

Where the Heroes are the Bridge Builders

A PRACTITIONER'S HANDBOOK FOR INSPIRING PLURALISM ON CAMPUS

*How higher education can transform its culture, recapture
its purpose, and serve the next generation of leaders*

By Simon Greer
Founder of Bridging the Gap and
Host of Courageous Conversations at TNP

the **tnp** institute



the mission is pluralism. the method is dialogue.

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PREFACE

The TNP Institute was launched in June of 2025 with the mission of promoting Pluralism through Dialogue. For 15 years, as The Nantucket Project, we have worked in the pursuit of what we call ‘hard pluralism’—an approach that tackles the deepest divides and the toughest cases. We do this because our experience demonstrates that these projects bring the boldest and most profound outcomes.

These experiences also offer powerful learnings and the development of tools and methodologies that offer efficiency and effectiveness in creating a culture where the heroes are the bridge builders. As a leader of bridge-building efforts in many social sectors, Simon Greer pioneered the “Bridging the Gap” model which is now taught and promoted across the country through the efforts of Interfaith America.

What follows from Simon is not an abstract blueprint but a distillation of best practices forged in the heat of tense, high stakes dialogue. These lessons are born from ground-level engagement—hours spent in the fire, navigating clashing worldviews and deep disagreements. This is not theory dressed up as practice; it is practice proven under pressure, tested and refined in some of the most divided environments imaginable. The pages ahead deliver strategies that work—practical guidance for the countless faculty, administrators, and student leaders determined to transform the culture of colleges and universities across the country.

Fear is the common element on college campuses. This fear, in turn, inhibits learning and lays waste to dialogue. At the same time, the centrality of dialogue to the mission of higher education can’t be overstated. When dialogue falters, the result, in part, is that our workplaces suffer from the corrosive effect of incivility, while our political and media cultures suffer from toxic polarization. For this reason, the pursuit of pluralism and the practice of dialogue must become foundational for higher education if it is to meet the moment.

Tom Scott
Founder, TNP Institute
Co-Founder, Nantucket Nectars



INTRODUCTION

Polarization and division are not limited to the political arena—they increasingly permeate many aspects of our broader culture. College campuses, as microcosms of society, are not immune. Students, faculty, and administrators often navigate a climate marked by intense social pressure, ideological conformity, and fear of missteps. The rise of “cancel culture,” moral grandstanding, and performative discourse can discourage genuine inquiry and open debate. In some cases, this has created a chilling effect, where individuals with differing perspectives are silenced or excluded rather than engaged.

At the same time, a powerful and promising shift is underway. Across higher education, we are seeing the emergence of a new kind of leadership—students, faculty, and administrators who are committed to fostering connection across difference. These leaders remain grounded in their own convictions while extending respect and curiosity toward those with opposing views. They recognize that addressing today’s complex challenges—whether social, scientific, or civic—requires more than consensus; it requires engagement across lines of disagreement, a willingness to listen deeply, and the courage to humanize those we may be tempted to otherize.

To support this cultural transformation, colleges and universities are beginning to experiment with new models and methods. From classroom pedagogy to residential life programs, from student leadership initiatives to faculty development efforts, institutions are discovering ways to nurture critical thinking, intellectual humility, and the pursuit of truth through dialogue.

This work is still emerging—but it is essential. The following 17 approaches reflect a growing movement within higher education to create campus cultures that prize inquiry over ideology and learning over labeling. One thoughtful student, one innovative professor, or one visionary president can

spark meaningful change. But lasting transformation requires a coordinated, campus-wide commitment that reaches students at multiple stages of their journey.

Our belief (guided by research and personal experience) is that if a campus community wants to move toward a more pro-pluralism culture, then there must be a diverse set of interventions that show up in varied aspects of campus life. This journey across many campuses offers a range of models, experiments and practices that can inspire, ignite imagination, and paint a picture of what is possible.

By pairing innovation with consistency, and courage with compassion, colleges and universities can use the strategies below to equip the next generation with both the skill and the will to navigate difference—and to lead with integrity in a divided world.

I. SETTING THE TABLE

1. Admission Application Questions

Among many families, high school counselors, and independent school communities, a clear message has taken hold: to gain admission to top colleges and universities, students must demonstrate alignment with a social cause. Academic achievement and a strong portfolio of extracurriculars are no longer perceived as sufficient—students now feel pressure to be activists, to champion a cause, and to articulate a compelling narrative of leadership in the realm of social change.



While it is laudable to encourage civic participation and engagement, this trend can also reinforce a troubling dynamic. In their desire to stand out, students may feel incentivized to adopt more strident postures, to portray ideological certainty, and to identify more deeply with the “rightness” of their positions rather than cultivate curiosity or openness. The admissions process—intentionally or not—can send a powerful signal about what colleges value, and young people are listening closely.

What if, instead, we used admissions to encourage a different kind of leadership—one rooted in intellectual humility, dialogue, and bridge-building? Imagine an essay prompt that asks students to reflect on a time they engaged meaningfully with someone they deeply disagreed with. What did they learn from that experience? How did they listen, respond, and grow?

Harvard College, for example, has added a new question to its undergraduate application for the Class of 2029: “Describe a time when you disagreed with someone. How did you communicate or engage with this person? What did you learn from this experience?” This subtle shift sends a strong signal to applicants—and their families—about the kind of student Harvard seeks to admit.

While some may view such prompts as just another performative act, they

have the potential to help reorient the broader admissions culture. Such questions signal an institutional commitment to the value of open-mindedness, empathy, and the ability to engage across difference—qualities that are essential to sustaining vibrant academic communities and a healthy democracy.

2. Cultural Nudges to Normalize Dialogue

Beyond admissions, colleges and universities can shape campus culture through deliberate and visible behavioral nudges. These need not be large-scale reforms to have meaningful impact. Examples include:

- Launching a social media or poster campaign that showcases the range of student views on current debates.
- Posting “Tell me more” signs in classrooms to model and encourage curiosity.
- Spotlighting student reflections on moments when they changed their minds or gained deeper understanding on a contentious topic.
- Publicizing positive data—for example, the percentage of students who reject public shaming even when they disagree with a peer.

These micro-interventions can help normalize a culture where disagreement is met with inquiry, and where courageous conversations are part of the everyday student experience.

3. Embedding Skills in First-Year Orientation

The first week on campus is a powerful culture-shaping moment when norms are established, expectations are set, and habits begin to form. Leading institutions like [Princeton](#) and [Belmont University](#) are already using this window to introduce students to the skills of dialogue and civil discourse.

A robust first-year orientation program should offer practical training in listening, storytelling, navigating disagreement, and giving and receiving feedback. Dedicating even a few hours to these skillsets can lay a foundation that supports a more thoughtful, inclusive, and resilient academic community.

Equipping students early with the tools for navigating complex conversations doesn't just benefit campus culture—it also prepares them for leadership in a pluralistic society. As stewards of higher education, college and university leaders have an opportunity—and a responsibility—to send the message that dialogue, not dogma, is a marker of intellectual and moral strength.



II. BUILDING THE PRACTICE

1. Ongoing Skills-Building Through Retreats

While orientation lays an important foundation, the interpersonal and dialogue skills introduced at the start of a student's academic journey must be reinforced throughout their time on campus. One effective model is the semester-opening retreat.

At smaller institutions, these can be department-wide gatherings—bringing together students in political science, philosophy, mathematics, and other fields for a day of reflection, skill practice, and community-building. These retreats strengthen departmental culture while reinforcing norms of open inquiry and intellectual humility.

As an example, last winter, the [University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill's School of Civic Life and Leadership](#) hosted a full-day retreat for students focused on civil discourse and bridge-building.

2. Core Courses, Seminars, and Academic Pathways

Campuses that offer structured opportunities for dialogue and debate within the academic curriculum send a strong message about institutional values. Models include:

- **Core requirements** that integrate philosophical, ethical, and civic reasoning (e.g., Colgate University's "[Conversations](#)" course or [Spring Arbor University](#)'s 100–300-level civil discourse classes).
- **Topical intensive seminars**, such as UNC's "[Courageous Conversations: Israel and Palestine on Campus](#)."
- **Debate-infused curriculum** across disciplines, like those at the [University of Denver](#) and [University of Utah](#), where students are trained to argue multiple sides of complex issues.

- **Majors, minors, or certificates** in civil discourse, dialogue, or bridge-building.

These approaches ensure that all students encounter this work—and some will be inspired to pursue it in depth.



Students at a skills-building retreat at UNC-Chapel Hill in 2025



Courageous Conversations: Israel and Palestine on Campus, at UNC-Chapel Hill (photo: Jon Gardiner/[UNC-Chapel Hill](#))

3. Faculty Development and Practice

Faculty are central to modeling and sustaining a culture of dialogue. Institutions can support faculty engagement in several ways:

- **Professional development days** with skills-based training in storytelling, dialogue facilitation, or civil discourse.
- **Faculty learning communities or seminars**, such as the one at UNC-Chapel Hill led by John Rose, Simon Greer, and Abdullah Antepli, which help faculty integrate civil discourse into their teaching.
- **Regular forums for constructive disagreement**, such as peer dialogues or cross-disciplinary lunches (e.g., Biola University).
- **Support for curriculum innovation** from deans and provosts, including course development grants, course releases, or summer stipends.
- **Affiliation with national networks** such as Heterodox Academy or the Constructive Dialogue Institute.

2025 Faculty Training Seminar at UNC-Chapel Hill, led by Dr. John Rose, Simon Greer, and Imam Abdullah Antepli (photo: John Rose)



4. Off-the-Shelf Tools and Programs

Institutions don't need to start from scratch. A growing number of high-quality, low-lift tools are available for faculty, student leaders, and staff:

- The [Constructive Dialogue Institute's Perspectives Program](#)
- [Bridging the Gap](#) models available via Interfaith America
- [Sway](#) and [Unify America](#) dialogue tools
- [The Nantucket Project's Courageous Conversations](#), which is developing curriculum, lesson plans, and summer intensives for faculty and students—focused initially on navigating campus conflict related to Israel and Palestine

These resources can be integrated into existing courses, residence life programming, or faculty seminars.

5. Leadership Messaging and Campus-Wide Programming

College and university leaders play a vital symbolic and strategic role in advancing a culture of civil discourse:

- Use key moments—Convocation, Commencement, State of the Campus addresses, faculty meetings, and press interviews—to articulate a clear vision and expectation for civic engagement across difference.
- Launch a **Presidential Lecture Series** or campus-wide initiatives that showcase speakers and dialogues across ideological lines.
- Ensure **adequate funding and staffing** to support these initiatives long-term.
- Join symposiums such as the [Institute for Citizens & Scholars' College Presidents for Civic Preparedness](#) committed to pursuing these efforts.
- Speak candidly about the importance of discomfort, complexity, and openness as hallmarks of a rigorous academic environment.

Leadership visibility on this issue legitimizes it—and gives campus communities permission to engage courageously.





Spring Arbor University's President Dr. Brent Ellis, Kevin Brown, Simon Greer, Saad Soliman, and more (photo: Spring Arbor University)

6. Residence Life and Student Leadership Integration

The residential experience offers a powerful and underutilized opportunity to reinforce these values outside the classroom:

- Train all **Resident Advisors (RAs)** in civil discourse, dialogue facilitation, and basic conflict navigation.
- Include regular programming that fosters viewpoint diversity—through facilitated conversations, workshops, or casual “conversation corners.”
- Incorporate media-based programming such as short film nights followed by guided discussions. Focus on themes like curiosity, forgiveness, humility, and respectful disagreement.
- Embedding these practices in residence life helps normalize them across the full spectrum of student life.



III. STUDENT CENTERED

While institutional policies and faculty initiatives are critical in shaping a culture of dialogue, students must also be empowered to take ownership of this work. When student leaders are equipped with the skills and support to foster civil discourse and bridge-building, they not only enrich their own leadership journeys—they also help embed these values into the fabric of campus life.

1. Student-Led Club

Students learn most deeply when they apply skills in real-world contexts—and student organizations provide a vital proving ground. Whether founding campus chapters of national networks like [BridgeUSA](#) or launching initiatives that reflect their institution's unique culture, student-led efforts play a powerful role in promoting viewpoint diversity.

- At [Spring Arbor University](#), students launched a discussion group called Fight Club, offering a structured space to explore disagreement with respect and curiosity.
- At [Colgate University](#), a growing student-led initiative, the [Heretics Club](#), is helping peers develop the capacity for courageous conversations.

These examples demonstrate how, with encouragement and minimal support, students can build communities that model open inquiry and meaningful engagement across difference.



Simon Greer speaking at the Heretics Club lunch at Colgate University

2. Civil Discourse Training for Student Leaders

Student government officers, club presidents, peer counselors, team captains, resident assistants, and orientation leaders all shape the tone and norms of campus culture. These roles offer ideal opportunities to integrate civil discourse training and bridge-building skill development.

- Investing in this training signals that viewpoint diversity and collaboration across lines of difference are core components of leadership, not peripheral concerns.
- The skills cultivated—active listening, conflict navigation, public reasoning—translate not only to campus life, but to future workplaces, research environments, and civic engagement.

Importantly, this work extends beyond politics. Whether students are leading a lab team, coaching intramural sports, or facilitating peer support groups, the ability to navigate disagreement constructively is foundational to success in any field.

3. Athletics as a Cultural Lever for Dialogue

Collegiate athletics presents a high-impact arena for advancing this work. Athletic teams operate in high-stakes, high-pressure environments that demand unity amid diversity. Programs at institutions like Dartmouth and Notre Dame are beginning to integrate civil discourse training directly into athletic life.

- Notre Dame's Director of Athletics, Pete Bevacqua, frames this work as central to student formation: "Part of being on a university campus is being able to engage in civil discourse and share your thoughts in an open way—without fear of retribution or being vilified."
- Coach Jerton Evans, at the University of the Cumberland, emphasizes the practical urgency: "Athletes must learn to communicate across lines of difference—and do it quickly."

Athletes often hold significant influence on campus. When they model open dialogue and mutual respect, they help shift cultural norms far beyond their teams.



4. Bridge-Building Within Religious and Interfaith Student Life

Faith-based student communities are also emerging as powerful spaces for dialogue and collaboration across difference.

- At the **University at Buffalo**, the Intercultural and Diversity Center's Bridge Builders peer leadership program trains students from multiple religious backgrounds in empathy, collaboration, and innovation.
- At Vanderbilt University, a multifaith student cohort meets regularly for sustained dialogue across religious and worldview differences.
- **Campus Hillels** at institutions such as the University of Georgia, Drexel, and Northeastern have become hubs for bridge-building, hosting programs that engage Jewish students and their peers in civil discourse and cross-communal learning.

These programs demonstrate how **religious identity and civic pluralism can reinforce one another**—and offer a replicable model for other affinity-based student communities.



IV. GOING FURTHER

As campuses face increased polarization and cultural division, educators have a unique opportunity to shape the next generation's ability to engage across difference. Through curriculum, mentorship, campus leadership, and public scholarship, faculty and academic staff can embed the principles of civil discourse and viewpoint diversity into the intellectual and social life of the university.

Below are four promising approaches for educators who want to deepen this work within their institutions:

1. In-House Institutes: Institutionalizing the Work

From [Davidson College](#) to [Providence College](#) to [Biola University](#), a growing number of institutions are creating dedicated centers and institutes to serve as anchors for dialogue and bridge-building efforts. Faculty can be involved as fellows, collaborators, facilitators, or advisors—helping to shape programming, co-teach seminars, or develop scholarship tied to the institute's goals.

These centers allow educators to contribute to a broader cultural shift while aligning with their own research, teaching, and service.

For example, [Biola's Winsome Conviction Project](#) provides a rich model—engaging faculty in research and public conversation, producing podcasts and resources, and piloting campus-wide programs.

These efforts succeed not because they are imposed from the outside, but because they are rooted in the institution's mission, values, and intellectual culture.



Keynote discussion featuring Saad Soliman, Simon Greer, and Tim Muehlhoff (founder of the Winsome Conviction Project) at the Torrey Conference at Biola (photo: Biola)

2. Campus-to-Campus Partnerships: Expanding Student and Faculty Horizons

The original Bridging the Gap model paired two ideologically and culturally distinct colleges—Oberlin College and Spring Arbor University—in a J-term collaborative program. Leadership from both schools were committed to the effort, helping students learn and practice bridge-building by:

- Spending time on each other's campuses,
- Engaging in structured dialogue,
- Tackling polarizing topics (e.g., criminal justice reform) together, and
- Developing real relationships across lines of ideological, religious, or cultural difference.

Educators can replicate or adapt this model to develop inter-institutional courses, coordinate exchange programs, or build collaborative dialogue experiences, as have also been done at Pomona College, Biola, and Brigham Young University. These intensive partnerships yield deep learning outcomes and long-term impact—for students and faculty alike.

3. Employment-Linked Badges and Certificates: Connecting to Career Readiness

Faculty and academic units can play a vital role in designing micro-credentials, certificate programs, or for-credit courses that explicitly link dialogue and civil discourse skills to students' professional trajectories.

- Campuses can invite **employers to participate**, send their teams for certification, or partner on co-branded executive education programs.

- For students, **bridge-building badges or certificates** offer tangible ways to demonstrate communication, collaboration, and leadership skills to future employers—key competencies in today’s workforce.
- Educators involved in designing these programs help shape **high-impact, interdisciplinary learning experiences** that reflect real-world needs and elevate the relevance of their disciplines.



This approach strengthens partnerships with industry while reinforcing the value of a liberal arts education in civic and professional life.

4. Alumni Programming as a Demonstration Platform

Alumni programming provides a powerful channel to sustain and showcase the campus’s commitment to dialogue and viewpoint diversity. Faculty can partner with advancement, alumni relations, or communications offices to:

- Design **interactive alumni workshops or civil discourse trainings**,
- Invite alumni **into the classroom** to participate in live dialogue sessions,
- Host **annual bridge-building events** tied to campus traditions,
- Convene alumni-facing conversations about the role of higher education in building a pluralistic society.

Engaging alumni not only builds goodwill and support, but also extends the educational mission beyond the student years—and reinforces that civil discourse is a lifelong practice.

CONCLUSION

Engaging across lines of difference—whether in opinion, lived experience, or worldview—is not peripheral to the academic enterprise; it is central. It sharpens critical thinking, deepens inquiry, and advances the pursuit of truth. For educators, creating space for such engagement is not a political act—it is a pedagogical imperative.

It is essential that we present this work as *nonpartisan and broadly applicable*. It should not be mischaracterized—by voices on the Left or the Right—as a veiled effort to smuggle ideology into the classroom. Instead, this work affirms a core academic principle: that education at its best challenges assumptions, invites discomfort, and cultivates the habits of mind necessary for engaging complexity.

At the same time, we must recognize that building a campus culture of viewpoint diversity and pluralism cannot be imposed from the outside or tacked on as an initiative of the moment. It must emerge authentically—from the institution’s history, mission, and values.

At **Oberlin College**, this work is animated by their commitment “to prepare graduates with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives essential to confront complex issues and to create change and value in the world.” At **Spring Arbor University**, it grows from their commitment to foster “a community of learners distinguished by our lifelong involvement in the study and application of the liberal arts, total commitment to Jesus Christ as the perspective for learning, and critical participation in the contemporary world.”

Every campus must find its own entry point—drawing from its unique ethos and academic identity. But the common goal is clear: to foster a culture where difference is not feared, but engaged with humility, respect, and intellectual rigor. This piece is offered in that same spirit: to invite campus leaders to consider the breadth of possibilities before them. Whether few or

many of these practices are already in motion, our hope is to broaden the horizon of what might be pursued.

In a national climate marked by polarization and distrust, higher education has a powerful opportunity—and responsibility—to lead. By equipping students with the skills to listen, collaborate, and solve problems across ideological lines, we help rebuild not just campus culture, but civic trust. We remind our students—and ourselves—that we share a nation, not a battlefield, with those who see the world differently.

If colleges and universities can take up this work with sincerity, courage, and institutional integrity, we can fulfill our highest mission: to serve the common good through education that forms both intellect and character.

By Simon Greer, Founder of Bridging the Gap, Host of The Nantucket Project's Courageous Conversations, and Lead Entrepreneur at The Nantucket Institute's Hard Pluralism Lab.

PROGRESS TABLE

We hope this road map offers you inspiration and highlights a range of possibilities for transforming campus culture to one where the heroes are the bridge builders. The following table is designed as a practical tool for self-assessment and planning to help identify strengths, uncover gaps, and chart actionable steps toward implementing these models.

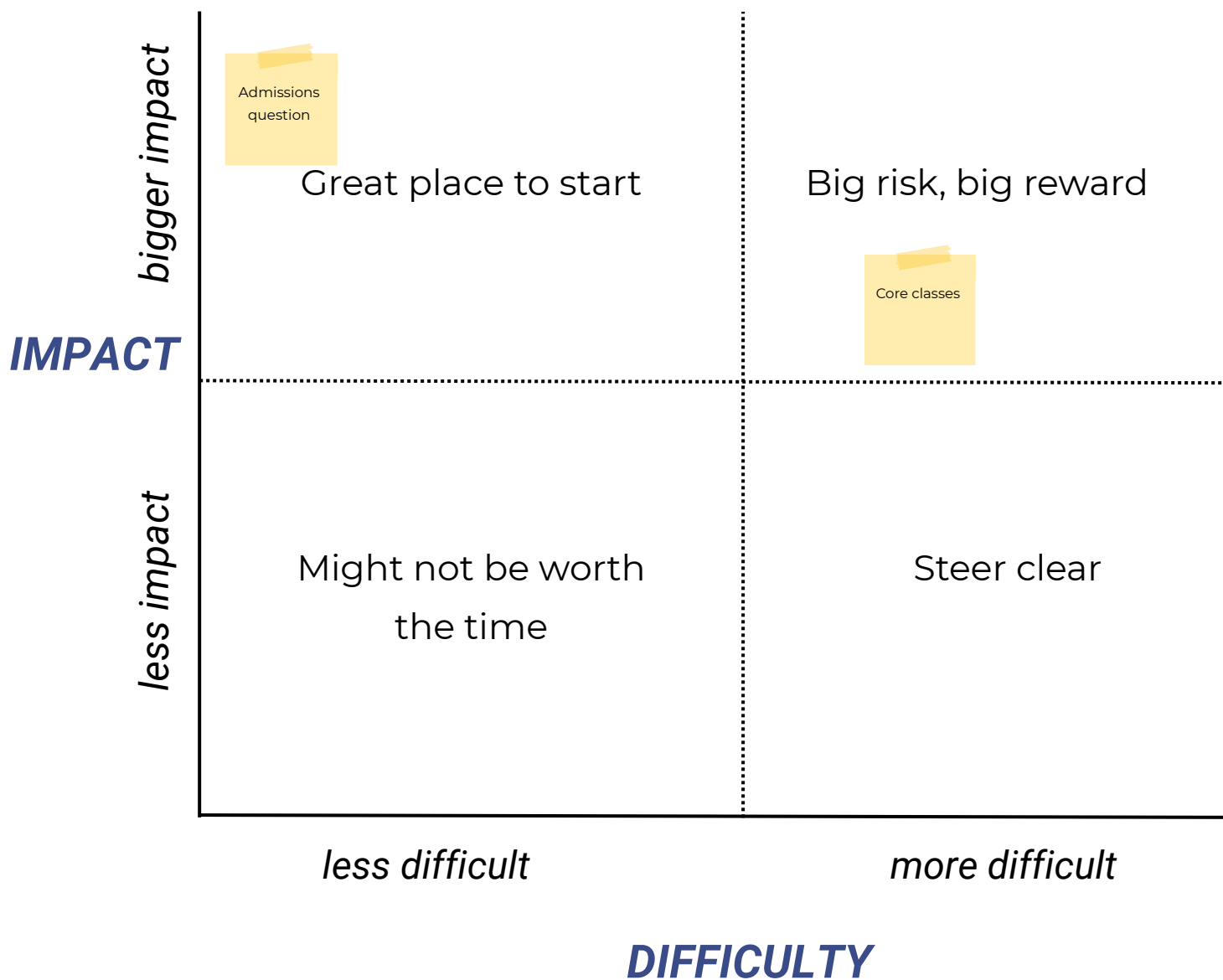
	Have you tried this? How did it go?	How might this “fit” in your campus culture and structure?	What would stand in your way?	What else would you need to be successful?	To what extent would you prioritize it (1 = not so valuable to 10 = we must do this)?
Admissions Question					
Cultural Nudges					
First-Year Orientation					
Regular Skills-Building Retreat					
Core Classes, Intensive Seminars, Course of Study					
Faculty Development and Practice					

	Have you tried this? How did It go?	How might this “fit” In your campus culture and structure?	What would stand In your way?	What else would you need to be successful?	To what extent would you prioritize it (1 = not so valuable to 10 = we must do this)?
Off-the-Shelf Tools and Programs					
Leadership Messaging and Campus-Wide Programming					
Residence Life and Student Leadership Integration					
Student-Led Clubs and Grassroots Initiatives					
Training for Student Leaders					

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Athletics as a Cultural Lever for Dialogue					
Bridge-Building Within Religious and Interfaith Student Life					
In-House Institutes					
Campus-to-Campus Partnerships					
Employment-Oriented Badge/ Certification					
Alumni Programming-Demonstration Project					

Setting Priorities: Impact vs. Difficulty Scale

Use this scale to plot each activity you are considering undertaking to assess the potential risk and reward of moving forward with any of the options we have covered. The post-its below are presented as examples of how you might use this assessment and panning tool and will differ for each campus community.



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