

Kayla Johnston:

I have Matt Kircher and Lauren Fletcher here. Two fabulous student fellows from the University of North Carolina Greensboro. I want to just kick off this conversation with your individual perspectives. Or essentially, why did you start doing this work with College Debates and Discourse Alliance on this campus? How did you get here?

Matt Kircher:

Sure.

Kayla Johnston:

You want to start, Matt?

Matt Kircher:

Yeah, I'll start. I started this experience with you and we both jumped in on it head first. You told me about the organization. I'm a conservative. So when I first heard about the organization, well, Braver Angels, so not really the partnership of CD&D. I learned about Braver Angels through you, and I didn't believe in it.

I thought it was silly. It gave me flashbacks of the tolerance movement, which then morphed into cancel culture, et cetera, et cetera. And then conservatives sort of locked down into self-censorship. So that's why I didn't believe in it.

I thought it was silly, but I told you I to read about it. I did. And I said, "Okay, it is kind of interesting." We talked about it, and then we went to Gettysburg. And once Gettysburg happened, it was the Braver Angels Convention in Gettysburg. That was July, what year?

Kayla Johnston:

2023.

Matt Kircher:

'23, yeah. We met Sadie up there, Sadie Webb, and she told us about CD&D. You'd already known about it. You knew about the fellowship. I don't know how you knew about these things.

Kayla Johnston:

I had experience in that first initial debate, spring 2023.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah, right. I skipped that because I didn't believe in it then. But when I was at the convention, I got to experience a debate, a air quotes debate for the first time. And that platform is really amazing, and it was pivotal in showing me how this civil discourse thing could really happen.

And before that, it was sort of smoke and mirrors. I didn't really think it could happen. I didn't think that you could truly get both sides together and then actually have both sides listen to each other. And then you had people speak with such genuineness.

So it was the genuine nature of the conversation, and then actually listening to each other was fantastic. And then in the second that I experienced that, that was it. And then I think we sort of both took off.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. It was a contagious atmosphere and environment and feeling for me. And I remember you, myself, Timona Stapleton was there from UNCG, as well as Savannah Henderson and the four of us. I remember walking to breakfast one morning and we thought, well, there were so many different ways in which we could bring this back to campus.

And while we were walking, we decided we're going to kind of divide and conquer of how to bring this kind of positive civil dialogue onto Greensboro's campus. That's when Savannah Henderson decided she was going to start a Bridge chapter. You and I were both thinking about applying for the student fellowship position with College Debates and Discourse.

And it was sort of, not a pact in an actual pact, but we all kind of made promises to each other that we would continue this spirit when we came back to school in the fall. And we did. So maybe, Lauren, you can come in at this point because you were here on campus. We'd all been friends for a while, so we came back. You did some work with Bridge initially, correct?

Lauren Fletcher:

Yeah, I did. I think I was contacted spring semester of 2023 about starting the chapter, and I was unable to do so at the time. But it put Bridge on my radar. And then I met you guys, and that was so much fun.

And then I couldn't go to Gettysburg, but I know that you both were going and that put Braver Angels on my radar. And then next thing you know, I come back in the fall and you guys are hosting some cool events and debates. And I'm like, "Yeah, I'll come speak at these. These seem really interesting."

Kayla Johnston:

You were an active initial speaker in several of them.

Lauren Fletcher:

Oh, yeah.

Kayla Johnston:

At the time, we had Timona Stapleton as our other student fellow, and she had since graduated. So when you first became aware of the student fellowship position, what motivated you to try to apply for that position and take on that role? What inspired you?

Lauren Fletcher:

I had seen definitely through Bridge, my involvement in Bridge. I had joined on their board and then just through actively participating in the Braver Angels debates, I had actually seen improvement on campus. I made friends with people who I never thought I would be friends with. I saw faculty and students talking about things that I wouldn't initially hear otherwise. And so I saw that this was actually making a very large impact.

And outside of that, I had already been very hands-on with CD&D. I was helping Matt set up events and he would hijack our Bridge meetings for brainstorming for topics. So I had helped come up with a few of the topics that we were talking about through the Braver Angels debates. And so when a position came up, I figured I'm already involved. I'm passionate about it. I think it works. So yeah, why not?

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah, it just seemed natural at that point.

Lauren Fletcher:

Yeah.

Kayla Johnston:

Let's rewind a little bit. So, Matt, when you first became a student fellow, can you describe the kind of campus culture around free expression? Or just dialogue on divisive social and political issues generally? What was the state of campus life when it came to conversations like that when you first started your student fellowship with CD&D?

Matt Kircher:

Okay, well, let's start with my return to university. So I'm a non-traditional student, just like you, a little bit older than your average crowd. And I came into university thinking it was going to be sort of a political war, waged mostly by the left against the right, and I was on the right.

So I thought that my return to university, especially in political science degree, was going to be confrontational and I would have to self-censor. That was my impression. However, the faculty here are wonderful, and they're very unbiased, and I enjoy them a lot.

So my experience coming back to university was sort of contradicting what I felt initially. But from the point at which I began my return to school to now, since we've started the program and had it going for more than a year, I would say that the campus, or very specifically the political science department, I think was just more maybe averse to talking about some things. Just kind of maybe issues weren't talked about in a fully explored way.

Maybe they were sort of partially explored, but the conservative perspective was not accepted as much as it is now. I think we can have more open conversations. People sort of crave that. There's less fear and intimidation about speaking about what it is that you want to bring to the table in a conversation. And so I think we sort of opened up the campus in that way.

There's curiosity. There's more enlightenment and curiosity in the conversations that we're having now just about the campus.

Kayla Johnston:

I like how you highlighted the effects of these kinds of debates that we've had on campus over the long haul, I guess. Although at maybe a year isn't the long haul, I hope it goes on longer. But I'm thinking primarily to the lack of formats and forums for those dialogues, for those kinds of conversations.

I know when I transferred over here, there are a few opportunities, but a lot of kind of defunct clubs. It was relatively soon after COVID, a lot of things died down campus wide. And I know I was craving those kinds of conversations with a broad variety of different viewpoints, and it was essentially looking for those spaces.

Matt Kircher:

So I had come to the campus for a brief moment in 2018, so that was before COVID. And during that timeframe, I do remember a lot more student engagement politically. We did have a College Repubs, we had a College Dems. They were pretty active.

I remember they put their little tents out for the tabling events. They would paint the rock, do those kinds of things. And then when I returned in 2023, January of that year, these things weren't present.

Kayla Johnston:

Pretty quiet.

Matt Kircher:

It was very quiet. And I had heard about-

Kayla Johnston:

On both sides too for a while.

Matt Kircher:

Yep.

Kayla Johnston:

I do remember, I believe College Gems wasn't as active as they had used to be. We had Political Awareness Club that essentially there was no student group running it by any means. So from my view, it was just lacking in groups to have these conversations.

And that's why I've appreciated the initial debates, the programming. And then the partnership with organizations like BridgeUSA to get us to this spot where I think the culture of conversation has exploded in comparison.

Matt Kircher:

And I was about to mention PAC, Political Awareness Club. I heard about it because I'd seen something about PAC, maybe it was like an old newsletter or something up on the electronic billboards that are here in the hallway, something like that. But it had stopped functioning.

So all of these things just stopped right when I got onto the campus. And then I witnessed a Michael Knowles event. Michael Knowles came to the campus to give a speech. And I remember I was walking across the EUC lawn with my dog. And I see this big fuzzy-haired guy with a sign, and he's running across the lawn, and he says, "We've got to kill the fascists."

And then there was a big protest that happened all at once. And so I went, "Oh." And that didn't help my position on thinking that there was a political war sort of being waged by the left when I first came. So that was my exposure to how the campus was politically and how we were interacting in political discourse at that time. So I think our work has done really wonderful things for this environment.

Kayla Johnston:

I want to speak to that, actually with you, Lauren, because you've written a couple of articles in the UNCG student newspaper on that very issue of our discourse or our level of free speech at this campus. Do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Lauren Fletcher:

Oh, yeah, of course. Definitely the Michael Knowles event was one that was definitely protested. There was, I think police were actually called to that protest, and it wasn't as peaceful as I know the planners originally wanted.

My initial reaction was actually not the Michael Knowles event, but we had Ben Shapiro come speak on campus. I believe it was Young Americans for Liberty, YAL, which is a conservative college group.

Kayla Johnston:

It was Y-A-F. For Freedom.

Lauren Fletcher:

Was it YAF?

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah.

Lauren Fletcher:

Okay. Hosted him. And they had a very large turnout. It was fantastic for them, but they had a lot of people protesting, which I believe was fine. It was a peaceful protest. It wasn't disruptive at all.

But there were students at the event who came specifically to be very aggressive. And actually got up to the microphone and made very crass comments about Ben Shapiro and this relationship with his wife. And at the time, this was, I think my freshman year.

And I grew up in a very small liberal community. I didn't really have that much experience with anything political-wise. I was a very new poli-sci student. So knowing me, I knew a little bit about Ben Shapiro and his beliefs, and I didn't agree with them.

So I took that as like, "Oh, yeah, that was a funny comment that was made. Ha-ha." But as I've met more people and I've extended my beliefs, I'm like, "Wow, there was an auditorium full of students and people in the community who wanted to hear this guy speak." And that was very rudely interrupted by someone who may not agree, but that also doesn't further support their beliefs with how they're acting.

So I kind of did a deep dive onto self-censorship on campus. There's an organization called FIRE that analyzes free speech specifically on college campuses. And UNCG, I believe has a ranking somewhat in the 60s, so kind of like a D to C score, which isn't great. So yeah, I feel like after we implemented CD&D here and Bridge, I've seen a lot of people become friends and start conversations that I would've never heard three years ago.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. Talk a little bit more about why you believe free speech is important on college campuses generally? Or UNCG more specifically?

Lauren Fletcher:

I feel like you cannot support the right for you to have free speech if you can't support other people having free speech. If you should be able to share your belief about this one issue, then why can't another person share their belief on that exact same issue? And if you want to try and censor someone else, then they also have the right to try and censor you.

And you don't want that. You want everyone be able to share. You want to be able to share your opinion, you want everyone to be able to speak. And I feel like there's a lack of conversation around this because here at UNCG, we are a very liberal student body. And so there's a lot of students who don't want to have Ben Shapiro come talk on campus. They don't want to have Michael Knowles talk on campus.

But then in that reverse way, Josh Stein shouldn't be able to come talk on campus, or Kamala Harris shouldn't be able to come talk on campus just because they're on different sides of the political spectrum. So if you want to be able to have your opinion heard, you have to hear the others' opinions.

And I feel like this is, I've been more exposed to at UNCG specifically because I am a full-time student here. But I do recognize this as a very large problem across college campuses. I think that generally some colleges are in cities which are more liberal, and so this is an ongoing problem.

Kayla Johnston:

So maybe this is just my perspective of it, but I remember when Ben Shapiro came, when Michael Knowles came, and then when Doug Sprei came to do the first Braver Angels debate.

Speaker 4:

Who the hell is Doug Sprei?

Kayla Johnston:

No idea who that guy is, just have his name memorized.

Lauren Fletcher:

I would say that Braver Angels debates and Bridge as well did provide an outlet for anyone who felt maybe that they were being dis-served by having different speakers on campus. I think there's a certain extent to which we're able to do that because we're not exactly a platform where people can just come and air their grievances with the different political sides.

But for a lot of different controversial issues where there are a lot of different opinions, we kind of are. Where it's kind of like a forum where people can express themselves and share their views. Not exactly a safe place, but it's a place where you can have your ideas challenged comfortably.

Kayla Johnston:

Respectfully.

Lauren Fletcher:

Respectfully. That's a good term. Where you wouldn't if you were having a protest outside, you're able to actually have an open conversation with somebody.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. I love to tell students, "If you were expecting a safe space, we are not a safe space."

Kayla Johnston:

No.

Matt Kircher:

We are a challenging space. Your ideas will be challenged. And I think that we need to have more of that. More speech countering speech. Universities are for enlightenment. That's why we're here.

Lauren Fletcher:

Yeah. One of the things that kind of stuck with me when I started researching more about freedom of speech on college campuses was I specifically came to college with an open mind. I feel like if you are set in your beliefs and your ideas, then what's the point of learning anything new?

That's the whole point that we are in higher ed, we're pursuing another level of education to learn more. So I feel like expanding your beliefs and hearing differing opinions is part of that.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. Sorry. I hate to throw some John Stuart Mill in there, but if you have the correct arguments, you can't make it better without hearing the flaws that are potentially in that. And you won't hear the flaws unless you speak to people that you disagree with or let that counter speech come through.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah, that's a great way to think about things, and I really like our work. I like what we're doing here because it directly counters all of my initial thoughts coming to the university.

Kayla Johnston:

I do also want to hear your perspectives on what you have witnessed in, whether it be classroom debates or campus debates, those people that don't often speak up at all. I was one of them.

Before I did a Braver Angels debate, I only really spoke up to answer questions that had two or three words. But I didn't have a lot of social interaction with people outside of class. And was very, very nervous and shy and unwilling to share my opinions, even if they were pretty much within the majority.

But curious as to y'all's perspective of watching your peers, maybe yourselves, kind of lighten up in these atmospheres and find that bravery to say what's really on their mind.

Lauren Fletcher:

I was kind of the opposite of you, I guess, Kayla. Matt called me up and is like, "Hey, I'm short an opening speaker. You don't have to have anything prepared. Can you just come and speak on this topic for two minutes?"

And I came in with three pages of notes ready to talk for possibly an hour. But I have nonstop worked on outreach and getting a lot more students out to our events, especially outside of the poli-sci realm. Us poli-sci students will jump at a chance to talk about politics or anything controversial. So I really wanted to extend that.

So I managed to get a lot of my English major friends out to events. And some people who I work with are very quiet. They don't really talk a lot, and they're generally very shy. So I was very pleasantly surprised when I was able to get a few of them out to some of our events.

And I saw this progression through a few debates of solely wanting to ask questions. We offered some of them the chance to get up and speak, and they're like, "No, no, I think I'm just going to stick to asking some questions right now."

Next debate, I think he got up three times and spoke. I think a few of them did, and it was really great to see. And then I also watched some of them expand beyond College Debates and Discourse out to the Braver Angel community, which was fantastic to see. And all in all I'm seeing also just a major growth in the act of practicing public speaking and becoming more confident in yourself and your ideas and your beliefs. And I think it's really great.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. That was one of the most refreshing comments that I got at one of our debate debriefs was somebody, they brought it up themselves. Usually I end up bringing it up, but they brought it up and the whole room agreed. They're like, "This is a really awesome platform to practice speaking because it takes the personal attack out of it."

And you can stand there and really speak on something that you believe in and be passionate about it. You're going to be challenged, your ideas will be challenged, but it's a wonderful place to speak. And then be able to go through that rigor of having a dialogue with someone who doesn't agree with you. Yeah.

Kayla Johnston:

Well, I was just going to say, but also in a low risk environment, because nobody's being graded in these atmospheres. In the collegiate setting, public speaking is difficult, especially when you're doing it for grade. And you're expected to come in with all the facts and statistics and academic sources backing you up.

So I appreciate this low risk environment for people to practice those skills just at a very base level. That can eventually build into those more, I guess, high risk situations, whether it be academically or in your career. That this provides outside of just a wonderful space for respectful civil discourse, but just the foundations of getting people to just speak up. Speak clearly and confidently. I think just in itself there, it's worth all that we do.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. I think the universities should be the sandbox for self-improvement, and we're doing a really good job with that.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. Lauren mentioned a couple of minutes ago, the new Braver Angels Alliance that has also sprung from the work that we've done with College Debates and Discourse Alliance at UNCG.

Matt Kircher:

Do tell. I've never heard about it.

Kayla Johnston:

Well, I was going to kick it to you, Mr. Chair. Yeah. Do you want to talk about how that came to be?



Matt Kircher:

Yeah, sure. So I think we briefly mentioned Savannah Henderson a little bit ago at the start of this.

Kayla Johnston:

Just fabulous.

Lauren Fletcher:

Love her.

Kayla Johnston:

Savannah and I, we met each other at the Braver Angels Convention. And then when we came back to campus, it was first day of the fall semester, I believe. And I rounded the corner, and there was Savannah. And I was just thinking about her, and she whips around and she goes, "Oh, there he is."

And then I walked up to her and I was like, "Hey." I was like, "So I heard you're doing this BridgeUSA thing." She goes, "Yep." She goes, "I heard you're doing this College Debates and Discourse thing." And I said, "Yeah, I am doing that."

And she goes, "Cool." And I was like, "You ready to get to work?" She's like, "Hell yeah." So we just sort of dove headfirst into it, and we really formed a partnership to help each other get off the ground because we didn't exist.

I remember that first Bridge meeting.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. It was the first-

Kayla Johnston:

It was the three of us.

Matt Kircher:

We were the only ones that showed up. And then it flourished. I mean, at the end of the semester, she was consistently getting, what, 15 or 20 students there and having wonderful discussions.

And then our debates, I think we were all pretty nervous for the first one. But the first one ended up being really successful. And it was on guns. It was on firearms. Do you remember the resolution?

Kayla Johnston:

The United States should impose stricter firearms regulations to reduce violence.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. That ended up being very successful. And then we grew from there. We just had that one event that semester, and it was everything we could do to put on that one event. And then now here we are more than a year later, and we hosted three in one semester. And we regularly partner with Bridge, and Bridge had a massive event recently where they had about 50 students in the room.

Kayla Johnston:

It's actually four debates total.

Matt Kircher:

Right, because of the classroom debate. Then I've been chairing these debates, I mean. But Savannah was pivotal in helping me get off the ground and vice versa, and we formed this wonderful working relationship that was amazing.

And then she sort of came to me one day and she was like, "Hey, there's people gathering in the community and they're trying to talk about maybe getting a Braver Angels Alliance off the ground in the community." And I said, "Oh, that's cool." And I wasn't super interested because I was doing CD&D, and I had a lot going on, et cetera, et cetera.

And she's like, "Well, come to an interest meeting." So I did. And they were starving for conservatives. And I enjoyed the group and the passion there. And then we kept talking and kept going to these interest meetings, and then eventually, both Savannah and I sort of fell into the roles of being the chairs for this alliance that would come to be.

And so we did do that. And we formed the North Carolina Triad Braver Angels Alliance. And we just held our first event about six weeks ago, and it was phenomenal. It was great. I mean, for a first event in the community with no money. We have no money, no infrastructure, very little outside support, and we pulled it all together and we're able to do it.

And then we have this really cool, invigorated crowd here at UCG that also found it interesting, and they showed up to my debate in the community. And that was great because the older demographic that is my Triad Alliance really enjoyed having the college students there, and they brought a unique and interesting perspective. And so it helped that conversation flourish.

Our hope is that we'll continue to grow in the community. And cover our nine-county region. But yeah, that's what this has done. This work thanks to Doug Sprei and the team there up at ACTA.

Kayla Johnston:

Also, our wonderful grant funder.

Matt Kircher:

Yes.

Kayla Johnston:

The [inaudible 00:24:21] Family Foundation.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. And I think the grant funders should understand that they have a much wider impact than just here on the campus. Yes, there's the amount of dollars per head that it takes to reach the student here on campus, et cetera, et cetera. But the ripple effects, especially here at this school, go regionally and they go across the state. So that's a massive impact, and that's sort of unaccounted for.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. Just stepping back and briefly highlighting all of the things that have happened since that first debate spring 2023. That was a seed that planted in my heart. I share the experience with you.

Somehow Savannah got involved. Timona Stapleton, our other first student fellow was in that debate as well. So it germinated within all of us. And we continued to follow the work.

Coming back after that summer to the fall semester, we've got College Debates and Discourse continuing to bring debates. Also bringing and building a Bridge to USA chapter from scratch and then germinating and spreading to where these kind of loose Braver Angels Alliance members would come in, I remember to this past Springs debates.

So there was an intergenerational conversation. I think social media was one of the topics. To now you have a fully functional official Braver Angels Alliance that's spreading to the larger community. And again, there's that intergenerational conversation because the college students that we've reached and touched, that seed has grown in their hearts, are going out into the community to have discourse and dialogue that's clearly impactful.

Matt Kircher:

Yeah. And I think through that intergenerational dialogue, we're sort of quelling some misnomers, or I've heard it from that older generation. They think that the younger generation's just not as involved. They don't care. A lot of, they think that we just don't care, and that's not true.

Becoming a parent with this, and that's a really beautiful thing. I don't think you can put a dollar figure on that. And these are things that are bringing our country back together. People are worried about polarization and worried about losing our democracy and being able to talk to each other and work with each other.

Kayla Johnston:

Losing our common respect for each other and just humanity. I think a lot of people fear that.

Matt Kircher:

Right. But this work gives us the hope and it's very tangible.

Kayla Johnston:

That is a theme that I hear time and time again in our debriefs after debate, is that feeling of hope that resonates every time we go to a Braver Angels Convention or we all gather together and reflect on the work that we're doing, it's hopeful.

Can you guys each tell me a little bit about specifically the student fellow experience? For those schools that we are trying to find and recruit students for, kind of make the pitch to them of A, maybe why this work is important? And why it's fulfilling to you?

Lauren Fletcher:

I think it's really validating because you are doing so much of the work, and there's so much that also goes into it. And at the end of the week, you get a look back and see how much you've really done and seeing how much of an impact you have on your community.

I mean, we're doing everything from renting rooms, contacting different professors, contacting different departments. We're getting the news out, we're organizing the events, we're hosting the events.

Kayla Johnston:

Making sure people are fed.

Lauren Fletcher:

Yeah, the food is a big incentive, y'all. But it's really validating. And it's a fantastic experience to be able to watch your community grow because of something that you've done. So that was kind of what really impacted me, I think the most. Is why I love this work so much is I'm seeing the impact it has and it's all positive.

Matt Kircher:

For me, it's that first magical experience with the Braver Angels debate in Gettysburg. That's the moment where I sort of fell in love with this platform, and I just had a strong desire to share this with other people. And so this was the opportunity to jump in and be able to share that. And I get to share that with an entire campus, and that's awesome. And it's even better for me because it totally obliterates the thoughts that I had when I first came back to college.

It makes me happy. I love coming to school because I can see the change. And when people come to me around campus and they talk about, I have these dynamic conversations randomly at random points in time with students. And they get to talk to me about the debate they went to a couple of weeks prior to or whatever, and they're very interested in the next one.

I'm like, "Well, we got a poll. Come take the poll and decide our next topic." And those things are extremely rewarding. And sharing that experience, having the ability to do that through this program, that's what makes it worth it.

Kayla Johnston:

Beautiful. Three words that characterize what it takes essentially to be a good student fellow? For the chops here.

Matt Kircher:

I mean, I think I have some unconventional styles, but I think anybody can do it. You just have to be dedicated. You have to be willing to see things through.

There are points in time where we've looked at the numbers or we've looked at what's going on and thinking, oh, we're going to have to cancel this event, things like that. And then you just have to stick to your guns and just go, "Mm-mm." And then double down on the work and you'll make it happen.

Kayla Johnston:

Okay. It's far more than three words, but that's okay.

Matt Kircher:

Okay. Oh, did you say three words? Listening [inaudible 00:29:57], sorry.

Kayla Johnston:

I'll try and stick to the three-word script. I would say loyalty. Like Matt said, you got to stick to your guns. Three words is hard.

Perseverance maybe?

Matt Kircher:

That's why I didn't do it.

Lauren Fletcher:

Perseverance, yes. Perseverance, absolutely.

Kayla Johnston:

Dare I say, organization?

Lauren Fletcher:

I mean, me and Matt are both kind of disorganized, but together-

Kayla Johnston:

Really?

Lauren Fletcher:

But together, it actually works out very, very well.

Kayla Johnston:

It does.

Lauren Fletcher:

We balance each other out. And I don't know what other word. I guess love for your community.

Kayla Johnston:

Determination?

Lauren Fletcher:

Or just desire to do more. Desire to do better.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. No, love that. So just for the last couple of minutes because I know that we're talking about this at lunch. What can be done to reach the students who are self-censoring the most?

Matt, maybe you can start speaking to this. But those more conservative students that came into the university setting with already those preconceived notions that they are these liberal bastions of indoctrination. I'm not trying to put words in your mouth, so correct me if I'm wrong. But that there is no place for your ideas and therefore you're not going to share them. How do we reach those people?

Matt Kircher:

Well, to a small degree, it is a little bit true, and conservatives do want to self-censor because they are in a big sea of blue. It's difficult for them to have these conversations and feel like they're going to be heard for what they're saying and not immediately criticized and just attacked for how they think about an issue or their perspective on it.

When they probably just want to have an intellectual conversation with somebody and they don't want to be harassed. But that's really difficult when you're a small fish in a very big sea full of very big other fish.

So there is an element of truth to that. However, with this platform, that's totally eliminated, and that's why this is so great. And I think the best way to reach conservative students that are having this hesitation, to experience it is the best way. A multimedia campaign is going to be good to show, hey, some sound bites and some video about what's going on where you can really see it.

Because without seeing it and hearing it, it's difficult to believe. I mean, how do you get relaxed when you feel like you're surrounded by enemies? And it's hard to do. And I think it's just a lot of us continuing to get our word out, finding new creative ways to show it. And then maybe changing the conversation a little bit that appeals to conservatives. I have my own ways of thinking about that.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah.

Matt Kircher:

Those kinds of things.

Kayla Johnston:

Lauren, what are your thoughts on this?

Lauren Fletcher:

I think once you get over the initial fear, I think it's better. Because it's definitely the problem of going to the first debate is going to be the scariest. You might not know what to expect because people will say like, "Oh, yeah, it's nonpartisan. You don't have to worry about anything. You can share your beliefs."

But there's always going to be a sense of underlying fear, especially because you may be so used to self-censoring in classrooms or in conversations with friends. That being told it's nonpartisan doesn't necessarily mean it actually is.

So I think getting to that initial point where you're able to actually be able to share your opinions without any majorly negative, disrespectful pushback. I mean, that in itself is a whole thing. So I think hopefully, I think what we've done recently is a few of our friends are conservatives, and I've gotten a few of them out to more debates. And I'm like, "Hey, you know that this works."

Kayla Johnston:

Spread the word.

Lauren Fletcher:

Spread the word.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah.

Lauren Fletcher:

I've told some of my friends, Bridge has a couple upcoming events. Hopefully we're going to see more ideological diversity. I would love for there to be, because my whole thing is we're claiming it's nonpartisan, and I will stand by it being nonpartisan.

Kayla Johnston:

Yeah. A lot of this sounds like it's about building trust that these spaces really are for everyone. And building trust takes a lot of work. And I think it's extremely important work, and we'll continue to do that.

But to, I guess, expect for this to be a fast thing that catches on immediately and everything is just fantastic after the first one, two, three, four, heck, even five debates is probably not the best way to look at success. But always striving to reach one more person who has closeted their true beliefs and is self-censoring. And just take those little baby steps to something bigger and grander.

Matt Kircher:

Well, and we are growing. I mean, we have grown. We have grown significantly. And we've made leaps and bounds in this arena on this campus. So that tells me that what we're doing is working. We just need to expand.

Kayla Johnston:

Matt and Lauren, I truly, truly appreciate all the great work that you have done in building this program at Greensboro. And thank you for spending some time with me this evening and for the great discussion.

Lauren Fletcher:

Thank you for having us.

Matt Kircher:

Absolutely. It's wonderful.