

Choosing Renewal over Rupture: Campus Crisis and the Practice of Courageous Citizenship

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Introduction

For decades, American higher education has navigated cycles of crisis. While institutional friction is not new, contemporary fractures are uniquely concerning due to the exacerbation of affective polarization and a precipitous decline in public trust. These crises manifest in forms ranging from self-censorship and "shout-downs" to legislative overreach and, in extreme cases, political violence. Recent events at UCLA ([Colombo, 2026](#)) and Utah Valley University ([Rogers, 2026](#)) serve as sobering reminders that the "ivory tower" is not insulated from the volatile currents of national discord.

In this era of deepening division, colleges and universities must be more than mere classrooms; they must serve as laboratories for the civic habits that keep a democracy alive. This paper advances a vision of **courageous citizenship**—a framework grounded in the active engagement of students and faculty in free speech and civil discourse. I argue that acts of courageous citizenship on campus are modern enactments of the Declaration of Independence's closing pledge—a "sacred honor" requiring recommitment precisely when the social fabric feels most frayed.

Through accounts from the College Debates and Discourse (CD&D) Alliance—an initiative of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA)—I illustrate how structured, immersive dialogue transforms ideological combat into personal and civic growth. By examining student and faculty responses to campus dialogues on geopolitical conflict and political violence, this paper provides an applied model for sustaining democracy through the cultivation of intellectual humility and constructive disagreement.

Civility, Courage, and Citizenship Needed Today

The definition of a "good citizen" has always been a moving target, shaped by the sociopolitical forces of the day (see [Schudson, 1998](#)). Today, with affective polarization reaching precarious levels, we require a renewal of what good citizenship means. Such citizenship should entail a willingness to engage with different backgrounds and viewpoints with civility and receptiveness. As Richard Haass notes in *The Bill of Obligations* ([2023](#)), civility is not about pulling punches or avoiding inconvenient truths. Rather, it is a functional necessity for reducing conflict. Civility allows dialogue to continue even when agreement is impossible, ensuring that opponents on one issue do not become enemies on all. This requires what Chantal Mouffe ([2013](#)) describes as *agonism*—a struggle between adversaries who share a common allegiance to democratic principles, rather than antagonism between enemies seeking to destroy one another.

This type of engaged citizenship is not easy. In fact, as Julia Minson ([2026](#)) submits, "engaging with opposing views in order to learn about other people, improve your mastery over your own emotions, and improve your relationships does take *courage*" (p. 204, italics added). She continues:

Strategizing how to have the dialogue in the face of these concerns [discomfort and fear] takes more courage still. So, in the end, despite all the benefits to be reaped, receptiveness is not for the faint of heart. It is for people who have enough faith in their ideas and perspectives to want to

share them but also recognize the importance of engaging with the ideas of others and considering them with an open mind. Gaining the confidence that you can have such conversations and not walk away bruised and battered takes both commitment and practice (p. 204).

Drawing on Minson's stance, the type of citizenship needed today is truly a *courageous* form of citizenship. It is animated by civility, receptiveness, and the choice to 'show up'—to enter uncomfortable spaces and embrace difficult conversations over the familiar silos of social media or the insulated "safe spaces" of like-minded peer groups.

Given their longstanding civic purposes, colleges and universities are uniquely positioned to guide students in their development as courageous citizens. Many institutions have been doing this work for years ([Longo & Shaffer, 2019](#)). Unfortunately, on campus, this practice is frequently undermined by *cancel culture*, which Greg Lukianoff and Rikki Schlott ([2023](#)) argue has created an intolerant climate that constricts the free exchange of ideas. When students self-censor out of fear, they lose the opportunity to "do each other the favor of counteracting each other's confirmation bias" ([Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018](#)). Courageous citizenship demands the courage to be wrong and the receptiveness to see the inherent dignity in the person across the aisle. The following cases from the CD&D Alliance illustrate what can happen when students and faculty choose courageous citizenship—running toward, rather than away from, uncomfortable, yet crucial dialogue.

Navigating Global Conflict at Columbia University

In the aftermath of the October 7th attacks and subsequent campus protests, Columbia University's BridgeUSA chapter partnered with the CD&D Alliance to host a Braver Campus Dialogue—a core CD&D program offering—on the Israel-Palestine conflict. The November 2024 event faced significant hurdles: security concerns, potential boycotts, and a heavy-handed administrative presence rooted in fear of "out-of-control" discourse. Despite these tensions, the dialogue provided what one student described as a "therapeutic" space where students "channeled and audibly pronounced the things that bothered us." This action of speaking up and listening to others respond helped students better process their thoughts and emotions.

Another participant noted that the "silent majority" on campus was desperate for such a space:

Most people, or a significant proportion of people on this campus, wanted to have this conversation. [My classmate] and I were having discussions with people one-on-one, and they were so immensely grateful for this opportunity to speak, for this opportunity to share their opinion, in this space where there was trust, in this space where they felt like they weren't going to get canceled or judged, in the place where they could literally schedule a coffee with someone who had a different viewpoint..... People want to have these conversations, and we need to provide the spaces for them.

Students wanted to have this conversation; they just needed a structured, neutral space and format to facilitate it. The students and faculty provided the space, the CD&D Alliance provided the format, both of which supported students in their common desire for dialogue.

By using the Braver Campus Dialogue format—where participants speak in the third person to the chair rather than at each other—the heat of the topic was separated from personal attack. Moreover, as one student observed, the structure helped participants stay on topic. When asked whether the format influenced the outcome of the dialogue, they said:

I think that absolutely was a big part of what facilitated the kind of conversation we had because people were able to, in the first part, acclimate themselves to the environment. They were able to get a sense for what the other participants were like without immediately jumping to respond, without immediately kind of formulating these answers. And I think that really set us up for to be able to just listen.

For this student, the format encouraged participants to get to know each other and be receptive to different views. The experience, guided by a trained moderator, elevated trust and good will.

Contrary to what university administration feared would happen, participants in this Braver Campus Dialogue exercised great civility and receptiveness throughout the evening. One student leader commented that the event demonstrated that the administration did not need to be excessively involved in student dialogue: “excess of hands-on involvement” in student dialogue. Rather, “they [university administrators] need to trust that their students are going to respect each other, that they're going to have these good conversations on their own, and they need to just take a step back at certain moments to let students have those conversations.” As difficult as the dialogue was, students ultimately rose to the occasion and practiced the art of courageous citizenship to great effect.

Responding to Political Violence at Utah State University

Nearly a year later, the assassination of Charlie Kirk at Utah Valley University in late 2025 sent shockwaves through the state’s higher education system, not to mention the nation. At Utah State University, rather than retreating, the Heravi Peace Institute leaned into the crisis by hosting a Braver Campus Dialogue with support from the CD&D Alliance. Participants at the USU event demonstrated bravery by directly addressing the trauma of the assassination. One student remarked that they attended specifically because they were “disturbed by the videos that we saw online” and felt a civic obligation to articulate that “Americans should learn to withstand other viewpoints and respect other viewpoints without literally shooting somebody.” This event proved that the muscles of civil discourse must be exercised proactively. As Dr. Austin Knuppe argued at the start of the event, “Conflicts transform when victims pursue reconciliation instead of resentment, especially in the face of profound pain and suffering.”

Throughout the forum, attendees provided diverse viewpoints regarding how the Utah State University community should handle provocative speakers. Guided by a moderator, the session aimed to move toward practical outcomes through a two-stage process: first, an initial reflection on the topic,

followed by an evaluation of potential solutions. The ultimate goal was for everyone to leave viewing ideological differences not as barriers, but as vital ingredients for solving critical societal and political challenges.

While the event was organized long before the tragedy at Utah Valley University, CD&D Associate Director Sadie Webb noted that the subject matter became unintentionally relevant. She commended USU's commitment to addressing the issue directly rather than avoiding it, particularly considering recent political violence. Such incidents, she said, highlight the urgent need for universities to establish environments where individuals feel empowered to express their views and learn to interact respectfully with those who hold opposing beliefs.

Students who attended the event displayed courage and resolve to be part of the solution, not the problem. "I'm also a firm believer that discourse is the only way to create solutions," one student said. They continued:

And if we're not having these kinds of conversation, then there is nothing productive that will be happening. If we're so focused on our own viewpoints and the viewpoints of the people that are most close to us, even if there are some people within that circle that disagree, we're limiting ourselves from a variety of, range of opinion, experience, social background, and I think that we're social creatures. We're supposed to talk to each other. We're supposed to figure out solutions for things together. And if we can't do that, then we can't really do anything.

With wisdom beyond their years, this student articulated what it means to be a courageous citizen. It involves showing up, talking with and listening to others, and finding solutions. The Braver Campus Dialogue helped students hone these skills for healthy conflict.

Healing a Fractured Community at Utah Valley University

By February 2026, Utah Valley University sought to heal its own campus through the Our Better Selves initiative. In collaboration with the CD&D Alliance, UVU's Center for Social Impact organized a Braver Campus Dialogue on immigration that attracted nearly 100 participants, many of whom arrived curious or even prepared to protest, expecting a performative, combative debate. Instead, the immersive dialogue format dismantled the "us vs. them" dynamic. Students, faculty, and staff who feared additional traumatization found peace and common ground in the shared rules of respect.

The event highlighted that the primary hurdle to courageous citizenship is often the initial fear of "the other" and unwanted confrontation. A few students shared that they were nervous prior to the event, knowing how hot and relevant the topic was. "I was just nervous on like the respect aspect of if students were going to be able to respect each other's opinions," one student admitted. But, they said, "it was just like really respectful, it was really good . . . people were able to share their opinions in such a way where it was like a controlled space." That sense of control, or structure, inspired and empowered students to engage openly and honestly with each other.

Echoing perspective from Columbia University students, UVU students also found the dialogue workshop to be “incredibly therapeutic.” It provided a space for participants to heal and practice a type of discourse grounded in good will and understanding. It also invited people to turn outward for support and solidarity even amid disagreement. One student reflected on the difficulty of processing recent events, noting that people often carry the weight of such experiences in silence while attempting to move on with their daily lives. They expressed that the dialogue provided a vital opportunity to reclaim the sense of free expression and internal peace that had been disrupted. Despite initial feelings of apprehension about participating, the student described the gathering as a positive and tranquil experience. Ultimately, they viewed the event as a meaningful way for those burdened by lingering emotions to find a sense of resolution and calm that was missing from previous events.

By choosing to go for it, the campus community has begun to develop an appetite for dialogue across differences and are striving to include more voices in the ongoing conversation. Together, these brave, resilient students are showing that constructive disagreement is possible even in the wake of tragedy.

Conclusion: A Blueprint for Renewal

These cases demonstrate that higher education holds an indispensable role in sustaining the civic habits that underpin democracy. Courageous citizenship is more than personal disposition; it is a practiced discipline cultivated through structured, immersive engagement. As the United States nears its 250th anniversary, the lessons from Columbia, USU, and UVU offer more than just a lens on today’s challenges; they offer a blueprint for renewal. By choosing connection over rupture and dialogue over withdrawal, the next generation of “good citizens” is proving that democracy is not merely a set of institutions, but a shared experiment kept alive by the courage to show up.

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