



Let's Talk

GUIDE TO STARTING A LET'S TALK
CIVIL DISCOURSE SOCIETY

Why start a Let's Talk Civil Discourse Group?

In the United States, the First Amendment guarantees, among other assurances, freedom of speech. But the practice of free speech calls for more than the right to be free from the suppression of speech by authority. The First Amendment calls us to action — not to silence others, but to actively seek them out and listen to their ideas. A culture of free speech requires citizens to be brave, to boldly engage with those whose words they find offensive, to hear them out respectfully, and to explain why they disagree.

It is essential to create spaces on our college and university campuses for healthy and productive conversations. Fervent discussion is vital to the success of a robust intellectual community, and colleges and universities must maintain an effective learning environment for their students. In such an environment, controversial conversations can reach their full productive potential. If professors and students, who dedicate their intellectual efforts to the exploration of the world and its many complexities, cannot discuss or even disagree about difficult and uncomfortable topics, who can?

FIRE's Let's Talk program provides students with tools to work towards a more intellectually-open campus environment.

You can use these tools to construct a group that matches your campus and your participants. Go ahead and experiment! Find ways to make debates fun, and work on techniques that help ensure a collegial environment in which students can feel encouraged to argue for their stances. Remind all participants that everyone will have a chance to make their case, and that healthy discussion requires listening as well as speaking.

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In order to create a successful Let's Talk civil discourse group, think about what you hope to achieve and how you want to impact your campus community. While each group may have a different dynamic, here are a few learning outcomes to help guide you.

A Let's Talk group aims to do the following:

- Work to create a space on campus for **free discussion** in which representatives of a variety of viewpoints may come together and participate in collegial discourse and debate.
- Ensure that learning in colleges and universities extends beyond the classroom into everyday life, reminding students that to truly grow as an individual, **one must be open to listening** to others with whom one disagrees without resorting to censorship and silencing.
- **Encourage listening** as a key component of discussion. A person cannot fairly and constructively debate an opposing position without first laboring to understand the argument with which they disagree.
- Establish a campus community that has more **knowledgeable, nuanced, and informed views** about contemporary issues. Exposure to dissonant views helps develop a more informed citizenry in addition to a better-functioning academic community.
- **Expose campus policies** that may infringe upon First Amendment rights.

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About the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE)

Freedom of speech is a fundamental American freedom and human right. It is essential for democracy, scientific progress, artistic expression, social justice, peace, and our ability to live as authentic individuals.

Yet, across our nation, this cornerstone of our free society is under serious threat. Far too many of us fear sharing our views or challenging those that seem to dominate. Nearly [6-in-10 Americans](#) believe our nation's democracy is threatened because people are afraid to voice their opinions.

FIRE therefore defends and promotes the value of free speech for all Americans in our courtrooms, on our campuses, and in our culture. Our vision is an America in which people overwhelmingly believe in the right of others to freely express views different from their own, and expect their laws and educational institutions to reflect and teach this belief.

Founded in 1999 as the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, for over 20 years FIRE has worked to advance the cause of free speech and the values of the First Amendment on our nation's college and university campuses. We

have done so through our commitments to sincere nonpartisanship, courageous advocacy, and an enduring belief in free speech as a force for good.

In 2022, FIRE changed its name to the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression to reflect its broader effort to protect and promote these values off campus, as well.

FIRE effectively and decisively defends the fundamental rights of tens of thousands of students and faculty members on our nation's campuses while simultaneously reaching millions on and off campus through education and outreach. Case after case, FIRE brings about favorable resolutions not only for those individuals facing rights violations, but also for the millions of other students affected by the culture of censorship at the country's institutions of higher education. In addition to our defense of specific individuals and groups, FIRE works across the nation and in all forms of media to empower campus activists, reform restrictive policies, and inform the public about the state of rights on college campuses.

HOW FIRE CAN HELP

While Let's Talk groups have no formal connection with FIRE and will vary in size and structure, FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer any other needed advice. Let's Talk groups are powerful tools for on-campus mobilization, bringing together supporters of free speech on campus who can actively fight to preserve expression rights for students and faculty. Whether you choose to host a casual discussion with your peers or start your own organization on campus, FIRE would be glad to help.

Starting your group

AUTHOR THE BASICS

Constitution

Write a constitution to preserve your organizational structure. Often, it is required for school recognition. Your school may have resources to assist you with your group's constitution, including a sample constitution or template. Below you will find explanations and examples for the most common constitution requirements:

Mission statement

Your mission statement is an opportunity to communicate your group's core values and goals. For example:

"The Let's Talk Civil Discourse Society strives to create an environment of thought-provoking conversation regarding current events, political ideologies, international issues, and much more. Our group plays an integral role in helping [school name] become more ideologically tolerant by creating space for the celebration of diverse opinions and lively debate across political and ideological divides."

Organization name

Your group's name should make it easy for students to understand what you do. Aim for a clear-cut, self-explanatory name. For example: Let's Talk Civil Discourse Society, Coalition for Dialogue, Student Discourse Group, or Conversation Club.

FIND AN ADVISOR

If your school requires an advisor it may be helpful to consider:

- A faculty member with whom you have an existing relationship;
- A faculty member in the political science, history, philosophy, or law department;
- A professor who teaches a constitutional law course; or
- A professor who teaches a journalism course or has a journalism background.

GAIN OFFICIAL RECOGNITION

On nearly all campuses, you will need official recognition in order to obtain a campus office and mailbox, receive funding, and table on campus. Most universities have a standard set of procedures and paperwork that you will have to complete in order to become a recognized organization. Usually, you can find this information online or at your school's student life office. If you have trouble with this process or your recognition is being held up for reasons that don't sound right or aren't being applied to other groups, please [contact FIRE](#).

DECIDE ON MEMBERSHIP REQUIREMENTS

This section should address the following questions:

- 1 What are the requirements and qualifications for membership? Are there any restrictions?
- 2 How can students become members?
- 3 How long does membership last?
- 4 What is the process for removal?

Your organization might choose to distinguish between two categories:

1 The full member

- Full membership might require applicants to sign an expectations form, outlining the mission statement of the group and committing them to a collegial, ideologically-tolerant attitude towards all viewpoints. Ensure that the expectations form provides a full and accurate picture of what members should expect at meetings, and be clear that this is a student organization dedicated to open discussion.
- Members enjoy the benefit of voting for organizational leadership.

2 The non-member participant

- There may be some students who are not yet ready to endorse this kind of environment, or are hesitant to make a time commitment, and that is okay. Those who want to learn more about your group's mission before committing can always attend your group's events as non-member participants.
- Think about events that you can hold for the whole student body that focus on debate and the expression of opposing viewpoints.

CREATE THE LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE

This section should outline the leadership structure of your organization and answer the following questions:

- Who is eligible for a leadership position?
- How long do leaders serve?
- Are there procedures to remove leaders?
- Are there provisions for replacements?
- What is the election process for leaders?
- Who is eligible to vote for leaders?
- What do leadership transitions look like?

Consider implementing a transition period so newly elected officials have a chance to shadow the former executives.

Common leadership roles include:

President

The President is responsible for setting goals and maintaining progress, for relaying information and concerns to appropriate parties, and for ensuring that members are continually recognized and respected within the university community. Prominent functions of the President include ensuring that the group's actions are in line with the group's mission, that the group is open to all opinions and does not limit topics to engage in, and that the executive board has regular meetings. The President and Vice President are also responsible for providing members with each discussion topic in advance of each meeting.

Vice President

The Vice President is responsible for overseeing the day-to-day operations of the organization. These responsibilities include ensuring members fulfill their obligations and meet group expectations. The Vice President will record meeting attendance and communicate with members regularly.

Treasurer

The Treasurer is responsible for managing funds, completing budget forms, and overseeing the efficient allocation of funds. The Treasurer works with the President and other positions to ensure that their goals and vision for the organization are achieved. This includes overseeing supplies and making sure equipment functions properly, maintaining any necessary filing system, and managing the calendar.

Chair of Recruitment

The Chair of Recruitment is responsible for recruiting potential members and ensuring that all advertising and outreach efforts are reaching all possible members. The Chair of Recruitment is responsible for updating student organization social media accounts and utilizing the advertising budget effectively. Given the nature of this position, look for someone who has design experience, marketing experience, and creativity to effectively market your group.

CREATE A BUDGET

Creating a budget is crucial for continued group success. Consider budgeting for things like printing, advertising materials (like pens, magnets, and stickers), notebooks, a website, social media advertising, meeting space fees, guest speakers, and food for meetings.

| | Price | Quantity | Total |
|-----------------------|-------|----------|-------|
| Promotional Materials | | | |
| Guest Speakers | | | |
| Meeting Space | | | |
| Snacks | | | |

APPLY FOR FUNDING

At most universities, students can apply for money allocated by their student government. This money often comes from a student activities fee that all students pay at the beginning of the year — so don't be shy when applying for funds. This is your money. Typically, funds will be granted for a specific event or project and will involve an application or presentation where members of the organization explain what they plan to do with the money. When filling out funding proposal applications, be sure that you have a clearly outlined budget and straightforward explanations for why your work benefits the campus community. You'll also need to describe the program and project in great detail. Here is an example of some of the information you may be asked to include in a funding proposal and sample answers.

Brief description of project/program: If you were requesting funding for the group's budget, you could write: "Let's Talk: Civil Discourse Society is a student-run organization dedicated to serving the student community by providing an environment for intellectual dialogue among students in order to extinguish political emphasis and work to discuss all issues facing society." Or this could be something more project/event specific depending on how your student government operates.

APPLY FOR FUNDING (CONTINUED)

Total amount of funds requested: In this section you'll want to be as explicit as possible about the funds you'll need and how you will use them. For example, if you will need office supplies and promotional items to advertise the services that your group offers, you may want to include it in the funding proposal as follows:

500 pens: \$200

banner for tabling: \$30

notepads for members: \$28.96

Feel free to be more detailed when outlining what types of promotional materials and office supplies you'll need. Generally, when you are more transparent with costs, you can offer better arguments about why you need funding for specific items or why a funding cut will be detrimental to your organization. A blanketed, non-specific number being requested (especially a large one) may be outright rejected by those approving funds.

What other sources of funding have you received beyond funding from SGA/___?

Be sure to disclose if you receive funding from other sources and how much it amounts to. You do not want to be put in a position where you have to explain to a funding board that you received funding from other sources and are asking for a considerable sum from them as well.

What other alternatives (e.g. fundraising, sponsorship, etc.) did you consider, in addition to this request?

Explore other funding sources because your school may ask you to expand upon your funding research. For example:

"In addition to this request, we have looked into receiving funding from alumni and organizations that have a history of funding programs like this. While we hope to receive additional funding from these sources, they are not reliable or consistent enough to sustain our club. To maintain sustainability, we are looking for consistent funding from the university and outside funding to boost marketing and outreach."

You may also want to explain why your group is a vital resource and service for students. Consider including metrics, for example: how many students are interested, what percentage of students feel they can't speak freely on a college campus, etc.

KNOW YOUR SCHOOL'S POLICIES

Policies that prohibit or restrict speech protected by the First Amendment, known as speech codes, are evaluated by FIRE's staff and compiled in our searchable "[Spotlight](#)" database.

- If your university has "yellow light" or "red light" policies, there are several actions you can take to kick-start the process of reforming them. Consider [writing an op-ed](#) in the campus paper in support of free speech in order to raise awareness about restrictive policies, hosting [free speech activism](#) events such as [tabling](#) and collecting student signatures to petition a change in policy, constructing a free speech wall, or inviting a [FIRE speaker](#) to help start a discussion about why free speech is critical to fostering a "marketplace of ideas" on campus.
- After gaining traction within the campus community, the next step is to [reach out to administrators](#) to ask them to revise the offending policies and hopefully earn your school a "green light" rating. FIRE staffers are on call to help you draft new policies that better protect free expression and to help you advocate for administrators to adopt these policies. FIRE staff are also available to help explain exactly why your campus's policies are overly restrictive. Understanding why your school's policies may be problematic is crucial in the process of amending them.

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Effectively running your group

MEETINGS

Decide how often your group will be meeting and who will be in charge of arranging the times and dates. **For example:**

- Regular meetings of Let's Talk shall be held bi-weekly.
- The President has the authority to plan what day the meetings will be held based on when most members are able to attend. The President will send a survey to members two weeks prior to the proposed dates to check availability.
- The President shall notify members of the meeting, via email, no later than two business days in advance of the meeting.

Establishing member obligations is a great way to engage members and set expectations. **Examples of obligations may include:**

- All members must attend at least one meeting per month.
- Members are each responsible for researching the topic questions for the next meeting and arriving prepared and ready to discuss.
- Members should attend with an open mind.

THE CHATHAM HOUSE RULE

The [**Chatham House Rule**](#) should be read at every meeting to establish a safe space for discussion.

“When a meeting, or part thereof, is held under the Chatham House Rule, participants are free to use the information received, but neither the identity nor the affiliation of the speaker(s), nor that of any other participant, may be revealed.”

AN AGENDA

An agenda should be prepared and agreed upon by group leaders prior to each meeting. A good agenda will help you run meetings efficiently, guaranteeing that all items are discussed. You may also consider sending an agenda draft to members a few days prior to the meeting with the topics that will be discussed (depending on how your organization operates). This allows members to prepare or develop questions for robust and productive meetings.

Sample meeting agenda

- 1 Introduction:** The executive board welcomes everyone and introduces themselves. The President explains the purpose of the organization and how it benefits the student body.
- 2 Read the Chatham House Rule.**
- 3 “Getting to Know You” Discussion (10-15 minutes):** Break up participants into small groups and provide them with two to three Heat Level Zero topics to discuss. The purpose of this 10-15 minute interval is to encourage participants to get to know each other and learn why their peers have chosen to attend the meeting.
- 4 Ground Rules (2-3 minutes):** The executive board goes over the ground rules for civil discussion, emphasizing the importance of listening, respect, and ideological tolerance.
- 5 The Discussion (15-20 minutes):** The executive board introduces the topic question of the day, and provides crucial facts and statistics pertaining to the issue being discussed. The executive board might even want to tell participants why they chose that topic for this particular day. Participants should split into groups of 3-5 for discussion.

6 Reflection (20-30 minutes): After the day’s theme has been discussed, bring the group back and ask for overall opinions, other opinions they might not agree with, and how their viewpoint has changed or strengthened as a result of the conversation.

7 Closing by Facilitators:

- Summarize and synthesize key points of clash during the debate.
- Ask students to find articles and research on another topic for the next session and to be prepared to discuss.
- Make sure to thank everyone for attending and send an email recap to all attendees.

Note for Let's Talk leaders: Please consider also taking time to review your student handbook and the policies your school enforces. Discuss them among your group in order to conclude whether they adequately protect your rights on campus.

Sample agenda for the first meeting of the semester

- 1** Before a discussion, find and share a comedy/satire (SNL, John Oliver, etc.) clip to introduce the issue to be discussed and inject humor into the discussion.
- 2** Begin the group discussions with Heat Level Zero questions, examples of which can be found on page 15 the Leader Moderation Guide.
- 3** Allow for 5-10 minutes or so at the beginning of a meeting to share snacks and drinks, and allow members to catch up and chat.
- 4** Have activities (perhaps icebreakers) to introduce existing members to new members.

MEETING MINUTES

Someone in your group should record decisions, action items, discussion topics, and points of contention. This should not be a transcript of the entire meeting, but rather an outline of major discussions and group decisions. Minutes should be distributed after the meeting to remind members of what was discussed and to update anyone who may have missed the meeting.

EXPECTATIONS AGREEMENT FOR MEMBERS

We suggest an expectations agreement be read at the beginning of each meeting, in order to set the groundwork for civil and productive conversation. Create expectations based on your organization's structure and your campus culture. Keep in mind that boundaries should be firm, but not overwhelming. **For example:**

As a leader/member of [school name]'s Let's Talk Civil Discourse Society, I (the undersigned) commit to the following statements:

When I engage in discussions on controversial topics with other members of this group, I will allow them to state their own views and treat them with respect and dignity, even if I disagree with them. I will share my own views and make my own case, but I will not attack others personally, insult them, call them names, or otherwise impugn their character.

I understand that the goal of Let's Talk is to provide a space for students of all viewpoints to share their perspectives, and I promise to do my utmost to ensure that people of all points of view feel safe expressing their opinions.

I will welcome new participants and will actively encourage others on campus to come to discussions.

PROFESSIONALISM

Professionalism is imperative. Without it, you risk losing credibility. **You can achieve professionalism in a few easy steps:**

1 Conduct yourself in an appropriate manner.

- Everyone is present to share their various opinions freely and learn from others. Remind your team and especially your executive board about how important this attitude is to your group's objectives.

2 Maintain appropriate communication between all members.

- In order to promote effective dialogue, students must feel comfortable and free to speak their mind during Let's Talk meetings, no matter how controversial the topic or how heated discussions may become. Communication and collegiality are key.

3 Maintain a cohesive executive board.

- Your executive board should all be on the same page with respect to management of the organization, and they should maintain the appearance of a team. It is very unprofessional to appear disorganized and inconsistent.

4 Maintain a nonpartisan environment.

- Be sure all views held by participants are being discussed during the conversation.
- Try to include people from across the political spectrum on your executive board.

Growing your group

Once you are fully operating, you will need to recruit and retain new members to ensure that your organization grows into a real force for discussion on campus. Start recruiting at the beginning of each semester, as students are more likely to look for extracurricular opportunities at the start of the semester. Try to recruit a diverse group of students with a wide range of ideological perspectives.

ADVERTISING

Advertising is an essential function for your organization, as you will be trying to attract students who are seeking a club composed of non-judgmental peers. Consider giving away materials like magnets, T-shirts, and stickers with the organization's logo, email address, and phone number.

REACHING OUT TO CAMPUS LEADERS

Make connections with campus leaders to spread the word about your group. Reach out to Greek life, residence hall staff, intramural teams, academic societies, political activism groups, student government members, and other clubs to let them know about your group. Ask if you can give a short presentation at the start or end of their meetings. Remember to bring small handouts to distribute.

Also consider [sending a press release](#) to your school's student newspaper to let them know about your organization.

FLYERING

Flyering is a great way to get the word out on campus. Hang flyers in campus buildings, restrooms, dining halls, and other high-traffic areas. Check your school's posting policy and, if necessary, gain approval before distributing and hanging flyers. Some professors may be willing to have flyers distributed after class, following a brief announcement by a member of your group. Your school may also have student group mailboxes. Consult your student involvement center to see if you are able to place flyers in student group mailboxes.

Your flyers should:

- be concise and to the point;
- use graphics;
- include your logo;
- include potential group conversation topics;
- include contact information, such as your group's email address and phone number, and;
- look professional.

TABLING

Tabling is an effective way to educate and engage your campus community and spread awareness of your club. Effective tabling typically requires several volunteers, and it's a good rule of thumb to try to recruit more volunteers than you think you will need. Besides, it's helpful to have company while tabling so you can stay excited and motivated! Together, a team can distribute literature, answer questions, and engage with passersby. If you plan on tabling for more than a few hours, schedule volunteers in shifts to ensure everyone stays enthusiastic and energetic. To coordinate shifts and keep track of volunteers, maintain a list of time slots and volunteer contact information so everyone knows who is working when. Think about what will attract people to your table and what literature visitors are likely to pick up once you have their attention. In addition to handouts, stickers, and other literature, bring a tablecloth and make a poster in advance to clearly show the purpose of your tabling event. While your table will likely attract those already walking by, advertising in advance will help to draw additional visitors and supporters. Putting up flyers, personally inviting your friends and classmates, and setting up a Facebook event page are cost-effective advertising methods.

RESIDENCE HALLS

Residence hall staff are great allies with whom you should strive to build solid relationships, and residence halls are a perfect place to get the word out about your group. Residence hall staff may help spread the word and even refer students to your organization.

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Dialogue and beyond

Expand conversations beyond your group! Proactively create opportunities for speech on campus.

For example, at Kenyon College, the Center for the Study of American Democracy (CSAD) sponsored the “Free Speech and Civil Discourse” conference, which took place on Kenyon’s campus. CSAD brought 15 conservative, liberal, and nonpartisan speakers to Kenyon to discuss and debate the importance of free speech and open political debate. As an article in the Kenyon Collegian put it, “This conference is an opportunity for those on all sides of the debate over freedom of speech versus political correctness to air their concerns. ... The speakers will go head-to-head in panels about hate speech and the limits of free expression, political correctness and microaggressions in the academy and the definitions of a free society.” Organizing an event like this one might be a great way for your Let’s Talk group to begin making connections with others who are also interested in encouraging free debate and discussion on campus.

At Dartmouth College, students in the Dartmouth Political Union played a substantive role in helping to bring about a culture shift regarding free expression on campus. As former president of the DPU, Jess Chiriboga, explained in an [interview with FIRE](#), “campus was very politically divided, particularly after the 2016 election. There were political organizations on campus that could not talk to each other and they wanted to have a space on campus where students from a variety of different political affiliations could come together and have real respectful and substantive conversations about

the pressing issues of our time.” Since its inception, the DPU has provided that forum, hosting debates, speakers, and conversations on contentious issues like sex work, gender, and gun control with guests from across the political spectrum. This, in turn, has complemented efforts to bring about policy reform at Dartmouth, which [re-claimed FIRE’s top “green light” speech code rating](#) in 2024, becoming the only university in the Ivy League to earn FIRE’s best rating.

Your Let’s Talk group could host a civil discussion event between existing political groups on campus, such as a mock presidential debate night between members of the College Republicans and College Democrats groups on campus. This collaboration among partisan groups and a discourse group that advocates for respectful discussion could work to counteract a lot of the animosity that can exist between political groups on campus.

Check out FIRE’s debate series hosted in partnership with The Free Press, “[The America Debates](#),” for more inspiration. You can also check out FIRE’s guide on [how to create your own debate program](#).



How FIRE can help

We are counting on you to help cultivate a culture of free speech on your campus. FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer advice on tricky free speech questions. Additionally, we can send guides, literature, speakers, and FIRE materials. Please do not hesitate to contact us with questions at mobilization.team@thefire.org. We are here to help!