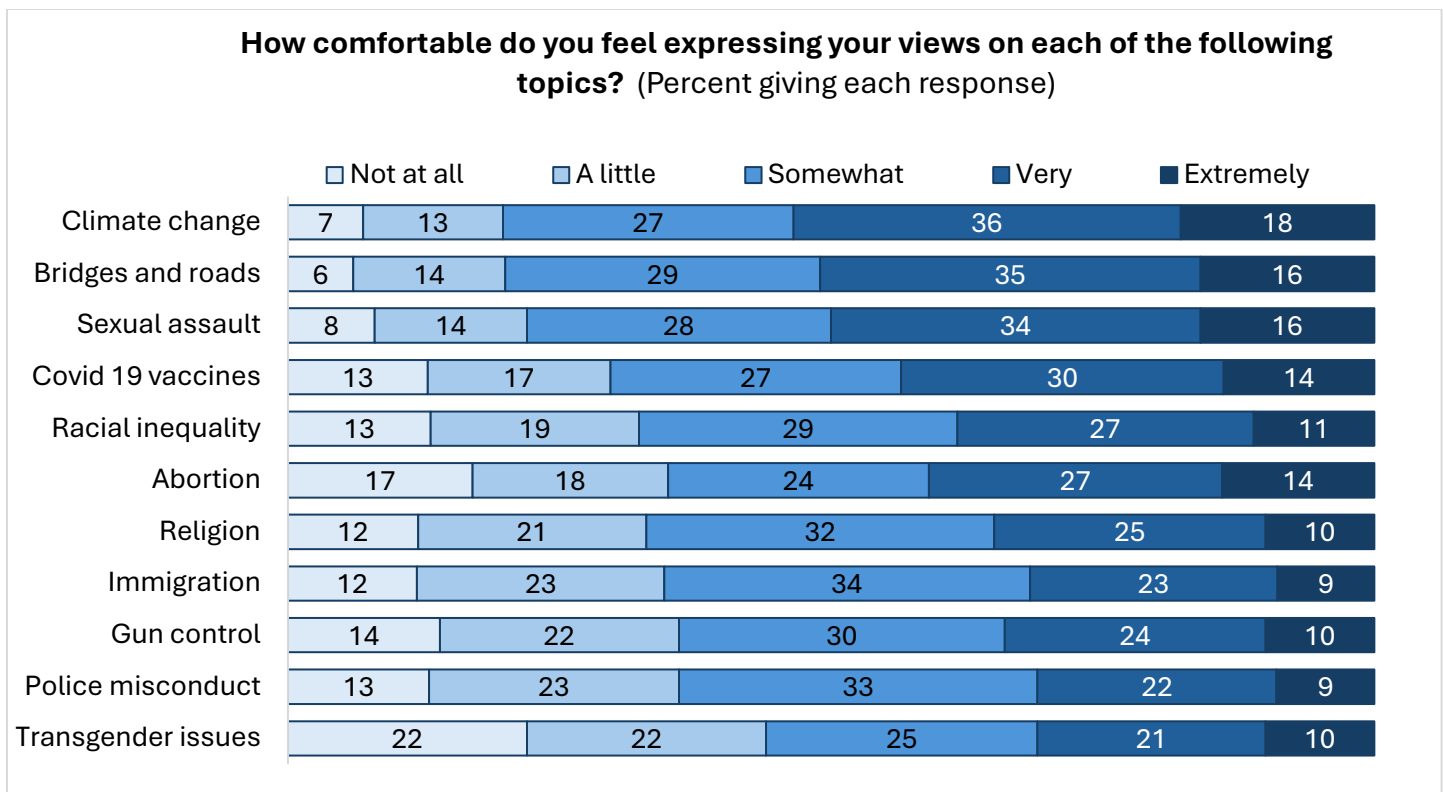
Together, the findings imply that many students will probably not actively engage in civil dialogue unless they are required to; however, among students who do actively choose to engage in civil dialogue, positive attitudinal change can occur at least in the short-term. To effect lasting change in attitudes and behaviors, interventions will need to be designed with multiple goals in mind: (1) address students' disinterest and fear/anxiety; (2) demonstrate to students the benefits of engaging in civil dialogue, with time to reflect on what civil dialogue looks like in action; (3) develop students' knowledge of specific personal characteristics and behaviors that enable constructive conversations (e.g., looping for understanding; Duhigg, 2024); and (4) provide safe opportunities both in and outside of the classroom for students to practice engaging in conversations about controversial issues.

Introduction

In the fall of 2022, as university campuses were increasingly enveloped in attempts to balance freedom of expression with concerns about the perceived harms of unpopular views, a team of researchers designed and implemented a survey of University of Wisconsin (UW) System students' attitudes about free expression and viewpoint diversity. Because of my interest in the issue and my experience with survey research, I served as the team's lead survey designer, data analyst, and report author.

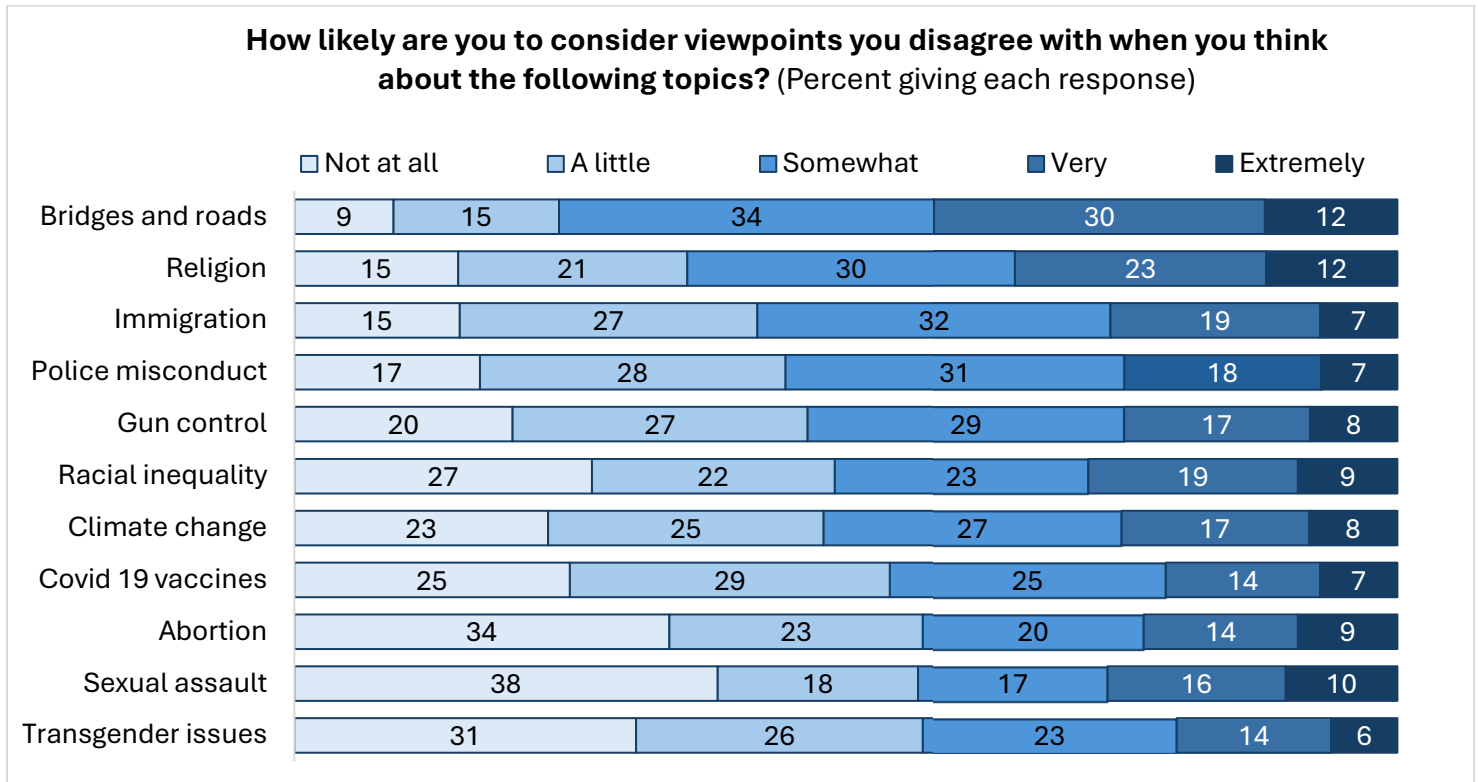
With UW System (now called Universities of Wisconsin) administrative support, our team surveyed a representative sample of over 10,000 degree-seeking undergraduate students across the 13 four-year campuses. Compiled in a report released in February that academic year (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023), student responses revealed a number of trends that were disappointing but not unexpected given what other survey studies around the nation had documented (Bitzan & Routledge, 2021; Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, 2021; Knight Foundation, 2022; Larson et al., 2020; Stikma, 2021). For example, as shown in Figure 1 below, only about one third of UW student respondents reported they were "very" or "extremely" comfortable expressing their views about controversial topics such as immigration, gun control, police misconduct, or transgender issues; at the same time, as shown in Figure 2 below, about half admitted to being "not at all" or just "a little" likely to consider viewpoints they disagree with when thinking about various controversial topics.

Figure 1. Universities of Wisconsin students' level of comfort expressing their views about various topics.



Note. Adapted from Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023: <https://www.wisconsin.edu/civil-dialogue/download/SurveyReport20230201.pdf>

Figure 2. Universities of Wisconsin students' likelihood of considering viewpoints they disagree with when thinking about various topics.



Note. Adapted from Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023: <https://www.wisconsin.edu/civil-dialogue/download/SurveyReport20230201.pdf>

Thus, students enrolled at the Universities of Wisconsin were, overall, not comfortable sharing their own views – yet they were not particularly interested in considering other people’s views, either.

Another important finding was that students were more likely to report that they had wanted, but decided not, to express their views about a controversial topic in class (57%), than to report that they had wanted to and did express their views (45%). When asked why they had not expressed their views on a controversial topic in class, two of the three most frequently cited reasons involved social anxiety: they worried other students would dismiss their views as offensive (58%), and they worried other students would disagree with them (61%).

Taken together, these findings (and others from the 2023 report) suggest that civil dialogue among UW students, especially among those who disagree with one another about controversial issues, is unlikely to unfold naturally. (Of course, historical patterns, humans’ tribal nature, and research on deliberative dialogue in the broader community [e.g., Mutz, 2006] all imply the same conclusion).

With plenty of national-level discussion of political polarization and debate about the value of free expression on college campuses, the 2023 report on UW students’ attitudes received a substantial amount of publicity. In particular, the research team was asked to discuss findings from the report with several members of the Wisconsin state legislature, some of whom felt that state funding to the Universities of Wisconsin should hinge on the degree to which it was actively supporting civil dialogue and free expression on its campuses.

Universities of Wisconsin administrators acted quickly to demonstrate they wanted to address concerns about free expression. For example, by the end of the spring 2023 semester, Universities of Wisconsin established and announced a new institute, the Wisconsin Institute for Citizenship and Civil Dialogue (WICCD), to oversee efforts across the Universities of Wisconsin to promote civil and constructive dialogue. The president of Universities of Wisconsin, Jay Rothman, had visited each campus to host a (brief and very structured) conversation with select

faculty and local government representatives. On my own campus, the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, Chancellor James Schmidt announced that he would prioritize efforts to improve freedom of expression and civil discourse. I was included in an initial team meeting to brainstorm and plan initiatives.

In the initial meeting, the chancellor made clear that he wanted the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire to be a role model for others, and he wanted us to gather evidence to show that we were actively working to promote more civil dialogue on our campus. I jumped at the chance to pursue that evidence. As a faculty member who teaches about topics that are often treated as taboo (Clark et al., 2024), I strive to create a classroom environment in which students are encouraged to trade perspectives; when this has gone well and students have really connected, I have witnessed the common elements of civic engagement (Keen, 2010): (1) students *express* their *own* viewpoint on an issue and (2) students see and acknowledge *value* in someone else's *different* viewpoint. I told the chancellor's team I wanted to determine whether providing students with an opportunity to *practice* civil dialogue could actually change their attitudes about expressing their own views and their perceptions of those they disagree with.

Civil Dialogue with Unify America

Personal accounts suggest that individuals who take advantage of opportunities to engage in civil dialogue with others, such as through Bridge USA (BridgeUSA.org) or through grassroots student organizations such as Bridging the Divide at UW (<https://thompsoncenter.wisc.edu/>) and the First Amendment Forum at the University of South Florida (<https://bullconnect.usf.edu/1af/home/>), feel invigorated and optimistic afterward. One organization that provides structured opportunities for civil dialogue is Unify America (UnifyAmerica.org). Unify America was founded just a few years ago by the original creator of Jack Box Games, Harry Gottlieb, and its stated mission is to “replace political fighting with collaborative problem-solving.” During a Unify America Challenge, strangers of different political leanings are paired up online to engage in a one-on-one, cameras-on, guided conversation about topics ranging from abortion to immigration. The overarching expectation is that contact with a member of one's political “outgroup,” especially someone of equal status who shares a goal of engaging in a civil conversation about difficult issues, can reduce outgroup negativity (Pettigrew, 2021; Pettigrew et al., 2011) and inspire optimism about the capacity for Americans to discuss and solve problems together.

When I met with the chancellor's team, I had recently participated in a Unify America Challenge. The process is straightforward. First, I registered, which involved providing my name and email address and basic demographic information as well as my political leaning (seven options: *Libertarian, Conservative, Somewhat Conservative, Moderate/Centrist, Somewhat Liberal, Liberal, Socialist*). The registration site stated directly they would use this information to match me with my Challenge partner. On the scheduled day, I joined my session online through a link in a reminder email that Unify America had sent, and I was soon matched with a young Hispanic woman from southern Texas. A co-worker of hers joined, as well, so there were actually three of us. We had a respectful and enjoyable 90-minute conversation that could easily have expanded to three hours.

The Unify America Challenge sessions are carefully designed to enable cooperation between politically different individuals. First, before the conversation even begins, participants are provided brief ground rules that boil down to “don't be a jerk.” Second, for introductions, participants are asked to share surface-level information followed by personal but non-judgmental information. Specifically, participants are asked to start by sharing their name, where they are from, where they go to school, and the best piece of advice they have ever been given. Notice this last question invites personal connection. Third, to provide an additional opportunity for personal disclosure and the connection that comes with it (Aron et al., 1997; Duhigg, 2024), as well as a gentle reminder that participants are likely to view things differently from one another, participants are given a discussion question: “Has politics affected your relationship with any family, friends, or co-workers? If yes, how so?” Finally, to prepare for the meat of the conversation, participants are asked to take turns reading aloud their guidelines:

- 1. In this conversation, we will discuss 16 possible goals for America.*
- 2. We will take turns reading the goals aloud.*
- 3. We will state our opinion about each goal, saying whether we believe in it or not, and why.*

4. *We don't have to worry about how each goal would be achieved. We're just talking about whether we believe each goal is worth reaching.*
5. *We won't move ahead to the next goal until we're both ready.*
6. *We will take the time to discuss each goal, listen to each other, and ask each other questions when we are curious. It's a conversation, not a race or a competition.*
7. *We will probably disagree sometimes, and that is okay.*

When the participants agree they are ready to move on, they click to the next screen to proceed. The statements are carefully designed. The first goal statement is shown below, along with the five response options. Conversation partners are asked to take turns sharing with one another their response and the experiences they have had to shape that response.

- In the United States, we should make sure that everyone has access to high-quality, affordable mental health care.
 - I strongly agree.
 - I agree.
 - I disagree.
 - I strongly disagree.
 - I have absolutely no opinion

Nationwide, most people agree with this statement, so it is a statement designed to show politically different individuals that they are unlikely to disagree about everything. Depending on the degree to which conversation partners explore their reactions to this goal statement, the statement can demonstrate to conversation partners early on that people can share the same goal yet differ in their evaluation of and support for various paths toward achieving the goal.

Not all statements are softballs, however, as demonstrated by the next three statements used in some of the Unify America Challenges. Even the statements that promote a lot of agreement provide the opportunity for conversation partners to share their personal experiences.

- We should make sure that police officers and other first responders are supported and trained to keep our neighborhoods safe.
(five response options)
Follow-up: Please discuss your personal experiences with law enforcement and other first responders.
Follow-up: Are police officers the right people to respond to nonviolent encounters or mental health crises?
What do you wish that first responders knew better about your home community or campus?
- Whether someone is a billionaire or a grade school teacher, everyone should have to pay their fair share of taxes to support the services that we all use.
(five response options)
- Abortion should be illegal in all 50 states.
(five response options)

A few other statements are as follows:

- If gender-neutral bathrooms are not available, transgender people should be allowed to use the public bathroom that matches the gender they identify with.
- College campuses should protect the free expression of a wide range of beliefs, even when those beliefs are expressed through offensive language that attacks certain groups or individuals.
- We should allow anyone with an illness that is either terminal or causes suffering that is unbearable and can't be relieved, to legally get assistance in ending their own life.

Pilot Study: Unify America College Bowl

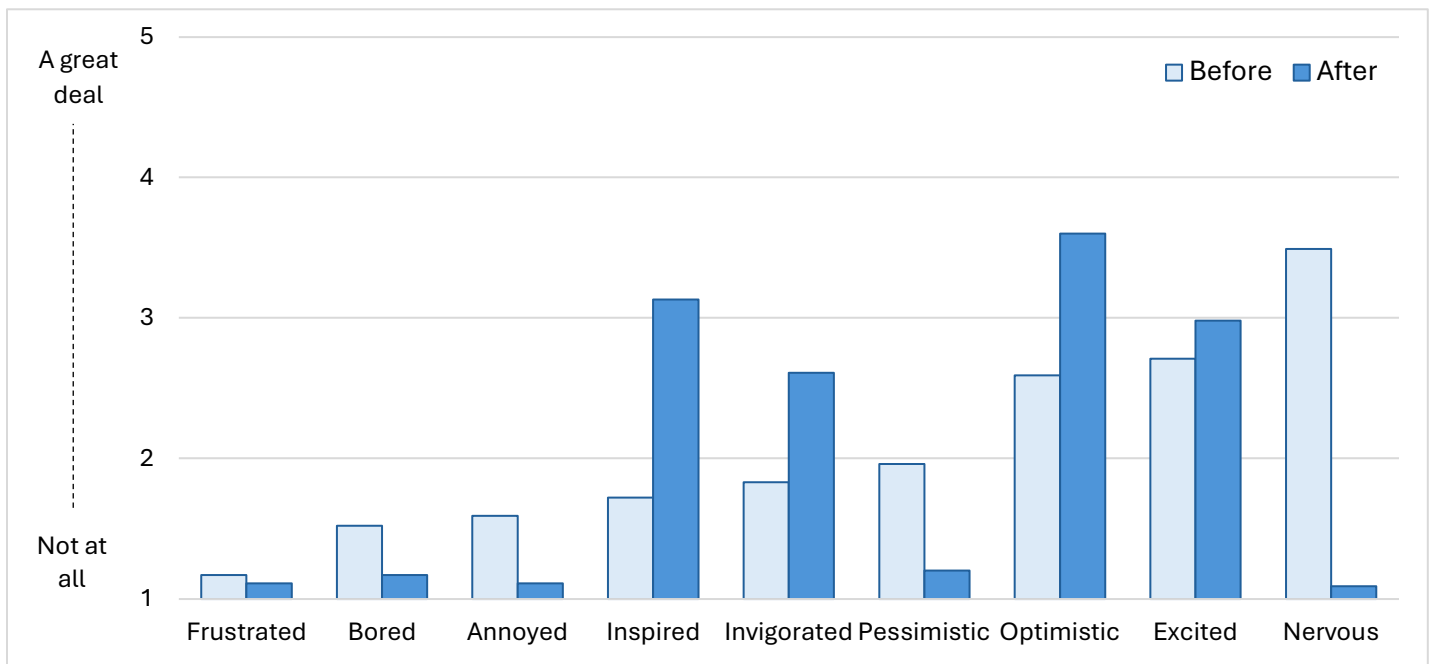
In August 2023, after bringing Unify America employees and the chancellor’s team together to learn about Unify America, I suggested that it might be an excellent platform to provide students practice engaging in constructive conversations about difficult topics and thereby see politically different individuals less negatively. I decided to pilot it with a group of students. I asked two colleagues to join me in recruiting students to participate in a Unify America Challenge that is designed for college students: the Unify America *College Bowl*. In the College Bowl, Unify America tries to match each college student with another student who (1) is from a different university and (2) differs in political leaning.

During the fall semester of 2023, Unify America offered 16 College Bowl sessions between the end of September and beginning of October. The two colleagues I asked to join me, Adam Kunz (political science) and Sean McAleer (philosophy), shared my enthusiasm and incorporated the College Bowl into their courses. We did it in different ways: Sean offered extra credit to his students for participating in the College Bowl; I offered my students a “free pass” (essentially an excused absence from class); and Adam assigned the College Bowl to the students enrolled in his course on Tolerance. Among the three of us, a total of 47 students participated in a College Bowl session and subsequently completed an anonymous survey from me about their experience.

These students were not representative of college students more generally. Adam Kunz’ students (n=28) ‘had to’ participate in the sense that participating was one of their course requirements, but these were a select group of students -- they had chosen to enroll in a course titled *Tolerance*. For me and Sean McAleer, who designated the College Bowl as an optional “bonus” activity of sorts, just a fraction of our students (a total of 19, or about 10% of our students) chose to engage with the opportunity.

That selection bias noted, the students expressed very favorable attitudes about their experience with the Unify America College Bowl. For example, as shown in Figure 3, students reported they felt quite nervous before the conversation, and not at all nervous – but quite optimistic, inspired, and excited - immediately after the conversation.

Figure 3. Pilot study students’ reports of how much they felt various emotions immediately before and immediately after the Unify America conversation.



Note. Both before and after emotions were reported retrospectively and at one timepoint, after the conversation. N=47.

As alluded to above, Unify America pairs together students of different political leanings. Unify America administrators are not always able to pair everyone with a dissimilar other, depending on the political leanings of the participants who log on for a given dialogue. Of the 47 students who engaged in a dialogue, 2 were paired with someone of the same political leaning (e.g., both somewhat conservative), 11 were paired with someone who differed from them by one point (e.g., one moderate and one somewhat liberal), 9 were paired with someone who differed from them by two points (e.g., one somewhat conservative and one somewhat liberal), and 25 were paired with someone who differed from them by three or more points (e.g., one socialist and one somewhat conservative). Thus, most of the students were indeed placed into a conversation with someone who identified themselves differently than they did. Despite those political identity differences, the students reported they found substantial common ground with their conversation partners. As shown in Table 1 below, 85% reported little or no disagreement and 96% reported quite a bit or a great deal of common ground.

Table 1. Pilot study students' retrospective reports of disagreement and common ground.

Thinking about your conversation overall,	None at all	A little	Some	Quite a bit	A great deal
...how much disagreement was there between you and your partner?	28%	57%	13%	2%	0%
... how much common ground was there between you and your partner?	0%	0%	6%	51%	43%

As shown in Table 2, they were just as likely to perceive their conversation partner as acting respectfully as they were to perceive themselves as acting respectfully. Literally zero students felt they or their conversation partner acted disrespectfully.

Table 2. Pilot study students' retrospective reports of engaging respectfully.

	Very disrespectfully	Somewhat disrespectfully	Neutral	Somewhat respectfully	Very respectfully
How did you act toward your conversation partner?	0%	0%	0%	11%	89%
How did your conversation partner act toward you?	0%	0%	0%	13%	87%

As shown in Table 3, the majority of students enjoyed talking with their conversation partner, and although over one third reported more than a little nervousness about sharing their viewpoints with their conversation partner, the majority of students reported not really holding back.

Table 3. Pilot study students’ retrospective reports of their conversation.

	Not at all	A little	Somewhat	Quite a bit	A great deal
How much did you enjoy talking with your College Bowl conversation partner?	0%	0%	23%	49%	28%
How nervous did you feel about sharing your perspectives and viewpoints with your partner?	23%	43%	19%	15%	0%
How much did you hold back from sharing your perspectives and viewpoints?	45%	45%	6%	4%	0%

In addition, well over half of the students reported that, coming out of the conversation, they placed more value on viewpoints that differ from their own and felt more comfortable interacting with people who held a viewpoint opposite theirs.

Table 4. Pilot study students’ perceptions of change.

Coming out of this conversation,	Much less than before	Somewhat less than before	No change	Somewhat more than before	Much more than before
...how much do you value viewpoints that differ from yours?	0%	2%	40%	51%	6%
... how comfortable do you feel interacting with people who hold a viewpoint opposite yours?	0%	0%	33%	52%	15%

As another component of the survey, students were told, “The Unify America challenge has the goal of providing students with useful practice engaging in civil dialogue” and were then asked how much their conversation met that goal. The most common response was the most positive option, *a great deal* (43%); another 34% said *quite a bit*; 19% said *somewhat*, 4% said *a little*; and zero students said *not at all*.

Finally, students were asked to explain any hopes, fears, or expectations they had going into the College Bowl conversation, and to explain if any of those hopes, fears, or expectations had been realized during the conversation. Their complete, unedited responses are provided in Appendix 1. One recurring theme was a worry going into the conversation that their conversation partner would have extreme views or be hostile or inconsiderate. Other recurring themes were that their conversation ended up being quite enjoyable and that there was more agreement than expected. This latter theme is notable given that, as noted above, 34 of 47 students were paired with someone who differed from them politically by two or more points on the seven-point scale.

Randomized Controlled Trial of Unify America

The results of the pilot study were very positive, and it is tempting to jump to the conclusion that the College Bowl, by engaging students in a guided discussion of controversial issues, enhanced students' willingness to express their own views as well as their perceptions of the utility of engaging with others who view things differently. However, the students' reactions do not serve as good evidence of the *causal* influence of the dialogue on their attitudes because these students were a select group of students; directly or indirectly, they *chose* to participate. Students who sign up for a course on tolerance, or who take time out of their lives for a virtual dialogue with a politically different stranger in return for a small course reward, are likely to be different from students who do not. They may be particularly interested in engaging in civil dialogue, for example, or particularly open to hearing diverse viewpoints or taking the psychological risk of meeting a stranger online. Perhaps the trends in the pilot study had less to do with the civil dialogue itself than with the type of students who chose to participate in the civil dialogue. Would a group of students drawn at random from the college population have as positive of an experience with, and react as positively to, the College Bowl as the pilot study participants did?

To determine whether engaging in civil dialogue actually has a positive influence on students' attitudes, a randomized controlled experiment is necessary. A randomized controlled experiment involves randomly assigning individuals to different levels of an independent variable and then comparing the two groups after exposure to their different levels. In the case of civil dialogue, this means assigning civil dialogue to a random subset of individuals and comparing their subsequent attitudes to a second random subset of individuals who do not undergo civil dialogue. I asked the chancellor's team to fund a more rigorous study, and they encouraged me to proceed.

I developed the formal research proposal and study materials, and obtained IRB approval, over the winter break. As part of the study design, at the beginning of Week 2 of the 2024 spring semester, the chancellor sent an email to the email addresses of 2,262 continuing first-year students. The message is displayed in Figure 4.

Figure 4. The chancellor's email message to continuing first-year students.

Date: Feb. 5

Subject Line:

Please Look for an Email Inviting You to Participate in Research on Constructive Conversations!

Body of Email:

Dear Students:

Welcome to the spring semester of your first year at UWEC! At a time when our country feels increasingly polarized, I have been working with people all across campus to better understand how our students feel about discussing controversial topics. Do you feel like you can talk freely about hot-button issues with other students and in your classes? What can we do to help each other engage in respectful and constructive disagreement?

Dr. April Bleske-Rechek (Professor of Psychology) and I are working together to try to answer these questions and others like them -- and *we need your help*. Later this week, you will receive an email from Dr. Bleske-Rechek inviting you to participate in a study. The study involves completion of a 10-15 minute survey at three different times over the course of the semester and a one-hour online activity mid-semester. There is an incentive attached to each phase, for a total participant incentive of \$50 in electronic gift cards.

Please be on alert for an email from Dr. Bleske-Rechek in the coming days. Her email will provide specific information about the study and a link to your first survey. I hope you will choose to be involved in the study!

Wishing you a semester of intellectual and personal growth,
Chancellor Schmidt

The distribution list used by the chancellor had been generated by the university registrar's office. Staff at Learning and Technology Services then used a digital randomizer to split the list of addresses into two distribution lists of 1,131 email addresses each and sent me the distribution lists. At random, I designated one list as my "Control" condition and the other as my "Conversation" condition.

The study timeline and phases are shown in Table 5. Phase 1 began on February 6, when I sent an email to all of the students (via the two distribution lists), inviting them to participate in a semester-long study of students' feelings about engaging in conversations about controversial issues. In brief:

- Phase 1 occurred during Week 2 of the semester; students who completed a brief survey received a \$10 electronic gift card to Amazon.
- Phase 2 began in Week 5 of the semester; students who had completed the Phase 1 survey received instructions for their "online task," which was to be completed within the upcoming two weeks, and the Phase 2 survey, which would be open during Week 7 of the semester. Participants received a \$20 electronic gift card to Amazon after completing both the online task and survey.

Note: Students did not receive any details about the "online task" until Phase 2 began.

- For participants in the Control Condition, the online task was a one-hour video on buttermaking in Wisconsin. The video was selected for its length (one hour) and neutral content.
- For participants in the Conversation Condition, the online task was a one-hour conversation with a college student from another university, through Unify America.
- Phase 3 occurred during Week 12 of the semester; it consisted of a brief survey with a \$20 electronic gift card to Amazon as incentive.

Table 5. Timeline and condition descriptions for the randomized controlled trial of constructive conversations (spring 2024 semester).

	Phase 1: Baseline Survey (\$10)		Phase 2: Online Task and Survey (\$20)		Phase 3: Online Survey (\$20)	
	<i>Number receiving the invitation email and reminders Feb. 6-9</i>	<i>Number completing the survey Feb. 6 thru 9</i>	<i>Number receiving the invitation email and task instructions Feb. 23-Mar 6</i>	<i>Number completing the task and survey Mar 8-16</i>	<i>Number receiving the invitation email and reminders April 23-27</i>	<i>Number completing the survey April 23-27</i>
Control	1,131 continuing first-year students	280 (25% response)	280 Phase 1 completers	141 (50% response)	141 Phase 2 completers	117 (83%) of those invited
Conversation	1,131 continuing first-year students	278 (24% response)	278 Phase 1 completers	51 (18% response)	51 Phase 2 completers + 100 others who completed Phase 1 but not Phase 2	50 (98%) of those invited + 50 (50%) of those invited

Phase 1: Baseline Attitudes and Demographic Information

As displayed in Table 5, the response rate for Phase 1 was similar for the two conditions (24 and 25%). Within four days, 280 students in the Control Condition and 278 students in the Conversation Condition completed the Phase 1 survey. The survey took 5-7 minutes, on average, to complete. The elements of the survey, described below, were included in identical form and order in the Phase 2 and Phase 3 surveys.

Students used five-point rating scales (*Not at all to Extremely/A great deal*) to report their attitudes toward expressing their views and discussing controversial issues:

- If a controversial issue came up during a conversation with your college friends, how willing would you be to share your views?
- How willing are you to share your views on a controversial issue on social media?
- If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how likely would you be to share your views?
- If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how fearful would you be that others would think badly of you because of your views?
- How confident are you that students at UWEC can be civil while discussing controversial issues?
- Do you want to discuss controversial issues with other students at UWEC?
- How much do you want to engage in discussions with other students who hold views on controversial issues that differ from yours?

The first three items showed acceptable internal consistency, so they were averaged to one composite score labeled “willingness to share.” The final two items were also strongly correlated so were averaged to one composite score labeled “desire to engage.”

Students were also asked to think about college students they know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from their own views. Using seven-point rating scales (1=*Absolutely nothing* to 4=*Some things* to 7=*Absolutely everything*), students responded to two questions:

- What do you disagree on?
- What do you agree on?

Students were asked to “think again about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views.” Using five-point rating scales (1=*Not at all/Almost never* to 5=*Extremely/Almost always/A great deal*), they responded to 12 questions:

- Are they genuinely open to hearing the viewpoints of those with whom they disagree?
- *Do they disagree respectfully?
- *Are they mean-spirited?
- Do they have reasonable arguments behind their positions?
- *Are their views harmful to other people?
- To what extent should they be allowed to express their views?
- *Are they misinformed?
- Are you comfortable interacting with them?
- *Are they a bad person?
- *Are they purposefully rude?
- Do they value being exposed to viewpoints that differ from their own?
- Are they willing to question the “right-ness” of their views?

Questions shown with an asterisk were reverse coded prior to data analysis, so that higher scores represented more favorable views. Responses to these 12 questions showed high internal consistency so were averaged to one composite score that can be thought of as overall favorability of view of *others* with differing views.

Finally, students responded to the same list of 12 questions, but about themselves:

- Are you genuinely open to hearing the viewpoints of those with whom you disagree?
- *Do you disagree respectfully?
- *Are you mean-spirited?
- Do you have reasonable arguments behind your positions?
- *Are your views harmful to other people?
- To what extent should you be allowed to express their views?
- *Are you misinformed?
- Are those who hold views opposite yours comfortable interacting with you?
- *Are you a bad person?
- *Are you purposefully rude?
- Do you value being exposed to viewpoints that differ from your own?
- Are you willing to question the “right-ness” of your views?

Again, questions shown with an asterisk were reverse coded prior to data analysis, so that higher scores represented more favorable views. Responses to these 12 questions showed high internal consistency so were averaged to one composite score that can be thought of as overall favorability of view of *self*.

The final section of the Phase 1 survey, which was included only in the Phase 1 survey, was the demographics section. Demographic characteristics are shown in Table 6. Comparisons (chi square tests of association) of the values in the lighter gray columns, representing the Phase 1 participants, showed that, at baseline, the two groups of participants were not statistically significantly different from each other on any of the demographic characteristics. In both conditions, women were over-represented relative to their representation among first year continuing students enrolled at UWEC.

Table 6. Characteristics of the participants in the randomized controlled trial of constructive conversations.

Characteristic	Phase 1 Participants		Those Who Completed All Phases	
	Control Condition (n=280)	Conversation Condition (n=278)	Control Condition (n=116)	Conversation Condition (n=50)
Age (Mean, SD)	18.68 (1.09)	18.82 (1.32)	18.65 (1.02)	19.48 (2.16)
Gender (%)				
Men	25	26	22	26
Women	69	67	74	70
Nonbinary/other/no answer	6	7	4	4
Racial/ethnic identity (%)				
White	85	85	87	80
Asian	3	2	2	2
Hispanic/Latino	4	4	4	4
Other (Black, American Indian, multiracial)	6	5	4	12
Prefer not to answer	2	2	3	2
Member of LGBTQIA+ community (%)				
Yes	23	30	17	24
No	74	66	79	72
Prefer not to answer	3	5	4	4
Number of credits (%)				
11 or fewer	3	2	3	4
12 to 15	50	55	47	42
16 or more	47	42	50	54
Hours per week work for pay (%)				
0	49	48	51	35
1-10	23	28	23	31
11-20	22	18	23	26
21 or more	7	6	3	8
Political leaning (%)				
Extremely or quite liberal	25	26	25	22
Somewhat liberal, just left of center	23	27	22	30
Centrist; middle of the road	10	11	10	14
Somewhat conservative, just right of center	16	16	10	12
Extremely or quite conservative	11	7	16	8
No political leaning	14	12	16	10
Voted in November 2023 election (% yes)	20	22	19	30
Intend to vote in April 2024 primaries (% yes)	89	88	93	88

As shown in Table 7, students in both conditions were on the lower end of the scale when asked about their willingness to share their views on a controversial issue on social media or in one of their classes; they expressed more willingness to share their views with their friends. In both groups, students were on the lower end of the scale in their reports of how much they wanted to discuss controversial issues with other students at UWEC. These patterns are very similar to those documented in the 2023 UW report (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023). On the whole, when it came to students who held different views on controversial issues, students perceived that they disagreed on some things and agreed on some things. Their evaluations of themselves were nearly a full point higher, on the five point scale, than were their evaluations of students who hold differing views; their view of themselves hovered around 4 (out of 5), while their view of others hovered slightly above the midpoint of 3. There was only one statistically significant difference between the two groups of students in terms of their baseline attitudes: Relative to students in the Conversation Condition, those in the Control Condition perceived more disagreement between themselves and those who hold differing views (1=*Absolutely nothing* to 7=*Absolutely everything*), $t(554)=2.22, p=.027, 95\% CI M_{diff} [0.02, 0.30]$. The difference was small ($d=0.19$).

Thus, for the most part, at baseline, students in the two conditions looked very similar to one another.

Table 7. Descriptive Statistics from the Phase 1 Survey Responses (Mean ± Margin of Error).

Survey Question	Control Condition (n=279-280)	Conversation Condition (n=275-278)
Overall willingness to share views (3 items; internal consistency = .68)	2.65 ± .10	2.61 ± .09
If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how fearful would you be that others would think badly of you because of your views?	2.70 ± .13	2.74 ± .13
How confident are you that students at UWEC can be civil while discussing controversial issues?	2.80 ± .11	2.87 ± .10
Overall desire to engage in conversations (2 items; internal consistency = .64)	2.28 ± .10	2.32 ± .10
*Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you disagree on?	4.11 ± .10	3.95 ± .10
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you agree on?	4.19 ± .11	4.16 ± .11
Overall favorability of view of students who hold differing views on controversial issues (12 items; internal consistency = .83)	3.20 ± .06	3.25 ± .06
Overall favorability of view of self (12 items; internal consistency = .72)	4.07 ± .04	4.12 ± .04

Note. Asterisk (*) and bold denote a statistically significant difference. Extent of disagreement and agreement were measured on seven-point scales that were scored 1 to 7; all others used five-point scales that were scored 1 to 5.

Phase 2: The Conversation

At the beginning of Week 5, students who had participated in Phase 1 received instructions about Phase 2. As shown in the box below, the emails for the two conditions differed in their instructions. The Control participants were asked to watch an online video before the Phase 2 survey opened on March 8, and the Conversation participants were given details on how to register for an online conversation before the Phase 2 survey opened on March 8.

Control Condition:

Dear Blugold:

It's Dr. Bleske-Rechek again! As you may recall, I am working with Chancellor Schmidt to understand how students on our campus feel about engaging in conversations about controversial issues.

Thank you so much for participating in Phase 1 a couple of weeks back! Your responses have been archived in a safe place, and they will not be analyzed until all phases of this study are complete. **This email serves as your formal invitation to participate in PHASE 2, where your incentive is a \$20 gift card!**

Phase 2 has two elements: a video and a survey.

- **Video (between now and March 7):** At some point during this week or next week, slot off an hour to watch the video I have for you (link below).
- **Survey (opens March 8):** The video is important for your second survey, so please pay attention and be ready for a few questions about it. I will send the link to the Phase 2 Survey on Friday, March 8.

Once you have completed both elements of Phase 2, I will send you your \$20 electronic gift card.

Again, your participation is voluntary, but I hope you will continue to choose to be a part of this study. **If you plan to participate, please watch [the video](#) this week so you can be ready for the survey on March 8!**

If you have any questions about the study, please email me, April Bleske-Rechek, at bleskeal@uwec.edu or call me at 715-864-8000.

Conversation Condition:

Hello, Blugold:

It's Dr. Bleske-Rechek again! As you may recall, I am working with Chancellor Schmidt to understand how students on our campus feel about engaging in conversations about controversial issues.

Thank you so much for participating in Phase 1 a couple of weeks back! Your responses have been archived in a safe place, and they will not be analyzed until all phases of this study are complete. **This email serves as your formal invitation to participate in PHASE 2, where your incentive is a \$20 gift card!**

Please read this email carefully.

Phase 2 has two elements:

- **Online Conversation (between now and March 7):** At some point this week or next week, slot off an hour to engage in an online conversation with another college student from a different university! (More on this below – **see purple font.**)
- **Survey (opens March 8):** If you engage in the online conversation, I will send you a link to the Phase 2 Survey on March 8.

Once you have completed both elements of Phase 2, I will send you your \$20 electronic gift card.

Let's look closely now at that first element of Phase 2, the online conversation! The objective is for you to have a structured one-on-one conversation with a student from a different university who has a different political leaning from you. In the conversation, you will be asked to share your perspectives on a variety of issues, such as immigration, healthcare, gun control, and abortion. Although that might make you nervous, you will see that there are ground rules in place to enable a civil conversation. This conversation is virtual, with cameras on for a "face to face" experience. Thousands and thousands of people have done it and reported good things.

Here are the details:

Note:

The entire email is not shown here; the remainder of the email provided information and a list of session dates/times and a link to the Unify America College Bowl landing page. Students had 14 different College Bowl sessions to choose from.

Students in both conditions were sent email reminders over the next two weeks. Meanwhile, I was able to track participation via the Unify American College Bowl instructor landing page. I began a new round of email invitations and reminders on March 8, when the Phase 2 survey opened.

The Phase 2 survey was identical for the two groups of participants. It opened with the following prompt: “Your first task for Phase 2 was to engage in an online activity. Please tell me about your online activity! You don’t have to write a lengthy essay; just tell me enough to show me you completed the activity. Specifically: (1) How did you feel about the activity? (2) What are three specific things you learned from it?”

Perhaps the most notable element of students’ responses to that prompt is that the vast majority of participants who entered the survey provided clear evidence of completing the online task. [A few students in each condition left the response box blank or admitted to not having watched the video or registered for an online conversation. Those students did not receive a gift card, and their attitude ratings were omitted from the Phase 2 survey data.] Students in the Control Condition often mentioned being a bit bored by the video or surprised to be watching a video about butter and then went on to share facts. For example, “It was a surprising to me that that was the activity, but it was also kind of interesting. 1. Butter was first made by a bag of milk on the back of a camel. 2. 25% of the nation's butter is made in Wisconsin. 3. Butter can only be as good as the milk that is being used.”

Students in the Conversation Condition gave positive and often quite lengthy comments about their experience. Several sample responses are shown below, and the full set of responses, unedited, is provided in Appendix 2.

I was very nervous at first, but ended up having a very nice conversation. I learned not all republicans are going to yell at me for having differing views, that some Republicans can see the democrats view, and that we shouldn't be afraid to have controversial conversations.

I thought I would be super uncomfortable but my partner was super nice and it was easy to have conversations with the prompts. I learned that it is easy to have conversations if you are both open to see the other persons side. It also taught me how to have difficult conversations and how to be able to talk to people you have never met.

I was so nervous as I signed in to meet the person I would be communicating with! After he appeared on screen, I will say as a non traditional student, I was pleased to see another non traditional student! I enjoyed having the ability to speak freely and was grateful I was matched with someone who was willing to have a conversation rather than just state their side. I felt heard, understood, and appreciated. One specific thing I learned was about was my own biases against Texas-where my person was from, and expectations that everyone there may support the stereotypical Texas lifestyle we hear about in the news. I can say for a fact now, at least one person doesn't fit the bill and I am sure many others do not as well. The second thing I learned is that even if we are filled with nerves and fear, good things can come out of having the unwanted conversations. Abortion, climate change, and other policies are not a political problem, they are a bipartisan-human problem that need compromise and understanding to find safe solutions in moving forward. The third thing I learned was again to do with my own biases in that all men are not threatening, and can respect women's rights even if the don't agree with them. Lastly, I learned about the varying reality of what gun control laws may or may not be.

I thought the activity went well. I got matched with someone who has similar beliefs to me, but different enough to have some good discussion. One thing I learned was that even if you agree on an issue, there are many different sides as to why someone may believe something. Another thing I learned was it's a lot of fun to engage in debate with someone else if you set up the conversation to be nonjudgmental and for the purpose of fun. I also learned that it's important to engage in conversations with people who are older than you, too, because that can frame people's beliefs (my partner was 30).

I really enjoyed the activity and the conversation I had with the other things. The three things I learned that when you take the time to listen and talk about things its much more efficient in understanding. Even if you don't agree on some points its better to be respectful about the communication. Having questions to talk about with another person and think about certain topics that aren't always talked about helped a lot with getting the conversation started.

The positivity of the open-ended responses is notable, given that only two students were paired with someone who ended up sharing their political leaning, and two thirds of the students were paired with someone who differed from them by two or more points. The Unify America platform asks students to rate their experience on a 0-10 scale immediately after, and the staff at Unify America sent the ratings to me. The lowest rating was a 5 (given by one person), the most frequent rating was a 10 (given by 24 participants), and the mean (and median) rating was 9.0. Thus, the ratings given by students immediately after their conversation corroborated the open-ended comments they provided on the Phase 2 survey.

Table 8 shows that, on the Phase 2 survey, students in the Conversation Condition (i.e., those who had engaged in the Unify America College Bowl) reported more favorable attitudes than did Control Condition participants. On the five-point scale, they were over 4/10 of a point more likely to share their views on a controversial issue with friends, and 6/10 of a point more likely to share in one of their classes. They also held more favorable views about themselves and about college students who have differing views from them on controversial issues.

Table 8. Descriptive Statistics from the Phase 2 Survey Responses (Mean ± Margin of Error).

Survey Question	Control Condition (n=141)	Conversation Condition (n=51)
*Overall willingness to share views (3 items; internal consistency = .76)	2.61 ± .14	2.98 ± .25
If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how fearful would you be that others would think badly of you because of your views?	2.64 ± .20	2.55 ± .30
How confident are you that students at UWEC can be civil while discussing controversial issues?	2.81 ± .15	2.92 ± .28
Overall desire to engage in conversation (2 items; internal consistency = .79)	2.35 ± .15	2.56 ± .28
*Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you disagree on?	4.13 ± .15	3.90 ± .24
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you agree on?	4.17 ± .17	4.41 ± .25
*Overall favorability of view of students who hold differing views on controversial issues (12 items; internal consistency = .86)	3.23 ± .09	3.48 ± .15
*Overall favorability of view of self (12 items; internal consistency = .69)	4.02 ± .06	4.17 ± .08

Note. Asterisk (*) and bold denote a statistically significant difference. Extent of disagreement and agreement were measured on seven-point scales that were scored 1 to 7; all others used five-point scales that were scored 1 to 5.

However, there is a concerning discrepancy in Phase 2 participation. As shown above, participants in the Control Condition were more likely (141 of 280, or 50%) to proceed with Phase 2 than were participants in the Conversation Condition (51 of 278, or 18%). The low level of Phase 2 participation for those in the Conversation Condition raises the possibility that within that group of students, those who took time to register for and attend a College Bowl session differ systematically from those who did not. One way of looking at this possibility is to compare Phase 1 attitudes of Conversation Condition participants who did versus did not attend a College Bowl session.

The comparisons are shown in Table 9. For several measures, those in the Conversation Condition who proceeded with the College Bowl did differ from those in their condition who chose not to do the College Bowl. They reported being more likely to share their views on a controversial issue in class, and they expressed more desire to discuss controversial issues and to engage in discussions with students who hold differing views. They also perceived more disagreement with those who hold differing views.

Table 9. Descriptive Statistics for Conversation Condition Participants at Phase 1, as a Function of Their Participation in Phase 2 (Mean ± Margin of Error).

Survey Question	Did not complete Phase 2 (n=227)	Did complete Phase 2 (n=51)
*Overall willingness to share views (3 items; internal consistency = .68)	2.57 ± .10	2.80 ± .22
If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how fearful would you be that others would think badly of you because of your views?	2.74 ± .15	2.75 ± .28
How confident are you that students at UWEC can be civil while discussing controversial issues?	2.88 ± .11	2.86 ± .27
*Overall desire to engage in conversations (2 items; internal consistency = .64)	2.22 ± .11	2.78 ± .25
*Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you disagree on?	3.90 ± .12	4.18 ± .21
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you agree on?	4.18 ± .12	4.04 ± .23
Overall favorability of view of students who hold differing views on controversial issues (12 items; internal consistency = .83)	3.26 ± .07	3.22 ± .15
Overall favorability of view of self (12 items; internal consistency = .72)	4.10 ± .05	4.19 ± .10

Note. Asterisk (*) and bold denote a statistically significant difference. Extent of disagreement and agreement were measured on seven-point scales that were scored 1 to 7; all others used five-point scales that were scored 1 to 5.

Thus, it is possible that more positive trends in Phase 2 survey responses could be due to the fact that the students in the experimental condition who actually proceeded with the College Bowl had more positive views about viewpoint expression and more interest in engaging in civil dialogue before undergoing the College Bowl. This possibility seems even more likely given that in the *Control* Condition, there were no statistically significant attitudinal differences between the 141 participants who did proceed with Phase 2 and the 139 who did not proceed with Phase 2 (*p* values .137 to .905).

Phase 3: Follow-up Attitudes

During Week 12 of the semester, all students who had completed Phase 2 (141 Control Condition, 51 Conversation Condition) were invited to complete the final survey in return for a \$20 electronic gift card. This survey included the same attitudinal items as the previous surveys did. Of 141 students in the Control Condition who were invited to Phase 3, 117 (83%) completed the survey. Of 51 students in the Conversation Condition who completed Phase 2 and were invited to Phase 3, 50 (98%) completed the survey. Recall that 227 students in the Conversation Condition had not engaged in Phase 2; a random subset of 100 of those students were also invited to participate in the Phase 3 survey, and 50 (50%) completed it. Table 10 shows descriptive statistics for these three groups of participants. At Phase 3, the only statistically significant difference among these three groups of participants was in the desire to engage in discussions with students who hold different views: The Conversation Condition participants who had done the College Bowl scored higher on this measure than did Conversation Condition participants who had not done the College Bowl.

Table 10. Descriptive Statistics from the Phase 3 Survey Responses (Mean ± Margin of Error).

Survey Question	Control (n=117)	Conversation-no Phase 2 (n=50)	Conversation-did Phase 2 (n=50)
Overall willingness to share views (3 items; internal consistency = .72)	2.71 ± .15	2.81 ± .26	2.95 ± .25
If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how fearful would you be that others would think badly of you because of your views?	2.50 ± .19	2.62 ± .25	2.60 ± .30
How confident are you that students at UWEC can be civil while discussing controversial issues?	2.84 ± .18	3.02 ± .26	2.88 ± .23
Overall desire to engage in conversation (2 items; internal consistency = .74)	2.40 ± .16	2.11 ± .24	2.57 ± .26
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you disagree on?	4.17 ± .15	4.02 ± .26	4.22 ± .28
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you agree on?	4.07 ± .18	4.22 ± .25	4.20 ± .30
Overall favorability of view of students who hold differing views on controversial issues (12 items; internal consistency = .85)	3.30 ± .09	3.41 ± .13	3.40 ± .16
Overall favorability of view of self (12 items; internal consistency = .74)	4.03 ± .06	4.06 ± .12	4.09 ± .11

Note. Asterisk (*) and bold text denote a statistically significant difference. Extent of disagreement and agreement were measured on seven-point scales that were scored 1 to 7; all others used five-point scales that were scored 1 to 5.

The Phase 3 survey for Conversation Condition participants came in two forms. For the students who had completed Phase 2, the opening prompt was as follows: “If you recall, Phase 2 of this semester-long study involved an online conversation followed by the Phase 2 survey. Some of the study participants did NOT engage in the civil dialogue session through Unify America, but you did. Why?” Students could check all options that applied to them; their responses are shown in Table 11.

Table 11. Reasons Given at Phase 3 for Engaging in the Phase 2 Conversation (n=50).

Reason	N (%)
I wanted the financial incentive that came with it	46 (92%)
I was curious about what the online conversation would be like	35 (70%)
I had time in my schedule to do it	30 (60%)
I wanted to engage in an online conversation about political issues	21 (42%)
Other	6 (12%)

Note. Those who responded “Other” and explained their response mentioned valuing civil dialogue and needing money.

For the students in the Conversation Condition who had not engaged with Phase 2, the opening prompt was, “If you recall, Phase 2 of this semester-long study asked that you sign up for a session in which you would engage in an online conversation about political issues. You are among the study participants who did not complete Phase 2. Why did you choose to not do the Phase 2 dialogue?” Students could check all options that applied to them; their responses are shown in Table 12.

Table 12. Reasons Given at Phase 3 for Not Engaging in the Phase 2 Conversation (n=50).

Reason	N (%)
I didn’t want to talk to a stranger online	32 (64%)
I did not have time in my schedule to do it	26 (52%)
I was not interested in engaging in an online conversation about political issues	22 (44%)
None of the dialogue dates/times worked with my schedule	13 (26%)
I did not think the financial incentive was worth it.	4 (8%)
Other	2 (4%)

Note. Those who responded “Other” and explained their response mentioned fear and nervousness.

Although the vast majority of students who did engage in the College Bowl selected the financial incentive as a reason, many also reported they wanted to engage in a political conversation or were curious. The most common reason for not engaging in the College Bowl was not wanting to talk to a stranger online (64%). Very few selected the financial incentive as not being worth it, yet the reasons they did select suggest that the financial incentive wasn’t enough to overcome their disinterest or apparent lack of time. [Given the work hours per week reported on the Phase 1 survey (Table 5), it is not clear that those who did not engage in the College Bowl truly had less time in their schedule than did those who engaged in the College Bowl.]

To engage in a robust test of the potential effect of engaging in the Unify America College Bowl on students’ attitudes toward free expression and politically different others, I conducted analyses of change over the semester for participants in each of the two conditions who completed all three phases of the study. The results of these analyses are displayed in Table 13. Although they are not entirely consistent, there are positive patterns in the table; specifically, for the Conversation participants, engaging in the College Bowl was accompanied by a (temporary) decrease in perceived disagreement, and a (temporary) increase in perceived agreement, with students who hold differing views. In addition, engaging in the College Bowl was accompanied by more favorable views toward students who hold differing viewpoints, and this small change was maintained in the Phase 3 follow-up. These

attitude changes over the semester, which were not observed for participants in the Control condition, are highlighted by light green shading.

Table 13. Descriptive Statistics for 116 Control Participants and 50 Conversation Participants Who Completed All Three Phases of the Study (Mean ± Margin of Error).

Survey Question	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3
Overall willingness to share views (3 items)			
Control:	2.63 ± .17 _a	2.62 ± .16 _a	2.72 ± .15 _a
Conversation:	2.80 ± .23 _a	2.97 ± .26 _a	2.95 ± .25 _a
If a controversial issue came up during one of your classes, how fearful would you be that others would think badly of you because of your views?			
Control:	2.76 ± .21_a	2.63 ± .21 _{ab}	2.49 ± .19_b
Conversation:	2.74 ± .29 _a	2.54 ± .30 _a	2.60 ± .30 _a
How confident are you that students at UWEC can be civil while discussing controversial issues?			
Control:	2.81 ± .18 _a	2.85 ± .17 _a	2.86 ± .18 _a
Conversation:	2.86 ± .28 _a	2.90 ± .28 _a	2.88 ± .23 _a
Overall desire to engage in conversation (2 items)			
Control:	2.29 ± .18 _a	2.38 ± .17 _a	2.41 ± .17 _a
Conversation:	2.79 ± .25 _a	2.58 ± .29 _a	2.57 ± .26 _a
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you <u>disagree</u> on?			
Control:	4.14 ± .15 _a	4.16 ± .16 _a	4.17 ± .16 _a
Conversation:	4.18 ± .21_a	3.90 ± .26_b	4.22 ± .28 _{ab}
Think about college students you know who hold views on controversial issues that differ from your views. What do you <u>agree</u> on?			
Control:	4.22 ± .17 _a	4.19 ± .18 _a	4.07 ± .18 _a
Conversation:	4.02 ± .23_a	4.42 ± .25_b	4.20 ± .30 _{ab}
Overall favorability of view of students who hold differing views on controversial issues (12 items)			
Control:	3.20 ± .09_a	3.25 ± .10 _{ab}	3.29 ± .10_b
Conversation:	3.22 ± .16_a	3.48 ± .15_b	3.41 ± .17_b
Overall favorability of view of self (12 items)			
Control:	4.06 ± .06 _a	4.04 ± .06 _a	4.03 ± .06 _a
Conversation:	4.18 ± .10 _a	4.17 ± .09 _a	4.11 ± .10 _a

Note. By row, cells that share a common subscript are not statistically significantly different from one another.

Discussion

Interacting with people of differing views has long been considered essential for appreciating alternative perspectives and recognizing that people of differing views are not necessarily bad people (Mutz, 2002). Interacting with people of differing views has also long been held as fundamental to a functional democracy. However, many college students today report attitudes about free expression – for both themselves and others - that may inhibit them from experiencing the educational and personal benefits of engaging respectfully with diverse viewpoints (e.g., Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023; FIRE, 2021; Stikma, 2021). I conducted a pilot study and a randomized controlled trial to investigate the possibility that engaging in a guided conversation with a politically different other can enhance students’ willingness to express their views on controversial topics and increase their positivity toward individuals who do not share their views. Below, I review notable findings from the studies and offer tentative recommendations for future efforts to encourage civil dialogue on campus.

In the pilot study (fall, 2023), 47 students engaged in a Unify America College Bowl conversation -- a one-on-one online conversation about various controversial issues with a politically different student from another university. The students had nearly unanimously positive reactions to the conversation (Appendix 1). They reported feeling nervous before the conversation and inspired and optimistic after the conversation. They reported finding common ground with their conversation partners as well as respectful engagement, and two-thirds reported feeling more comfortable than before interacting with people who hold a viewpoint opposite theirs (the rest reported no change).

In the randomized controlled trial (spring, 2024), I measured students’ attitudes at three times during the semester, and then looked separately at attitude change of those who were asked to engage in a College Bowl conversation mid-semester and attitude change of those who were in a control condition. As in the pilot study, students who engaged in the College Bowl had overwhelmingly positive reactions to the experience (Appendix 2). Some of the quantitative data also suggested that engaging in the conversation had some positive effects. First, their perception of how much disagreement exists between them and other college students of differing viewpoints decreased from baseline to immediately after the College Bowl, and their perception of how much agreement exists *increased*. This finding is important given that perceived *commonality* between oneself and an outgroup is a key mechanism by which interparty contact is tied to lower levels of Democrat-Republican hostility (Wojcieszak et al., 2020).

Notably, then, a second important finding is that the degree to which students in the conversation condition felt favorably toward students of differing viewpoints increased after engaging in the College Bowl. This change, which was maintained in the Phase 3 follow-up, included twelve elements, such as the perception of differing others as disagreeing respectfully, having reasonable arguments behind their positions, and being willing to question the “right”-ness of their views. These findings coincide with other research suggesting that political discussions with “outgroup” members can have a positive effect on evaluations of the outgroup (Bond et al., 2018). For students in the control condition, changes in attitudes over the three phases of the study were inconsistent.

However, there is reason to be cautious. Among the students in the conversation condition, the decrease in perceived amount of disagreement and increase in perceived amount of agreement did not persist to the end-of-semester, reinforcing the notion that this is just a start -- long-term change in students’ attitudes is going to require much more than an hour of civil conversation. Moreover, only some of the attitudes changed in a positive direction over the semester. Students’ reported willingness to share views about a controversial issue in class, for example, did not show statistically significant increases after they engaged in the conversation, nor was there a statistically significant change in their reported desire to engage in discussions with students who hold differing views on controversial issues.

Another reason to be cautious about the positive findings of the studies described here is that many students in the randomized controlled trial did not complete all three phases of the study, despite a \$20 electronic gift card incentive (which they could feel confident about receiving because they had received a \$10 gift card after the first survey). Students in the conversation condition who engaged in the task differed systematically from students in the

conversation condition who did not engage in the task. At baseline, for example, they expressed more desire to have conversations about controversial issues and to engage in discussions with students whose views differ from their own. Perhaps more importantly, when we surveyed students at the end of the semester, students in the conversation condition who did not engage in the College Bowl did *not* attribute it to too small of a financial incentive. Rather, they mentioned not wanting to meet a stranger online and being disinterested in having a conversation about political issues.

The issue of student nervousness, fear, or anxiety about meeting a stranger online, especially to discuss controversial issues or “politics,” is important. Multiple studies have shown that people in general tend to avoid talking to strangers. They tend to believe that interacting with a stranger will be awkward and that the other person will be disinterested or will reject them or be hostile (Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021); they underestimate how much a conversation partner will enjoy talking with them (Boothby et al., 2018); and they overestimate how harshly they will be judged for saying or doing something “stupid” (Savitsky et al., 2001). Although it is normative human behavior to fear looking stupid by giving the wrong answer or saying something ignorant, in today’s polarized environment, it wouldn’t be surprising if college students are extra fearful of saying something offensive (Bleske-Rechek et al., 2023; Stikma, 2021). Some of the open-ended comments from the participants in these two studies also suggest that students are uncomfortable discussing difficult issues they don’t know a lot about. Perhaps one way to bring civil dialogue practice to students – and perhaps leveling the playing ground for those who perceive themselves as ill-informed about issues to be discussed - could involve supplying them with logical arguments for opposing positions about an issue as well as questions to guide them through a discussion of their reactions to the opposing arguments.

In conclusion, the results of these two studies support the possibility that a guided civil dialogue, such as through a carefully structured session provided by Unify America’s College Bowl, can enhance students’ attitudes toward expressing their views and their affective evaluations of politically different others. That said, future efforts at the Universities of Wisconsin to improve civil dialogue on their campuses will need to be multifaceted and robust if they are to effect lasting change in attitudes and behaviors. In addition, they will need to be designed with multiple goals in mind: (1) address students’ disinterest, anxiety, and fears of rejection (particularly those of students who are high in dispositional anxiety; Sandstrom & Boothby, 2021); (2) demonstrate to students the benefits of engaging in civil dialogue, giving them time to reflect on what civil dialogue looks like in action; (3) develop students’ explicit knowledge of specific personal characteristics and behaviors that enable constructive conversations (e.g., sharing, looping for understanding; Duhigg, 2024); and (4) provide safe opportunities both in and outside of the classroom for students to practice engaging in conversations about controversial issues.

Acknowledgements

This research was funded by the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire Foundation.

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Appendix 1: Pilot Study Participants' Open-Ended Comments

What hopes, fears, or expectations did you have going into the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.	Were any of those hopes, fears, or expectations realized during the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.
I was super nervous being paired with someone random! I didn't know who it would be, how they would act, or how they would treat me.	During the conversation, the fears and nerves were completely gone!! I had a great experience
I was expecting to be in total disagreement with my match about the topics but we actually had a lot of the same views	Talking through the questions made me realize that Americans may have more in common than originally thought
I was worried that I would go into the conversation, and it would be more of an argument than a discussion. I was expecting to talk to a person who worked at unify america to interview me.	My fears weren't realized, because me and the other person had a healthy conversation and we both respected each other's viewpoints. I was pleasantly surprised that it was more of a discussion between someone like me, a student who is also doing this for their class. It was nice to talk to someone who is a college student like me.
I came into this somewhat prepared that I was going to be engaging in discourse with someone who I may not politically align myself with but knowing that coming in gave me a sense of comfortability once I started engaging in that discourse.	Yes, I did anticipate that there were going to be some disagreements however I was a bit surprised that I agreed with a good deal of topics being discussed with my partner but we were able to see the other side of the argument and see why someone would disagree with us in those arguments.
I was expecting to be placed with someone with very extreme political views and opinions	No, she was very nice and had opinions not directly aligned with a party in particular.
I hoped it would be a conversation and not two people taking turns talking	For the most part there was a conversation. My partner liked to talk a lot.
Knowing I'd be talking to someone of opposite political views, I was worried they say things to intentionally rile me up or start a fight.	No fights were started, the guy I talked to was actually very willing to listen to my opinions.
I didn't know why to expect since I've never participated in this program before, so I was definitely nervous on what to expect.	Yes, since I learned more about the process of the program and ways to discuss the current issues asked to the person I was paired with and myself.
I was expecting it to be a very heated discussion, similar to an argumentative debate.	These expectations were not realized since my partner was more open to sharing their life experiences that correspond to their political beliefs and values, and they were also more receptive to the ideas that I contributed. We overall had very similar viewpoints with some slight discrepancies.
I didn't have any expectations going in which I think ended up being a good thing because the conversation was very genuine	During the conversation I had a fear that I couldn't articulate why I believed what I believed or that I didn't know enough about certain topics to have an opinion.
I normally just don't like confrontational things	I think that it's good to talk about these issues with people
I was really nervous I was going to get into an argument with somebody about one of the topics I'm more opinionated about. I was also really unsure about what the whole experience was going to be like, so that just caused some general anxiety.	Nope! I actually had a really good conversation with my partner. That made me feel a lot better about my opinions and how they were respected.

What hopes, fears, or expectations did you have going into the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.	Were any of those hopes, fears, or expectations realized during the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.
I wasn't expecting much and I was honestly expecting to hide back my true opinions.	No- I was able to actually share my feelings and opinions without feeling like I got judged
I hoped to have some interesting conversations with someone who saw things different than me and see their point of view.	Unfortunately not, because the person had very similar views as me
My main fear for going into the College Bowl was getting someone who didn't agree with me. Someone who would be firm in their stance and judge me for my views.	I hoped that the other person would agree with me on the big things like abortion, etc.
I was nervous that I would get frustrated with hearing their opinions.	I felt much better afterwards as the videos showed that people with varying opinions all thought semi similarly
I hoped I would be exposed to someone who I could have a thoughtful conversation with. I wanted to be engaged for the conversation not just running through random points.	I had thoughtful conversations but my partner and I agreed on many things so sadly there wasn't any conflicting views
I hoped that I would be able to talk with someone who kept an open mind. I feared that I would be paired with someone who would be hostile or aggressive. I also hoped that the survey would lead to good question and fill up the time so there wouldn't be a lot of dead space.	Yes, I was paired with someone who kept an open mind and we really had a great conversation. The survey questions were great and we even went a half hour longer than expected.
I was worried it was going to be a more formal debate style or that I would be matched with someone with a more aggressive communication style than me.	No my partner and me both were surprised how respectful the other was and how much we agreed on in our perfect world where practicality isn't a thing.
Honestly just thought I wouldn't be able to discuss things with my partner. I'm not a very argumentative person.	We ended up having a really good discussion, and I had a good time talking with my partner.
That my partner and I would argue and fight.	During the College Bowl none of my fears were realized.
Thought it would be more of an argument than a conversation	It was very civil and friendly, it was an enjoyable conversation
I didn't have any expectations really besides a fruitful conversation with someone despite what they believe.	Yes, my partner and I both agreed we were really anxious and nervous to participate.
I was a little bit nervous about who I was going to be paired up with and if we were going to have the same political views. I'm very set in my views so I believe it would've been difficult for me to have a open conversation with someone who disagreed with me.	No, not really.
I was expecting to be paired with someone very different from me, and be engaged in a tense dialogue. I was paired with someone who I was pretty even with in political standing so that made the conversation easier.	I became really hopefully in knowing that there were other people similar to me out in the world that aren't my friends or family. Sometimes, you can feel in a box or secluded area and forget that the world is a much bigger place.

What hopes, fears, or expectations did you have going into the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.	Were any of those hopes, fears, or expectations realized during the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.
I was very nervous going into the conversation. I don't get nervous talking to people usually, but I think I was because political beliefs that I have might be completely opposite than the other person, and I didn't know if I could fully express myself without being attacked for them.	All nerves went away as I started talking to the person. We agreed on most things, and the things we didn't we explained why, and found some middle ground on the topic.
I was worried I was going to be paired up with a very belligerent person with some very intense views.	Not really, the first person I talked with disconnected. The second person was pretty chill.
I feared a belligerent partner who was hostile.	No, neither partner got that heated. Potentially my first one would have, but we never got there.
I had hoped to have an honest conversation with someone and find middle ground	I think I did find middle ground with the person I talked to
I tend to not like conflict and I didn't want to be like debating people	No it went a lot different than I thought, we ended up agreeing on a lot
I didn't think we would agree on anything as we were supposed to be political opposites, but it went way better than I originally thought and there was a mutual respect for each side.	While we agreed with each other for most, on a couple of occasions, after explaining my viewpoint, the other person agreed with my side and didn't know what to choose for her answer.
I was expecting to get paired with someone who had very extreme views. I hoped I would be matched with someone who was close in values but not the exact same for some good conversation.	I realized many people are quite moderate, which is hopeful.
I hoped that we could have a good discussion, I did not have many fears because I had a feeling it would go well	No
I was worried they were going to be inconsiderate and it was going to be super awkward and the conversation would feel forced.	The conversation went really good, I had no anxiety and there was no awkwardness. The conversation was really fluid and there was no uncomfortable or mean tension.
I was a bit worried that I would be matched with someone who was explicitly hostile, but I was also excited about that prospect.	The person I was matched with ended up being very kind and understanding, which was nice, but I would have preferred a more argumentative/combatative counterpart (I like being challenged).
I was scared I would get matched with an extremist who would respond somewhat aggressively to the questions.	None of my fears came true during my experience, it ended up being very positive and insightful.
I was nervous that my partner would be the complete opposite of me and wouldn't let me talk about my thoughts on issues	Not at all, we got along very well and both got to talk.
I was hoping to have a productive conversation with someone who has opposite viewpoints on politics than me.	The conversation about transgender bathroom use made me fear that there are so many roadblocks to get through before LGBTQ individuals are fully accepted in our small rural communities
That I was going to be paired with someone who was hard set in their way of thinking	No

What hopes, fears, or expectations did you have going into the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.	Were any of those hopes, fears, or expectations realized during the College Bowl conversation? Please explain.
If I am being honest, I did not know what to expect and I had no expectations going into the College Bowl. I did hope that I would gain something from the experience in which I did gain insight to new perspectives.	I did achieve my hopes of gaining something from the experience. I am glad that I participated because I gained valuable perspective as well as respect for the view in opposition to my own.
I was worried that I would be paired with somebody that would be intolerant of some or all of my views.	No, my partner was opening to listening to my views.
I was just nervous to be on a call with a stranger so I was hoping it would be casual.	We got off to a good start agreeing on several of the topics and I felt much more comfortable very quickly.
I was worried that I would be paired with someone who would only argue and not be super open to conversation. On the other hand, I was a little hopeful to have someone open to conversation that had differing viewpoints	Not really. The two of us had similar viewpoints but differed slightly which led into good conversation about our experiences growing and how it has affected us
I was fairly confident that we would be sharing a lot of the same goals, and I thought we might be forced to go more into tactics, but I was all for it.	Just the fact that I knew the person I would be talking to would be absolutely civil and happy to speak with me so long as I showed them the same respect.
I thought it would be boring	Nah, we agreed on basically everything and she was fun to talk to too. We went off course and just chatted most of the time after agreeing on things.
I had hoped that it wouldn't be a conversation that was taxing, as in the other person had no interest in participating or was disrespectful.	I was hopeful that I would connect with someone new and learn new things. I absolutely did!!
I was worried that I was going to be attacked left and right on my viewpoints and that I would feel the conversation like the life had been sucked out of me	I felt a little more optimistic about the country afterwards, that we could actually work together and maybe find some common ground

Appendix 2: Randomized Controlled Trial Participants' Open-Ended Comments

Prompt: Your first task for Phase 2 was to engage in an online activity. Please tell me about your online activity! You don't have to write a lengthy essay; just tell me enough to show me you completed the activity. Specifically: (1) How did you feel about the activity? (2) What are three specific things you learned from it?

I completed an online survey of sorts with someone from Florida. He was supposed to be my political opposite, but we pretty much agreed on everything. A few times we agreed but for different reasons/had different feelings toward people that disagreed with us so it was interesting to see his perspective on those sorts of things though I wish we could have had more disagreements that we could talk through. But overall, I enjoyed the experience and I am happy I got the partner that I did because I was fairly nervous I would get someone that was rude but he was very nice and understanding.

I was very nervous at first, but ended up having a very nice conversation. I learned not all republicans are going to yell at me for having differing views, that some Republicans can see the democrats view, and that we shouldn't be afraid to have controversial conversations.

I thought I would be super uncomfortable but my partner was super nice and it was easy to have conversations with the prompts. I learned that it is easy to have conversations if you are both open to see the other persons side. It also taught me how to have difficult conversations and how to be able to talk to people you have never met.

I was so nervous as I signed in to meet the person I would be communicating with! After he appeared on screen, I will say as a non traditional student, I was pleased to see another non traditional student! I enjoyed having the ability to speak freely and was grateful I was matched with someone who was willing to have a conversation rather than just state their side. I felt heard, understood, and appreciated. One specific thing I learned was about my own biases against Texas-where my person was from, and expectations that everyone there may support the stereotypical Texas lifestyle we hear about in the news. I can say for a fact now, at least one person doesn't fit the bill and I am sure many others do not as well. The second thing I learned is that even if we are filled with nerves and fear, good things can come out of having the unwanted conversations. Abortion, climate change, and other policies are not a political problem, they are a bipartisan-human problem that need compromise and understanding to find safe solutions in moving forward. The third thing I learned was again to do with my own biases in that all men are not threatening, and can respect women's rights even if they don't agree with them. Lastly, I learned about the varying reality of what gun control laws may or may not be.

I thought the activity went well. I got matched with someone who has similar beliefs to me, but different enough to have some good discussion. One thing I learned was that even if you agree on an issue, there are many different sides as to why someone may believe something. Another thing I learned was it's a lot of fun to engage in debate with someone else if you set up the conversation to be nonjudgmental and for the purpose of fun. I also learned that it's important to engage in conversations with people who are older than you, too, because that can frame people's beliefs (my partner was 30).

Going into the activity I didn't know how to feel and what to expect from the other person. I personally don't tend to share my political views openly so I was hesistany. However, I was paired with a student from Georgia state university and they were very respectful throughout the discussion and I got to learn about their points of view and why they feel that way.

I really enjoyed the activity and the conversation I had with the other things. The three things I learned that when you take the time to listen and talk about things its much more efficient in understanding. Even if you don't agree on some points its better to be respectful about the communication. Having questions to talk about with another person and think about certain topics that aren't always talked about helped a lot with getting the conversation started.

Going into it I was very nervous. I didn't know what to expect. But once the conversation got started it went well. I really liked that prompts were given to get the conversation going.

At first I was very nervous, but once she popped on the screen conversation flowed easily. We were both respectful and kind about our opposing views. I ended the conversation with most of my opinions the same but, I was open to other opinions/ideas

It took me a while to actually get connected to someone, but I met someone from Oregon, and she identified on the opposite side of the political spectrum as me. That said, we agreed on quite a bit, and it was nice talking to someone who seemed like they wanted to learn about trans people in good faith despite being on a side of the political spectrum which is generally not a fan of GNC people. But yeah overall I liked it. I found 3 things from the activity. 1) It's better to talk politically with people who haven't established their views to you and vice versa. 2) Well Formed conversation is much different than what we see in the news, on television, on podcasts, or on social media. 3) There is a gap between left and right goals, but the gap is smaller than it looks.

Going into the activity, I was very anxious and hesitant on how it would go. However, when I left the call, I felt a lot more eased! The call I had was with a student from Georgia St. University!! The biggest thing that I learned was that many people have the same opinions and views, but what sets us apart is how we would all go about changing that situation. We all want to help our country succeed. We just all have different morals on how our country should go about it! I also learned that there are many more issues that are usually discussed casually!

I thought it was a pretty good meeting. Beforehand I was really nervous, but as we went through it I got better. I learned about other people's beliefs (like pro-choice), I learned why they have their beliefs (choose what happens to your own body), and I learned about different goals the IS could have (unite all countries to solve climate change).

I felt uncomfortable during the activity. The student that I got paired up with was extremely left sided and there were somethings that I didn't want to disagree on with her because I was afraid, she would attack me. It seemed as if she had evidence to back up her points and I really didn't, so I just went along with what she said. I learned that talking to other students about controversial topics when you have no evidence can be difficult. I honestly thought it would have been a lot easier because I was talking through a screen instead of in person. The biggest controversial issue that we disagreed on was about transgenders being able to participate in whatever sport. She said that sports should be conjoined. I was thinking to myself if she had lost her mind. That's literally the dumbest thing I've ever heard, but I didn't say anything.

1) I really enjoyed the conversation. I don't feel totally comfortable talking about politics with my family and it's not something that comes up with my friends very often, so it was nice to have the opportunity to talk about politics.
2) Three things I learned were that there are more people than I thought who feel similarly to me about political issues, gun use is a very important thing to a lot of people, and that people in the military don't always feel the same way

I was a little nervous at first talking to someone I have never talked to before about politics or my views on stuff going on in the world. I learned that even someone from Texas has the same views as I do, I learned that it gets easier talking to someone as the video call goes, and lastly I learned that sometimes going out of my comfort zone can open my eyes to things

Going into the activity, I was nervous about it and didn't know what to expect. I feel like I am more independent on the political spectrum, as I have views on both sides of the aisle, and I was worried that I would be stuck with a person on the far-right or far-left. Instead, I was paired with someone who did not know much about politics and did not know the difference between conservative and liberal. He was only participating because he had to for one of his gen-ed classes. I feel like this made the activity easier and calmed my nerves down. Because both of us

leaned towards being independent, Unity America included videos from other people on both sides of the aisle explaining their views that we then had to discuss. After hearing both sides from these videos, I felt like then talking through the issues of abortion and gun rights and things like that was a lot easier because we could take parts of both sides and put them together. One of the key things I took from the videos is that people on both sides of the aisle actually agree on certain parts of key topics and that could be something to rally everyone around to come up with something that everyone can agree on. In the video on abortion, Travis, who claimed to be on the far-right, mentioned that he does not believe in fully banning abortion, because "there are times when it is necessary, and should still happen." This was interesting to me because I thought that people on the far right would all be anti-abortion but I now know that I was incorrect.

I was extremely nervous going into the activity. I was envisioning an hour long blood-bath zoom call with someone who would be attacking me the whole time. When I completed the activity, however, the questions were worded very well to facilitate actual conversation and encourage finding middle ground. Firstly, I learned that people of any political affiliation can agree on core values underlying an issue even if we have different ideas on how to solve the problem. Next, I was challenged by the activity to argue for perspectives that don't align with my beliefs for some questions, which helped me better understand where the other side is coming from. Third, I learned that even people of the same political affiliation can disagree on some topics. I, a somewhat liberal identifying individual, was surprisingly paired up with another somewhat liberal identifying individual. While we agreed on most topics, we had very different opinions on the topic of AI in school!

I thought the activity was pretty cool. My partner and I agreed on a majority of the prompts and the ones we didn't we had a good conversation about. I learned how easy it is to simply listen to others and how to have a non-judgmental conversation about controversial topics. There were some parts that we discussed that we disagreed on but we stayed civil and both got to share our points. I learned someone across the country could have basically the exact same opinions about things as me. I think this is pretty cool since I'm pretty close to being a moderate and there aren't many moderate people that I've met before. I also learned that I am pretty comfortable sharing my views. I, at no point, felt as though I had to censor myself throughout the conversation.

At first I was nervous no one would match with me because it took three tries for me to finally get paired with a partner. I really liked the chance to discuss but I felt like my partner just wanted to get through the questions fast where as I wanted to have deeper discussions about some questions. I learned that it is possible to have a civil discussion with someone who completely disagrees with me.

I felt like the activity was engaging. I know that the person I was with was supposed to have a different viewpoint on the topics but they really didn't. We had some interesting conversations about our experiences. I learned that we are both in the middle on most topics; that it is hard to generalize without specifics; and even though she was substantially older than me we both had similar levels of knowledge on the topics.

1.) I felt very nervous going into the activity but the different goals were very thought provoking. I was intrigued by the idea of the president having to take a civics test to demonstrate their understanding of the American democracy. 2.) I learned that things even just in different parts of the United States make certain causes more important. For example my partner was from Florida and she talked about how important climate change is for Floridians with the rising sea levels. Second is that a lot of people agree with the middle ground in issues but it's difficult because political parties are extremely divided. Third is that it's important to have discussions around politics/important issues since that is how we learn what issues are important in this country.

I found it fun and it felt like I had a temporary friend discussing topics that people debate. I learned that not all of the other side of politics seem as radical as it seems, we can agree to disagree politely, being an active listener can be beneficial to understanding someone.

I enjoyed the activity and thought it was cool being able to talk to another random college student in the United States. I felt like we should have been paired up with someone with opposite political views as ourselves though. I learned that most teens don't really know and care about politics. If they do have an opinion it is usually what their parents influence.

I felt really good about the activity! The person I was paired with was really nice to talk to, and I was able to have some really in-depth conversations with her. I learned a lot about where people live can really affect their thought process on issues, how similar some of our concerns about issues can be, and how easy it is to try and find a middle ground on topics. While me and my partner had very similar political views, it was still nice to hear someone else's take.

Well me and my partner agreed on many things so it was pretty easy flowing conversation. I learned that I share similar views with people from Ohio. I also learned that even if you don't believe in the same things it's easy to be open and hear the other side of the story, even if you don't agree you can listen. Another thing I learn is it is kind of weird to talk about controversial topics with a stranger.

1. I felt that the activity was a very nice way to talk to someone from a different area and background about different topics. We didn't know what to do for the first 45ish minutes because we both didn't click through the prompts so we got to know each other. I felt that the activity was fun and friendly but really depended on the individual duos to make the prompts work. 2. I learned that my partner's parents immigrated in and that they are going to graduate this year. I learned that they have a very cute cat and are a driven person.

I felt pretty good about the activity. I first learned that I'm not the only person all across the board on the political scale. Secondly, some kids had to take that for a class. And lastly, politics are easy to talk about.

I really enjoyed the experience. Unfortunately, I didn't learn anything from this experience because I didn't really get the opportunity to disagree or talk through differences because the girl I was paired up with either agreed with me, or would say she didn't know enough on the topic to have an opinion.

It was really fun, I met with a girl who was from Texas she identified as a liberal. I was super scared at first and was hoping for a woman and not a man. I was afraid of being partnered with an aggressive man. When I saw her I felt more at ease and the funny thing is she was feeling the same way I was so we bonded a bit with the initial fear. When it was over we had so much in common that we were just chatting about our initial fears and what we believed in politically. Our views were identical so it was not the ideal result for the experiment, however it was great to compare experiences. I was pre-judging and assuming that she would be a conservative from Texas and a trump supporter and it was actually the complete opposite. I learned that she wanted to find community as well and to come together as a country rather than be divided. I learned I need to be more open to having discussions with people or I should say all types of people. I also learned I enjoy speaking with new people despite it being a little intimidating.

I thought the girl I talked to was very lovely and it was easier than I thought it was going to be. I learned that maybe we are more united in our views than different, we agreed on almost everything no matter who talked first. We discussed politics and if one was a democrat or republican or moderate. I felt comfortable and no limitations to my opinions because the other party and myself created a safe and free environment. I learned to actively listen to another's point of view and their take on the same exact prompt question I received.

The activity was interesting and fun. I had a good experience talking with my person. We had similar views on quite a few of the questions asked. I would say that it was nice hearing her reasonings to why she felt the way she did on guns, abortions, and just politics in general. We did talk about our personal experience on school shootings. Although neither of us have experienced it first had the fear factor possibly having a school shooter situation occur is very real all across America.

Before the activity, I was a bit nervous. I wondered who I would be paired up with, and whether it would be possible to have a civilized discussion if we had completely polarizing ideas, but after the discussion started, I realized that even if we didn't agree, we still had the same end goal. Something specific that I learned is that, despite having differing views, I think most people do want what's best for America, even if their idea of what is best is different than my own. I also realized that people whose ideas differ from me aren't just uneducated or possibly bigoted, but that they are just educated differently, and sometimes that is okay. The final thing that I realized is that the best way to unite America so that we really are one nation is to have these uncomfortable conversations.

I met up with a guy living in Oregon. He described himself as a libertarian. He told me he had never voted because he believes the government is corrupt and ordinary citizens hold false power. Generally, he didn't care what people do as long as it doesn't affect him. I was pretty comfortable with the conversation.

1) I felt good about the activity the girl I was partnered with was very respectful so our discussion went well. 2) 1. I learned it is important to listen to others even when you disagree because politics rarely change who a person is 2. I learned that abortion rights are important to a lot of younger people, to the point of choosing what party they vote for 3. I learned that age does not matter when it comes to holding political opinions, people of all ages are entitled to their ideas and should have the freedom to express them.

I felt really good about it after it ended. I really liked the person I partnered up with. It was interesting to learn he doesn't really care about trans people I thought he'd have more of an opinion. I learned that he didn't really care about about gun laws even in Texas. I learned that maybe my opinions with other people aren't that different.

I was a little wary of this activity at first because I have never been good at expressing my own beliefs to others, but I felt quite comfortable the farther I got into the online activity. The first thing I learned was me and my online partner had a lot of the same political beliefs. The second thing I learned was being able to talk and discuss views I gained a new perspective that I didn't know about or think about, Thirdly, I learned is being more open and honest about view points can allow me to learn more information about topics I don't know a lot about.

At first I was very hesitant to actually do it because I felt that it would be super super uncomfortable and I didn't want any sort of an issue to arise if there were disagreements. I think I learned that many of us do feel similarly about a variety of topics, that most people try to be respectful thoughtful of what others have to say and that a lot of us youth can agree that talking about this stuff can be uncomfortable.

I met with a stranger on the internet over video call and we discussed various political and stigmatized topics. The person I was matched with was on the opposite side of the political spectrum than me, yet surprisingly, we ended up agreeing on a lot of the topics. We had a few disagreements, but we were able to respectfully disagree with each other, and also learn from each other experiences and hear why the other thinks that way. I was initially nervous, but it ended up being a delightful experience that we both benefited from. I learned a bit about gun laws, unfortunately, he was from Colorado, so I didn't learn about the gun laws in my own state, but I learned in Colorado, that you can buy a gun without a mental health check, but you do need to go through a background check. Another thing I learned is that there are people out there that tend to be conservative, but also believe in a lot of the same things I believe in as a liberal person. It seems like a lot of people have similar goals for humanity we just have different opinions on how to achieve them. I also learned how to better engage with people from opposite ends of the political spectrum. To be respectful and ask them questions and ask them why they believe the things they do.

Overall I would say I had a positive experience with the online activity. Me and my partner agreed mostly on the 18 goals for America that were being discussed. Before the activity I felt a little nervous just cause of who I was going to be partnered with, as in I didn't know how opposite or similar we were going to be, but after the activity I felt good because I had a positive conversation, were we asked questions as to why we felt a certain way on the things

that we disagree with. Overall 3 specific things I learned from this activity are, to have an open mind to different perspectives, how to respectfully engage with someone when it comes to political topics, and how to look at issues from someone else's shoes, and how they may interpret different things.

1) I felt very nervous going into the activity. I thought that it would be an argument or disagreement the entire time, and I was worried about that. However, the person I was paired with and I had a great time chatting about the 17 different goals we were prompted with. We agreed on mostly everything, and it was enjoyable to have a conversation with someone who felt similarly to myself. 2) I learned specifically that I shouldn't buy into stereotypes. The individual I was partnered with was from Texas, so initially I assumed they would have very polar opposite ideals than me, but I came to realize this wasn't true. I also realized and learned that people of my generation are very concerned about the political atmosphere, and have a mentality of "I doesn't really matter anyway" when it comes to voting and whose in office.

We talked about the given questions and statements during the online activity. The overall experience was very interesting to me because talking about politics is normally something I don't engage in. I was cool talking to someone from California about these topics and seeing their point of view. Three things I specifically learned from the experience are that being in different regions of the country most of us share similar views, even with differing views you can still engage in conversation and learn a lot from their opposing side, and that it is important to talk about these topics in order to become more informed.

I enjoyed the topics that we discussed. We had some tech issues so we had to do the activity in the chat box. I wouldn't say that I necessarily learned anything, but I enjoyed the conversation because the person I was with was very respectful even when we had a difference in opinion. For example, when we talked about abortion she was not for it. But she said that I brought up good points when I said that abortion is not a black and white topic, it is very much so grey. When we discussed companies spreading misinformation we both agreed that there should be consequences, but we couldn't figure out what that would be. We also discussed the topic of transgender people in sports and whether or not they should be in the sport with the gender they now assign with. Neither of us believe that they should be because it is unfair because no matter what you identify with you are not able to change the biology and genetic makeup of your body.

I feel like it went good. One thing I learned from the girl I was talking to was that different opinions doesn't mean you can't come to the same conclusion. Another thing I learned is even though people have different political beliefs. There are still a lot of humane concepts, we share. And lastly, the last thing I learned was how easy it is to listen to someone's opinion, even though you may not agree.

I was not too nervous going into the activity, mostly because I have fairly moderate views and am able to find common ground with most people. The activity did turn out well for me. My partner was actually a foreign exchange student so I was able to see a different perspective on political issues here. With that, one thing I learned is that the concept of federalism and states having the ability to vary their own laws significantly is unfamiliar to those from outside of America. This isn't shocking but it was interesting given my partner is a college student here and has been the whole academic year. I also was suprised/learned that gender issues in sports is a bigger deal than I was aware of. I would not have expected it to be a primary topic of conversation. I also got to learn how my opinions match up with local politicians through the oppscore survey provided after.

Well, going into this I had no idea what it was going to entail. Then I realized I would be talking with a complete stranger and filling out a survey it was a bit anxiety inducing. However the person I had was great and when we disagreed we both listened to the other side out and opened the others to our perspective. It was a really great experience and I am glad I did it, even without the incentive it was still an amazing experience and I recommended it to my Race, Class, and Gender Course to anyone who was interested. I learned a lot about how people communicate when in a situation of talking about heavy topics, and I also learned that if you respect the other person's opinion talking about politics and hard issues isn't as bad as it seems. Finally I learned that I am not the

only one who realizes the downward spiral our nation is headed so it was nice to be able to vent about that to someone who also saw the issues at hand.

It was very nice! I met another girl named Emma and she is a senior at the University of Delaware. We had great discussions and I felt heard and she said she felt heard too. We agreed to disagree on most things but we agreed on a lot more than I originally thought. I felt very good about the activity. I learned how to communicate better about uncomfortable topics, how to listen to others better, and how to engage with someone who has different views than me.

The activity went well, I was nervous to start but once we got talking it wasn't so bad. I feel like I learned more about what I believe in and why, how it's okay to change how you feel on certain topics or not have a position, and I feel like I was able to feel comfortable talking to someone of an opposite political view as me and realize it's not going to result in a negative outcome.

I felt like the activity was well run. My partner and I took turns answering questions. I learned that we all want what is best for our country.

In my online activity I was paired with a transgender person from West Virginia. We had to answer a form together and discuss why we chose what we did. I liked the activity because I was able to see the views of someone unlike me. I learned: 1.) We all have unique views. 2.) People agree more than you would think. 3.) Most people are willing to have a civilized conversation.

The discussion I had with the other person was very interesting. I learned that there is way more middle ground than most people realize. I also learned that I tend to be on red alert for disagreements, when I should just be listening.