

Where Heroes Are the Bridge Builders

By Simon Greer and Michael Murray

The recent assassination of Charlie Kirk was a jarring reminder of just how far polarization and demonization have metastasized in American life. Mr. Kirk himself understood the risks: he took the stage on a college campus wearing a bulletproof vest, flanked by security. While the shooting and its aftermath are shocking, they are not anomalous. Rather, they are the latest—and most gruesome—manifestation of a culture where Americans have stopped engaging meaningfully with those who think differently. That toxic culture has even become an industry, thriving on outrage, hostility, and the refusal to see opponents as fully human.

While this climate has been building for years, higher education has recently become one of its most visible flashpoints. Campuses across the country have been roiled by escalating unrest: encampments, police interventions, and a breakdown of constructive dialogue. Heightened polarization, fierce loyalty to social causes, and relentless pressure to align with a binary narrative of villains and victims have produced new levels of dysfunction. Faculty members sometimes fuel the fire, while administrators scramble to respond. The result is a campus culture where violent rhetoric and dehumanizing language feel commonplace—and, in the most extreme cases, spill into deadly violence.

Such problems are not confined to universities. As a growing cohort of socially conscious Gen Z employees enters the workforce, these same conflicts are spilling into companies and nonprofits. [A recent Society for Human Resource Management \(SHRM\) survey](#) found that 66 percent of employees experience workplace incivility at least once a month, and more than half say the behavior harms their mental health. One in three attribute conflicts to generational divides. The economic toll is staggering: SHRM estimates that workplace incivility drains [\\$2.1 billion in productivity every day](#).

The message for all of us is more clear than ever: We need to step out of this cycle of escalating polarization and hate. But, how? For colleges and universities the call is clear: we need students to form dramatically different civic habits during their college years if they are going to pull us in a new direction not only in workplaces, but also in communities and civic life. The question is whether campuses can help graduates become bridge builders who thrive in dialogue across difference—improving both their educational experience and their future workplaces. And, can it be done quickly and thoroughly enough to break the cycle of disruption, destruction and violence?

A New Resource for Campuses in Crisis

Campuses once imagined as laboratories of free inquiry are now often marked by ideological rigidity, performative activism, moral grandstanding and even violence. Students describe a climate of fear and conformity where the cost of saying the “wrong”

thing can be ostracism and disagreement is treated as betrayal. The potential costs of free speech and even harsh arguments across difference has just gone up again. This climate undermines higher education's most basic mission: cultivating inquiry, humility, and preparation for leadership in a diverse society.

The same culture has migrated into professional life. Symbolic, disruptive protests in a corporate headquarters or individuals unwilling to work with people "from the other side" mirror what has become common on campus. These behaviors corrode teamwork and productivity in sectors from health care to technology.

It is a difficult moment to talk about hope. But across the country, educators are experimenting with new approaches to pluralism—teaching students how to hold convictions firmly while engaging others respectfully.

One promising initiative comes from [The Nantucket Project \(TNP\)](#), a think-and-do-tank founded by entrepreneurs and business leaders. Its new [Practitioner's Handbook for Inspiring Pluralism on Campus](#) offers practical tools for fostering dialogue and bridge building. The handbook's vision is bold but pragmatic: a campus culture where the heroes are not the loudest voices but the bridge builders. Students formed in such a culture will carry those skills into workplaces, where constructive disagreement generates value instead of division.

As TNP Institute founder Tom Scott writes in the preface:

"Fear is the common element on college campuses. This fear, in turn, inhibits learning and lays waste to dialogue. 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."

Built on Practice, Not Theory

The handbook is not an ivory-tower manifesto. It emerges from more than a decade of work in "hard pluralism"—hundreds of convenings, retreats and classrooms where students, faculty, civic leaders, and employers have confronted deep, often painful disagreements. From this practice has grown a toolkit that any campus can adapt to shift its culture and prepare graduates for the workplaces of the future.

One lesson is clear: one-shot interventions do not yield durable change. Guest speakers, one-off civil discourse workshops and annual "days of dialogue" are insufficient. Culture change requires a year-round, all-of-the-above strategy—touching admissions and orientation, residence life and athletics, the classroom and the boardroom. Only when bridge-building practices appear consistently across these

spaces do they become woven into daily life. Students then learn that dialogue is not extracurricular but central to who they are as a community.

A Practical Roadmap

The handbook's 17 recommendations fall into four arcs:

1. **Setting the Table.** Admissions essays, orientation programs and campus-wide nudges set expectations early. [Harvard's recent admissions essay](#)—asking applicants to describe a time they engaged someone they disagreed with—signals that intellectual humility and curiosity matter. Posters, storytelling campaigns and first-year workshops reinforce the message. Without such orientation, how will students succeed at places like McKinsey & Co., where the [“obligation to dissent”](#) requires every team member, regardless of seniority, to speak up when they believe a decision is misguided?
2. **Building the Practice.** Skills must be taught and reinforced throughout the curriculum. Retreats, seminars, faculty development and dialogue tools (such as those from the [Constructive Dialogue Institute](#)) help students practice. Leadership messaging—from convocation speeches to presidential addresses—signals legitimacy. Residence life activities provide daily reinforcement. The will to cross lines of difference matters, but even more important is the skill to do so effectively. Listening, perspective-taking and giving constructive feedback are dialogue practices that, once habitual, can reshape workplace culture.
3. **Student-Centered Approaches.** Students must lead. Clubs like [BridgeUSA](#) or Colgate's [“Heretics Club”](#) model peer-to-peer dialogue. Organizations like [The Viewpoints Project](#) train student government leaders, athletes, resident assistants, editors of campus news outlets, fraternity and sorority heads, to model and normalize bridge-building practices. [Religious and interfaith initiatives](#) can provide similar leadership. In workplaces, corporate culture is shaped less by top-down directives than by frontline leaders and middle managers. Likewise, when student leaders model pluralism and constructive disagreement, they set the tone for the campus.
4. **Going Further.** Institutions can sustain this work through on-campus institutes, cross-campus partnerships, career-linked credentials and alumni programming. Employers are seeking graduates with these skills, and some—such as Henry Ford Health in Michigan—have begun sponsoring [management retreats](#) to cultivate them. When colleges and employers invest together, they transform today's deficit in civil discourse into tomorrow's business advantage.

Together, these steps illustrate a powerful principle: pluralism must be normalized and institutionalized. Small nudges establish norms, sustained programs reinforce skills and institutional commitments make the work durable.

From Polarization to Purpose

Engaging across differences is not a partisan project; it is a pedagogical imperative—in fact it is a national imperative. It sharpens critical thinking, deepens inquiry and strengthens the pursuit of truth. But pluralism must grow authentically from each institution's mission. [Oberlin College](#), with its tradition of civic engagement, and [Spring Arbor University](#), with its Christian mission, can both practice pluralism—but in ways that reflect their identities.

Higher education does more than transmit knowledge; it forms intellectual character. In a society marked by polarization, demonization, deep distrust and billions in lost workplace productivity, universities have a responsibility to equip students with the habits of mind and heart that restore civic trust and strengthen the economy. Employers will recognize and reward this move.

We can't afford to continue down the path we are on. The heroes of the next era will not be those who silence opponents or dominate conversations, but those who build bridges. Higher education must lead the way—equipping students to become those heroes.

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