

The UNC Program for Public Discourse

Introduction:

The College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill has approved a new IDEAs in Action general education curriculum to begin in Fall of 2021 (see <https://tinyurl.com/IDEAs-UNC>). The pedagogical approach of the new curriculum is to prepare students to be effective, successful thinkers and citizens by developing flexible capacities that cross disciplines and domains of knowledge. The curriculum document describes these capacities as “flexible and adaptable modes of thought and action that can be used in different contexts, including new contexts that will emerge in the future.” The core courses in the curriculum will incorporate a set of recurring capacities, such as the ability to pose problems and questions that require systematic thinking about evidence, argument and uncertainty. Communication, both written and oral, is a key element in these recurring capacities, and the curriculum also includes a required course in “Communication beyond Carolina.”

Education research shows that advocacy, argumentation, and debate are crucial skills that promote civic engagement. Research into the impact of debate-centered instruction on student learning shows it improves content knowledge, reading and speaking skills, critical thinking skills, and self-confidence.^{1,2} The academic literature includes suggested methods and practices for developing these communication skills in the classroom,³ and published research validates the effectiveness of this approach to learning.⁴

The main objectives of The Program for Public Discourse will be to 1) build capacities for civic engagement as called for in the new curriculum and 2) to support the implementation of pedagogical methods that increase student engagement and critical thinking by employing research validated methods. It seeks to enable students to engage with disagreements across the full range of issues that arise in the university and the broader society. It attempts to foster the possibilities of civil arguments, discussions and conversations, by having students learn to deal with different modes of deliberation, reasoning, argument, evidence and presentation.

The Program will continue UNC’s long and storied tradition of free speech, lively debate, and intellectual autonomy in the service of excellence in teaching, research, and service to the state. At the heart of this heritage is the recognition that respect for and pursuit of the truth requires a willingness to engage honestly and respectfully with those with whom one disagrees.

1. What will this Program do?

The Program for Public Discourse will collaborate with and complement programs across campus that bring together faculty and students from all of the divisions of the College of Arts and Sciences and

¹ Allen, M., Berkowitz, S., Hunt, S., and Loudon, A. (1999). A meta-analysis of the impact of forensics and communication education on critical thinking. *Communication Education*, 48(1), 18–30.

² Lundberg, C. O. (2010). The Allred Initiative and debate across the curriculum: Reinventing the tradition of debate at North Carolina. In A. D. Loudon (Ed.), *Navigating opportunity: Policy debate in the 21st century*. New York, NY: International Debate Education Association.

³ Johnson, D. W., and Johnson, R. T. (1995). *Creative controversy: Intellectual challenge in the classroom*. Edina, MN: Interaction Book Co.

⁴ Bellon, J. (2000). A research-based justification for debate across the curriculum. *Argumentation and Advocacy*, 36(3), 161–175.

other schools to explore contemporary, contested questions that require broad interdisciplinary knowledge to address. In the spirit of the pursuit of truth, we will approach these questions in intellectual friendship with acknowledgment of our fallibility, even when exploring deeply held ideas and convictions. We will employ the full breadth of classical, modern and contemporary intellectual traditions available to us.

The Program will be inclusive and student-centered, focusing on developing and teaching courses in the new IDEAs in Action curriculum, and especially upon sharpening the recurring capacities for critical thinking and civic engagement called for by the new curriculum. This support will take the form of course development grants and workshops which the Program will develop for faculty who wish to incorporate structured deliberation, argumentation and debate into their pedagogy. The Program will also help fund visitors to campus who can enrich our conversation by providing “campus life experience” events that align with courses in the curriculum.

2. Why is this Program valuable?

The Program will encourage the development or enhancement of courses and campus life experiences that explicitly engage the full range of structured techniques, practices, habits and processes for discussion, deliberation and debate, including different ways of analyzing and evaluating competing claims to knowledge. These courses will enrich student capacities for argument, listening, judgement, and self-reflection. Program courses will also explicitly make the practices and terms of analysis and evaluation, of argument and evidence the subject of deliberation, discussion and debate.

These capacities will lay the groundwork in our students for broad intellectual inquiry and cross-disciplinary dialogue — two things that are challenging in a modern university environment that often favors specialization. The Program will provide opportunities for faculty to engage in broader conversations or to deliberate with students over big questions that transcend disciplinary boundaries. These opportunities will help in the mission of the curriculum to provide students with a coherent intellectual experience.

There are currently many campus organizations that permit students to expand their intellectual and civic horizons, yet the students themselves say they find too few opportunities for constructive engagement with people who disagree with them. This Program will help remedy this by working with existing programs to integrate the spectrum of civic life opportunities on campus with the curriculum. It will provide methods, capacities, and incentives for students and faculty to debate and discuss big, broad questions. It will help to balance the demands of the academy that tend to isolate and narrow the focus of faculty and students alike.

3. Will the Program draw students and credit hours away from other departments and programs?

The Program for Public Discourse has no plans to offer a major or minor, and all courses will be affiliated with existing academic departments or programs. Students will take advantage of the Program by taking general education requirements in, for example, history, English, political science — relying on affiliated faculty from the relevant departments. The faculty home departments will receive “credit” for these full-time enrollment numbers. The Program will not be affiliated with any one department but will be housed within the College of Arts and Sciences.

4. Who will direct the Program?

While there can sometimes be substantial value in hiring a prominent director from outside UNC, such a strategy can also make it difficult to build a Program that leverages the unique strengths of UNC, while understanding and acknowledging the challenges. Consequently, we have decided that the faculty director for the first three years should be appointed from our own tenured faculty ranks. After that time, an interdisciplinary faculty search committee appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences will conduct a search, both internally and externally, for a faculty director who will be hired according to the usual faculty hiring process, based on the recommendation of a search committee composed of faculty from relevant departments. The director will have a primary appointment in one of the College's departments.

This year the Program will search for a fixed-term Teaching Assistant Professor to serve as executive director and to teach courses in the Program. Both internal and external candidates will be invited to apply. In addition to self-initiated applicants, the search committee may ask candidates to apply based on recommendations from the advisory board, campus leadership, and the faculty at large. When a short list of candidates has been developed, the departments relevant to the candidates' disciplines will be asked to interview the candidates and help rank them. This process worked very well with recent interdisciplinary hires in the College's Environment, Ecology and Energy Program (E³P). Once hired, the executive director will have a term faculty appointment in the home department of his or her discipline.

5. How are faculty selected for the Program?

The faculty on the advisory board are developing a request for proposals that will be used as a basis for distributing course development funds and support for associated campus life experience events, which may be funded in collaboration with other programs across campus. Applications will be open to faculty who teach in the general education curriculum, are willing to incorporate structured deliberation, argumentation, and debate into their pedagogy, and are building knowledge and capacities for civic engagement. As with all courses developed for the general education curriculum, courses developed or enhanced with Program support will be reviewed for approval by the administrative boards of the general college and the College of Arts and Sciences Course Committee.

We are considering funding joint or adjunct appointments in the Program, whereby faculty would satisfy part of their teaching responsibilities by developing and teaching courses that satisfy first-year or capacity requirements in the general education curriculum. Whatever form faculty participation takes, Program faculty will not leave their home departments. The courses they teach in the general education curriculum will be listed in their home departments, and the student credit hours will be credited to their home departments.

6. What is the role of the advisory committee, especially the external members? How will you ensure transparent governance directed by our faculty?

In its initial year, the Program has an advisory board that is composed of UNC faculty and external board members. The board advises UNC faculty and leadership as it develops the mission and activities of the Program, and it will help solicit interest and engagement from potential speakers, visiting scholars, and

programs at other universities. The Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences has appointed external academic leaders who have experience in developing similar initiatives elsewhere and who have strong networks that will give the Program visibility. We have also invited members of the UNC Board of Trustees and Board of Governors to serve on the advisory board and we hope to hear their ideas and to solicit their help in communicating our curricular objectives and successes to stakeholders throughout the campus, the system, and the state. However, in all matters affecting hiring, curriculum, or governance, decisions will be made by UNC faculty and administration, following the same policies, practices, and norms as in all UNC units or programs.

7. Who is funding the Program? What conditions have been attached to the gifts?

Private philanthropy will be crucial to the success of this Program. A variety of private foundations and individuals have expressed interest in supporting it. To date, we have received seed money to develop the Program.

As is the case with every other contribution the University receives, the College will not accept gifts that limit academic freedom, attempt to stipulate the shape of courses or curricula, or shrink the areas of inquiry or pedagogy open to faculty in the Program. To reinforce this point, the gift agreements for all donors include the following statement:

“The donor understands that the College and the University are committed to academic freedom and shared governance, such that faculty and the dean determine the content of academic programs, course curricula and the selection of faculty who teach students.”

8. Will you make the gift agreements and the names of donors public?

The University discloses the identity of specific donors on a case-by-case basis that depends on the donor’s wishes. The identities of donors who choose to give anonymously are not disclosed.