2021

Tough Talks: Student-Led Programs to Facilitate Civil Discourse

Leah Horton

Doug Corbitt

Booker White

Honors in Practice 17 (2021)

Tough Talks: Student-Led Programs to Facilitate Civil Discourse

Leah Horton, Doug Corbitt, and Booker White
University of Central Arkansas

Abstract: These student-led, co-curricular programs are designed to give honors students the opportunity to learn and practice civil discourse through difficult conversations. Issues such as race, religion, politics, gender, and sexual orientation are carefully curated to help students practice and hone their dialogue skills outside the classroom where grades are not a factor. A brave spaces ideology provides the foundation for shared pools of meaning, encouraging students to move from certainty to curiosity with the shared understanding that discomfort is an opportunity for growth. By teaching students how to engage in controversy with civility, Tough Talks support an honors ethos of tolerance, diversity, and inclusion. Fast becoming the college's signature program, authors suggest that with the proper infrastructure and support, Tough Talks can be implemented at other institutions.

Keywords: dialogic learning; brave spaces; critical pedagogy; emotional competence; University of Central Arkansas (AR)—Schedler Honors College

Citation: *Honors in Practice*, 2021, Vol. 17:109–18

"Things like religion, race, politics, gender, and sexuality are considered taboo topics and are not fit for polite discussion. But we do talk about them, a lot. We just rarely do so with people who we feel disagree with us." As a senior and student mentor in the Schedler Honors College, Booker White described the need to provide a brave space for honors students to engage in authentic dialogue outside of class about taboo topics. Because of his professed love for alliteration, the programs became known as "Tough Talks" and, since their inception in 2018, have become some of the most popular programs within our honors community.

The Schedler Honors College was established in 1982 at the University of Central Arkansas. The college currently serves around 300 students, 75 per cohort selected through a holistic application process, who move through an interdisciplinary studies curriculum taught by six fulltime honors college faculty, four of whom hold tenure within the college. Mentors are typically sophomores who live on the first-year student floors within the honors residence hall and volunteer their time and talents to help incoming students transition successfully from high school to college. Early in the spring semester of their first year, interested students apply to become student mentors. The selection process includes essay questions and interviews designed to probe the students' understanding of and commitment to our values, vision, and mission. Following selection, mentors undergo extensive training, both in person and online, for the remainder of the spring semester and over the summer.

Mentor training focuses heavily on creating an inclusive community and learning how to bring new students into the community. The faculty employ a variety of methods in the training: readings and discussions related to diversity, belonging, inclusion, and equity; SafeColleges training modules; roleplaying common and not-so-common scenarios that past honors mentors have encountered; and lectures from various student services professionals around campus. These professionals are part of a program on "How to Have Difficult Conversations" that in part helps the mentors establish their own personal limitations and boundaries to help them recognize when it is time to refer students to the appropriate campus professionals, e.g., the counseling center, student health center, and honors college dean.

The mentors and their faculty coordinators devote thirty to forty hours to training prior to the start of the fall semester. Once the fall semester begins, mentors and faculty coordinators meet weekly for additional training, program debriefings, planning, and student updates. Honors mentors host a variety of academic, social, and wellness-related programming, hold office hours for students who have questions or need someone to talk to, and serve as additional touchpoints between the students and honors faculty/administration by making them aware of students who are in crisis or need assistance.

WHAT ARE TOUGH TALKS?

Tough Talks are the centerpiece of the mentoring program, a way for our honors students to practice and hone their dialogue skills outside the classroom where grades are not a factor. They are co-curricular, voluntary

programs offered within the honors residence hall and open to all honors students, but freshmen are the target audience. White writes,

> These programs were enlightening because they showcased that people can discuss issues, disagree, and most importantly listen. These programs helped me develop empathy and gave me the opportunity to not just examine what someone thinks, but why they think what they do. These Tough Talks broadened my horizons and changed my mind about certain topics or viewpoints that I would normally discount or write off. On the whole I gained a deeper understanding of the community I am part of and set an example of how we can discuss the things that matter to us without attacking or putting down each other.

White is, in part, talking about moral reflection. Sandel (2010) explains moral reflection as an iterative process dependent on making ethical claims, getting curious and asking questions, introspection, and reevaluation. However, Sandel goes on to say that moral reflection cannot happen only in isolation but must make use of interlocutors. Tough Talks have given our students opportunities to practice moral reflection within our honors community and with interlocutors who may make vastly different ethical claims. These programs are meant to be places for students to ask questions they have been pondering but felt they couldn't ask or were scared to ask, to listen to other students share their experiences and perspectives about a theme, and to contribute their own stories and experiences as the community strives to create a shared pool of understanding.

Tough Talks have been carefully designed to foster productive dialogue and not devolve into heated arguments. First, we lay a theoretical foundation based on brave space ideology (Arao and Clemens, 2013) through our values/vision/mission statements, our holistic selection process, our early programming during first-year student summer orientation, and our annual pre-semester fall retreat. Once our new cohort is selected, the mentors begin interacting with them via social media apps like Instagram and GroupMe to build a community based on the tenets of brave spaces.

Students arrive on campus having heard about the Tough Talks programs and looking forward to them. One cohort of mentors developed an acronym, POUNDING, to humorously communicate the intent and parameters of Tough Talks and to help students understand that the goal of Tough Talks is dialogue, not verbally pounding other students for expressing unpopular ideas. POUNDING has eight tenets:

P **Positions, Not People.** We do not "get inside people's heads." We refuse to assess participants' motives for holding their positions. Instead, we seek to understand the positions through thoughtful, respectful questions and challenges.

O **Open Hearts and Open Minds.** We ask each participant to be open to other ways of looking at things and to remain curious., to remember Peter Elbow (1998) and the believing game, and to remain curious. An important note is that all our honors college applicants read an abridged version of the Elbow essay as part of the application process and therefore understand his concepts of "the doubting game and the believing game."

U **Understand Limits.** We remind participants that our individual life experiences are valuable starting points for ethical, philosophical, sociological, and political reflection but that our individual life experiences are different and may justifiably lead to different perspectives and points of view.

N **No Ad Hominems.** Any personal attacks are out of bounds.

D **Don't Get Offended.** We ask participants not to take offense when others object to or reject positions they find dear.

I **Integrate New Ideas.** We ask participants to be willing to reflect on and potentially embrace new ideas. We try to guide students, through dialogue and gentle questioning, to the realization that being open to new ideas does not have to mean a wholesale renunciation of their personal values or upbringing.

N **Norb It!** Founding Director Norbert O. Schedler was famous for counseling students and alumni to "Keep the Conversation Going!" We want students to understand that the conversation itself and the relationships that sustain it are precious.

G **Go for It!** Conversations grow dry and stale if only "approved" topics and values are spoken. We encourage respectful voicing of overlooked or unpopular perspectives.

Once this foundation is set, the Tough Talks begin. The mentors typically try to schedule one Tough Talk each month, and each event has a particular theme such as religion, race, or gender. Mentors always prime the conversations with five to seven questions written on a whiteboard before the Tough Talk starts. The questions are generally submitted by the student participants,

allowing them to be involved in planning the event and to have an idea where the discussion could lead. Submission is anonymous, so students do not feel singled out for asking a question, nor are participants obliged to take up any of these questions, but the list usually makes for quick and energetic beginnings.

Examples of general questions range from "What are your views on organized religion in the United States?" to current-event questions like "How do the recent protests against racial injustice impact you? Positively or negatively?" If conversation lags or gets too far off-topic, mentors can return to the questions written on the board and steer the conversation back toward the evening's theme. A faculty member attends each Tough Talk and can provide support to the mentor facilitator but is typically a silent observer unless needed. While we want our students to be empowered to discuss difficult topics, we also recognize that these conversations can be intensely emotional and that our mentors, while mature and responsible, may need assistance from time to time.

Doug Corbitt, the faculty coordinator for the Schedler Honors College mentors, offers some practical considerations. Tough Talks take place in the honors residence hall common room and are scheduled for one hour in the evening. At the end of the hour, the leaders cheerfully invite those who have obligations elsewhere to feel free to leave and those who would like to stay to keep the conversation going. Typically, half the participants stay, and the conversation continues another hour or two, with the contributions becoming more and more personal, more and more intimate, more and more vulnerable. Laughter and tears abound, and people who profoundly disagree with each other regularly discover personal connections that transcend their differences.

The three main challenges to well-run conversations that we have observed are: (1) keeping track of the students (frequently as many as ten) who have indicated a desire to make a contribution; (2) politely keeping anyone from dominating the conversation; and (3) deciding what to do when the next-in-line student wants to change the conversation and those waiting to be called on want to respond to a point already made. Since beginning these programs in 2018, we have not had a problem with bad-faith actors attending the programs, perhaps in part because student participation in the programs is optional; the number of participants has routinely averaged between 10% and 20% of our honors student population for each program.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Having recently endured another contentious political season, we are keenly aware of the need for improved dialogue and civil discourse throughout our communities. While we might not be able to alter the nature of conversation on the national level, we can provide our honors students with the spaces—both physical and emotional—to practice engaging in difficult conversations. We want to affirm, acknowledge, and celebrate all people everywhere, and we want to live in ways that make possible a flourishing life for everyone and everything. At this point, you may be asking, "But what about the bigots or those who might share extremist positions or who might attend for the sole reason to spew hate?" Here we offer some reminders about the structure of our honors college and the voluntary, co-curricular design of the Tough Talks. Students admitted to our honors college undergo a holistic admissions process that includes an essay speaking to the values/vision/mission of the honors college as well as their own values and goals. As soon as the new cohort is selected, our mentors begin engaging with them on GroupMe to build community and model the types of behaviors and communication we expect.

This past summer during the protests following the death of George Floyd, we did have a few students express dismissive and dehumanizing opinions in the group chat. Other students responded by providing examples, evidence, and lived experiences. The conversation in the group chat devolved, and the mentors and other student leaders (peer coaches and pedagogical assistants) eventually had to put an end to the conversation despite their best efforts to keep it productive and civil. Afterward, a couple of student leaders were designated to reach out to the students in question via direct message not necessarily to change their minds but to encourage them to play Elbow's (1998) believing game, to respect other people's lived experiences, and to be open to the possibility that their absolute certainty in their positions might be preventing them from the curiosity that is required for growth. We offer this example for two reasons: (1) we do not want to give the false impression that our honors college is an enlightened utopia where no conflicts arise nor positions we find abhorrent are expressed, and (2) Tough Talks provide a productive and personable venue for difficult conversations.

Tough Talks are designed to model dialogue in which students contribute to a shared pool of meaning (Patterson et al., 2012). In order for students to be willing to risk sharing their opinions, asking questions, or revealing something

they do not understand (potentially an honors student's worst nightmare), the conditions must be in place to facilitate risk-taking. Honors colleges and programs routinely advocate intellectual risk-taking, yet our formal educational spaces may inhibit risk-taking by our students (Cognard-Black, 2019). While Tough Talks are co-curricular programs that carry no risk of grade reduction, students must still be open to vulnerability. Being vulnerable is a status risk when students fear that expressing themselves and their viewpoints, doubts, questions, and experiences will cause others to perceive them to be not as smart, cool, together, or sophisticated (Cognard-Black, 2019).

To encourage students to embrace vulnerability and take status risks in Tough Talks, we have recently been actively promoting the language of brave spaces, rather than only safe spaces, within honors. Safe spaces are important for all students, in particular those of marginalized groups such as LGTBQIA or BIPOC students and their allies (Harpalani, 2017). Examples of safe spaces include student organizations, low-sensory rooms for neurodiverse students, residential programs, and even faculty offices. Safe spaces offer students and their allies places to be themselves and to celebrate their identities without fear of confrontation and conflict.

Brave spaces ideology differs from safe spaces ideology in several key ways: foremost is the recognition that willingness to be uncomfortable is a prerequisite for growth (Arao and Clemens, 2013). If our students are going to learn to engage in authentic dialogue and have difficult conversations, they must learn to lean in to discomfort. Talking about controversial topics that challenge one's worldview is uncomfortable, but being uncomfortable is not equivalent to being unsafe. By unequivocally making this claim to students, we are letting them know that we expect them to be uncomfortable at times. Having recently left the confines of K–12 education, where anything even slightly controversial is often avoided at all costs, students can find this claim both disorienting and refreshing.

Brave spaces ideology also calls for moving from "agree to disagree" to "controversy with civility" (Arao and Clemens, 2013). Honors colleges and programs across the country are striving to move beyond diversity as representation to belonging, inclusion, and equity (Bleicher, 2020; Dotter, 2019; Walters, Cooley, and Dunbar, 2019). In fact, the spring/summer 2018 issue of *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council* was devoted to honors and social justice, and many of the pieces include the call for improving belonging, inclusion, and equity. While diversity is representation of folks of various identity groups within a larger group, it is an insufficient ideal in comparison

with inclusion, which Tienda (2013) defines as "organizational strategies and practices that promote meaningful social and academic interactions among persons and groups who differ in their experiences, their views, and their traits" (p. 467). Winters (2014) posits, "Another way to distinguish between diversity and inclusion is to define diversity as a noun describing a state and inclusion as a verb or action noun, in that *to include* requires action" (p. 206). Without a commitment to inclusion, students from marginalized groups may feel that they do not belong in our honors colleges and are more likely to leave.

Dotter (2019) offers this view of inclusion in relation to honors:

> By developing pedagogies, institutional practices, and spaces that welcome all identities and foster a culture that values differences, honors programs and colleges can model the fundamental importance of inclusion and equity. By moving in this direction, we not only better prepare our students for the multicultural and interconnected world we inhabit, but we also improve our institutions. . . . (p. 46)

In our fractured and increasingly divided world, bringing students from various backgrounds, worldviews, political affiliations, and religious traditions together in an honors college undoubtedly leads to some conflict and controversy among them. An "agree to disagree" mentality privileges majority perspectives and provides students with an "out" to avoid the discomfort of being asked to articulate their positions or have their perspectives challenged. Students from minority and marginalized groups have no such "out" because being uncomfortable is often their perpetual state of being. Controversy with civility posits that we can openly, rationally, and civilly discuss challenging topics through a shared commitment to curiosity and community, thus leading us closer to genuine inclusion and belonging.

Another important tenet of difficult conversations and brave spaces is that individual motives are invisible (Patterson, 2012). When emotions run high, our tendency is to assign motive to another person's words or actions. Assumption of motive contributes to miscommunication, so we encourage our students to be generous in their assumptions and to move from certainty to curiosity (Brown, 2015). We ask our students to recognize that no two honors students have the same lived experience, that lived experiences influence our values, and that our values shape our perspectives on social justice and current events. If we can convince students of these ideas, we can then help them understand that when someone shares an opinion that seems to invalidate or offend them, the speaker is likely not trying to hurt their feelings

and is most likely not an idiot. The next step then is curiosity. When we can observe students moving away from assigning motive and being certain that their view of the world is correct, and when we can observe them instead moving toward curiosity, we make progress toward civil discourse and a willingness to risk being uncomfortable.

We believe that the beauty of Tough Talks is that they are transferable to virtually any honors college or program that has a commitment to effective communication, social and personal responsibility, and civil discourse. Pre-COVID, the only expense of the programs was a few snacks, the other resources being time and a gathering space large enough to accommodate forty to sixty students. This year, we have limited the number of attendees in order to maintain social distancing but have offered two sessions for each topic.

Depending on the admissions criteria for an honors college, the structure of its curriculum, and the nature of its community, barriers may exist on a campus that we have not experienced. However, by laying the appropriate theoretical foundation and establishing appropriate parameters for any specific situation, Tough Talks have the potential to give honors students a needed avenue to engage with ideas that are meaningful and important to them. As honors educators we want our students to think critically, listen actively, and recognize the dignity and worth of each individual in our communities. Tough Talks are opportunities for students to practice these skills in the relatively low-stakes and supportive environment of honors.

REFERENCES

Arao, B., and Clemens, K. (2013). From safe spaces to brave spaces. In L. M. Landreman (Ed.), *The Art of Effective Facilitation: Reflections from Social Justice Educators*, (pp. 135–50). Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Bleicher, E. (2020). Teaching critical university studies: A first-year seminar to cultivate intentional learners. *Honors in Practice*, *16*, 93–126.

Brown, B. (2015). *Rising Strong*. Spiegel & Grau, an imprint of Random House.

Cognard-Black, A. J. (2019). Risky honors. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, *20*(2), 3–8.

Dotter, A. (2019). With great privilege comes great responsibility. *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council*, *20*(1), 45–49.

Elbow, P. (1998). The doubting game and the believing game—an analysis of the intellectual enterprise. *Writing without Teachers* (pp. 147–92). Oxford University Press.

Harpalani, V. (2017). 'Safe Spaces' and the educational benefits of diversity. *Duke Journal of Constitutional Law & Public Policy, 13*(1), 117–66.

Patterson, K., Grenny, J., McMillan, R., and Switzler, A. (2012). *Crucial Conversations: Tools for Talking When Stakes Are High* (2nd ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.

Sandel, M. J. (2010). *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* Macmillan.

Tienda, M. (2013). Diversity ≠ inclusion: Promoting integration in higher education. *Educational Researcher, 42*(9), 467–75.

Walters, G. E., Cooley, A. J., and Dunbar, Q. (2019). Opening doors to engage a more diverse population in honors: A conversation. *Honors in Practice, 15*, 55–64.

Winters, M. F. (2014). From diversity to inclusion: An inclusion equation. In B. M. Ferdman and B. R. Deane (Eds.), *Diversity at Work: The Practice of Inclusion* (pp. 205–28). John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

The authors may be contacted at

lhorton@uca.edu.