

THE UNC PROGRAM FOR PUBLIC DISCOURSE

Promoting Civic Virtue, Fostering Civil Debate

Universities are centers for the creation, exploration, and dissemination of knowledge, and they serve a unique role both in history and in our contemporary culture. They function best when they maintain an atmosphere of open, frank, respectful, and productive debate. When our faculty, by practice and example, teach students how to think and argue well, with the processes and terms of rational justification themselves open to examination, they strengthen our democracy and our public lives.

I am writing to promote a new program at UNC-Chapel Hill that will help us do this better. The initial working name of this program was The Program in Civic Virtue and Civil Discourse, however the UNC-Chapel Hill faculty serving on the advisory board, after receiving feedback, have now settled on a permanent name: The UNC Program for Public Discourse.

The UNC Program for Public Discourse will be housed in the College of Arts and Sciences and its purpose will be to help build our capacity for civil argument, discussion, and conversation --- and it will be a uniquely Carolina program. Most immediately, it will begin developing ways to support faculty who wish to incorporate more structured advocacy, argumentation, and debate into their courses using research validated methods. 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. These skills all help our students prepare for constructive civil engagement, an objective that has been highlighted by the College's new IDEAS in Action general education curriculum, and in the Chancellor's Strategic Plan.

The group of faculty who have participated in the evolution of the program are a diverse group of scholars with one common ideological commitment: they believe in the power of the university to socialize debate and democratic culture. They represent all three divisions of the College and one professional school, and are scholars in History, Political Science, Communication, Law, and Physics. In our work to develop the UNC-Chapel Hill program, we have met with dozens of UNC faculty, considered programs on other campuses with similar goals, and consulted with the faculty who developed them, but the plans we have drawn up for UNC are very different. We envision a unique program with elements that will leverage Carolina's strengths and opportunities as the nation's first public university. To help explain the main features of the program and to stimulate further conversations about its objectives, activities, and structure, we have posted a document for faculty, students, and the public to review at www.publicdiscourse.web.unc.edu.

As the document explains, the new program will not have a major or minor of its own, but will assist faculty to develop or enhance courses in the new curriculum. Participation by faculty is completely voluntary, and the program is extremely broad in subject area. We expect to issue calls for course development or enhancement proposals from faculty as soon as we have support infrastructure in place and details can be worked out in consultation with department chairs and college leadership. Faculty who participate in the program will remain in their own departments, as with similar programs in the College such as the Program in Medieval and Early Modern Studies or The Philosophy, Politics and Economics Program. Although the program will assist faculty in their work, it will be student-centered, attempting to enhance student communication and civic engagement capacities through a variety of initiatives we will be developing over the coming semesters.

The program is firmly committed to academic freedom, and to all regulations, policies and norms of faculty governance. These have been followed scrupulously as we have developed this program from draft stage to its current state of development. Any courses developed or enhanced with program support or assistance will be reviewed by the administrative boards of the college, as with any courses in the new general education curriculum. The hiring of a term executive director and academic director will be made using faculty search committees, following usual hiring procedures. Donors to the program will sign an agreement that states that the faculty and dean have sole discretion over the content of courses and the selection of faculty.

However, academic freedom does not mean freedom from accountability, both to each other and to the public who provide the financial support for this University. To address the latter, we have asked two members of the UNC Board of Trustees and one from the Board of Governors of the UNC System to serve on the advisory board for the program. We want members of these bodies to see the excellent and dedicated work of our faculty and to help us communicate the mission and vision of the University to our main stakeholders: the people of North Carolina. As for our responsibilities to one another, now that the initial vision for the program has been drafted, Interim Dean Terry Rhodes will be convening roundtable discussions and I look forward to a frank and civil conversation about what we might do to make the vision even better.

Chris Clemens

Acting Director, UNC Program for Public Discourse

Senior Associate Dean for Research and Innovation, College of Arts and Sciences