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# What our debate team taught us about teaching students how to disagree

We're betting on a movement of 140 college presidents to make civic learning central to campus life.



By David Einhorn and Rajiv Vinnakota



Jonathan Koppel, left, president of Montclair State University in New Jersey, is a member of College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, a coalition of 140 leaders committed to reviving higher education's public mission. Montclair State University

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## KEY POINTS

- Why two former debate partners — now a philanthropist and a nonprofit leader — believe the skills they honed as teenagers must be taught on today's college campuses.
- How a fast-growing coalition of university presidents is embedding dialogue and disagreement into campus life, from Ivy League institutions to community colleges.
- What philanthropy can do to help higher education reclaim its public mission at a moment when federal support is unreliable.

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We first met in 1986, on our high school debate team in suburban Milwaukee, thrown together as partners with barely an hour to prepare before a competitive tournament.

We didn't win, but the thrill of competing in an intellectual sport that demanded ambition, erudition, and civil discourse shaped our lives. Neither of us imagined we would find each other decades later, drawn together by a shared aspiration to help Americans build stronger relationships across differences to solve our most urgent challenges.

While we took different paths — one of us became an investor, the other a social entrepreneur — our observations led us to the same conclusion: America's social fabric is deeply frayed, and a crisis of connection threatens to erode what little social trust remains.

Higher education must be a central place where that gets addressed. Instead, academia has overemphasized personal advancement and ideological conformity at the expense of something more durable and indispensable — the

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values we first encountered in that debate room: practicing empathy, rigorously examining multiple perspectives, and building arguments that persuade rather than belittle others or oversimplify issues.

So we partnered again, this time more intentionally, to bring civic learning to where it is needed most. Einhorn Collaborative, where David is a trustee, announced a \$10 million gift to Citizens and Scholars (known as C&S), a nonprofit led by Raj that partners with colleges across the U.S. to help students become engaged citizens. The gift supports C&S's College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, a coalition of 140 leaders committed to reviving higher education's public mission.

College presidents hold enormous sway over their schools and are critical to embedding democratic principles and practices on campus. With this anchor investment, C&S aims to transform campus civic culture and reach 4.5 million students across 400 institutions over the next five years.

The goal: equip the next generation with the skills we first acquired in that debate room — listening deeply, assessing the credibility of each argument, and persuading effectively.

What we learned as teenagers wasn't simply how to argue. It was how to argue both sides. In a classic policy debate, each team must argue one position in the first round and the opposing position in the next. The only way to do that well is to interrogate a question rigorously and take seriously the strongest version of the argument you hope to defeat. You tailor your case to different judges, different frameworks, different audiences. You listen as hard as you speak. You respect the other position enough to argue for it yourself.

These skills win high school debate tournaments, but they can also be used to solve shared problems as adults. They're the fundamentals of good citizenship and a successful professional life, whether advocating for an idea in a meeting, evaluating whether to buy a stock, or building rapport with someone who thinks differently.

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# Tuning out the other side

A third of America's youth avoid listening to people with opposing viewpoints because they worry about the appearance of agreement. A society that stops teaching people how to engage in a conversation, navigate conflict, and move forward together cannot remain a democracy by chance. Civic learning skills and mindsets are an antidote to polarization. Treating them as anything less undermines the mutual interest we all share in sustaining a functioning, flourishing society.



In our last presidential election, tens of millions of Americans voted for Donald Trump, tens of millions of others voted for Kamala Harris, and tens of millions more didn't vote at all. There is ample room for healthy discourse over the ideas that divide, but actual dialogue between opposing camps has become troublingly rare. What once looked like a good-spirited argument — contentious, productive, American — now looks like zero-sum contempt. Congress once argued it out and voted,

and the country moved forward. Today, distrust and dehumanization have replaced deliberation, contributing to a climate of antipathy and a normalization of violence.

Students are being asked to inherit this landscape without the tools to navigate it. Higher education, despite recent progress, has largely failed to prepare them. Campuses are often the single most diverse environment young people will ever inhabit — places where those from genuinely different backgrounds are thrown together before life sorts them into self-selected enclaves. College should be ground zero for civic renewal.

The skills we're describing — taking another's perspective, humanizing disagreement, collaborating toward solutions — are teachable, measurable, and as essential as writing or mathematics. These skills, once developed, go beyond the classroom. Young people bring them into the workplace and into civic life.

## A coalition of leaders

University presidents know this. In August 2023, C&S convened 14 presidents who were eager to foster healthier campus cultures. That eagerness took on a greater sense of urgency when conflict over Israel and Gaza shattered campus life into two seemingly

irreconcilable worlds. Within a year, 75 presidents had joined College Presidents for Civic Preparedness, a number that has since nearly doubled to the current 140. Today, leaders across American higher education — representing flagship public universities, Ivy League institutions, historically Black colleges and universities, regional public universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges — are building dialogue, information literacy, and problem-solving into the structure of campus life.

With federal support unreliable, private philanthropy and business leadership can provide investment in the civic infrastructure a pluralist society requires — and in the human capital our economy depends on. A 20-year-old who learns these skills has a lifetime to exercise them. And that return compounds.

The challenges that feel most intractable are often, at their root, failures of exposure and practice. The connection and trust among citizens can be rebuilt. A national coalition of college presidents is ready to take on the task.

Debate team feels like a lifetime ago, but its effects continue to reverberate. The only difference between then and now is that we've had time to prepare — and this time, we plan to win.

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