

## Civil Discourse for an Inclusive State System

Dr. Denise Pearson, Vice Chancellor and Chief DEI Officer

It is widely accepted that inclusive campus environments are paramount to the success of students, faculty, and staff. Engaging in individual and group actions that foster feelings of being respected, affirmed, and valued is central, including engaging in civil discourse. This feature article is intended to center inclusion across PASSHE (the commonwealth's only public system of higher education) through a discussion about a timely educational issue—civil discourse and actions that strengthen its potential.

Civil discourse is not about restricting speech or performative politeness. It is about listening to understand, engaging in the honest exchange of ideas, and sharing responsibility for the process. This is true regardless of the forum – in the classroom, outside the school, and elsewhere. [Carnegie Mellon University's Civility Initiatives](#) asserts that discourse is fundamental to learning, growth, and deepening our understanding of self, others, and matters of critical concern. They cite Schmidt and Pickney's distinguishing of the often-conflated concepts of discourse, debate, and dialogue as defined below.

- **Discourse** is the practice of listening and speaking on a topic of shared interest or concern with the intention of promoting understanding, knowledge-building, and community engagement. Think about the myriad engagements that occur, in myriad environments, with myriad individuals and groups across PASSHE daily.

### Message from Vice Chancellor Dr. Denise Pearson

Welcome back, students, faculty, and staff! I hope you enjoyed the summer break and are ready for another exciting and transformative semester!

The feature story focuses on the notion of civility in our interactions. Civil discourse requires honesty, which made me think about this poem:

#### The Face of Truth

The Face of Truth is covered  
with brilliant golden orb.  
Remove it, O Sun,  
so that I who am devoted to the Truth  
may behold the truth.

—Upanishads

- **Debate** is a competitive, two-way conversation. The goal is to win an argument or convince someone, such as the participant or third-party observers. Think about the annual [Frederick Douglass Collaborative](#) student debates every year across PASSHE.
- **Dialogue** is a cooperative, two-way conversation. The goal is to participate in the exchange of information and build relationships. Like discourse, dialogue is not competitive. Think about all the formal and informal unique opportunities students, faculty, and staff are afforded to strengthen relationships as members of the 10-university PASSHE community.

The timeliness of this discussion is evident amid the country's upcoming presidential election and a wide range of associated societal stresses. Fortunately, PASSHE universities are taking the lead and providing their communities with curated opportunities to expand knowledge and skills that build the capacity to engage in civil discourse. Indiana University of Pennsylvania's Associate Professor Gwen Torges, for example, leads IUP's Difficult Dialogues Project and has cohosted workshops

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## Shippensburg University Minority/Alumni Student Mentoring Program

To address the persistence of our underrepresented students on campus, Shippensburg University began a minority/alumni student mentoring program in 2023-24 with 16 alumni mentors and 16 students. The program's premise is to support underrepresented students on campus in navigating the rigors of college and career preparation at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI). By pairing minority students with alumni who have previously navigated college life at a PWI, students gained valuable knowledge about coursework, decision-making, financial literacy, networking, career paths, and transitioning from college to work. Students established meaningful and enduring relationships with alumni, leading to success in 23-24.

### Student Eligibility

All minority students were eligible to apply for the program; however, limited slots were available to launch the pilot.

### Facilitation

The program's administration was overseen by the Office of Inclusion, Belonging, and Social Equity with support from Multicultural Affairs and Alumni Affairs. ShipConnects, the networking platform for students and alumni, facilitated the program. However, personal connections were valued, and regular check-ins (monthly) were required either virtually or in person, as well as periodic group discussions to share and discuss the progress of each mentor/mentee pair. Conversation topics were provided, and paired alumni and students were responsible for arranging the best time and method to meet for discussions.

### Topics Covered

The topics include successfully navigating a PWI, professional etiquette, how to write an A+ paper, creating a resume, personal finances (both while in and after college), networking (including creating a LinkedIn profile), mock interviews, career paths, transition from college to career, and regular check-ins for general support.

### Programs Costs

The program can be launched and run at no cost. Alumni were willing to dedicate their time to meet with students every month.

### Outcomes

- 32 Total Participants (16 students and 16 alumni mentors)
- Curriculum-Based Model
- Monthly Meetings with the entire group
- Average GPA of Cohort in Fall '23 – 2.619 (with 6 students earning above a 3.0 and one student who passed all four courses for the first time)
- Average GPA of Cohort in Spring '24 – 2.800 (with 7 students earning above a 3.0)

\*Note: The average GPA for students in Spring '23 when the program was not in place was 2.313. The GPA increased by 0.50 from Spring '23 to Spring '24.

## Goal for Expansion in 2024-25

Shippensburg delivered the curriculum-based pilot with 16 students and 16 alumni across the academic year of 23-24. The university is working purposefully to create a sustainable and scalable minority/alumni student mentoring program for the academic year 24-25 by embedding the program in department-specific initiatives. The academic year 24-25 will focus on the largest undergraduate major, psychology. Shippensburg has 869 URM undergraduate students, with 10.13% majoring in psychology. By collaborating with psychology faculty, the program aims to expand its scope and provide mentoring opportunities to 88 URM psychology students, increasing from the 16 students served in the current academic year.

Contact Information: Dr. Manuel Ruiz, Assistant Vice President for Inclusion, Belonging, and Social Equity ([mruiz@ship.edu](mailto:mruiz@ship.edu))

## Restorative Practices across PASSHE

[The Board of Governors DEI Statement of Affirmation](#) was adopted to affirm its commitment to ensuring the State System operates from a foundation of values to create and maintain a strong System that meets the multi-cultural needs of students, faculty, and staff. In June 2024, the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion organized a Restorative Practices intensive training program for Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) and two additional representatives from each PASSHE campus. The virtual training was developed to establish a systematic framework that cultivates equitable learning environments, fosters positive relationships, and drives cultural transformation.

According to Evans and Vaandering, restorative justice in education involves fostering learning communities that uphold and honor the inherent dignity and worth of all individuals. When restorative justice is understood holistically, it intersects with educational institutions, from pre-schools to universities, influencing cultural norms. Restorative education encompasses creating a just and equitable learning environment, nurturing healthy relationships, repairing harm, and transforming conflict. (Evans, 2016)

Over 30 individuals from PASSHE universities participated in this curated professional development opportunity. Pre-session reading materials included [The Little Book of Listening](#) and the article "Transforming Communities: Restorative Justice as a Community Building Strategy" by Beck. Following the sessions, participants shared their most significant takeaways, including valuable discussions with colleagues, understanding distinctions between restorative justice and restorative practices, the importance of establishing core group values, and framing restorative practices from a DEI perspective.

The next phase of this initiative includes providing 20 hours of coaching and guidance to assist participating institutions in developing comprehensive campus plans. Questions? Contact Christa Cobb at [ccobb@passhe.edu](mailto:ccobb@passhe.edu).

### Additional resources:

Beck, Elizabeth. (2012). Transforming Communities: Restorative Justice as a Community Building Strategy. *Journal of Community Practice*. 20. 380-401.

Evans, K and Vaandering D. (2016). *The Little Book of Restorative Justice in Education*, Skyhorse Publishing, Inc. Delaware

hooks, bell. (2003). *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*

## Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC)

All PASSHE campuses now have access to the Higher Education Recruitment Consortium (HERC). HERC is a nonprofit consortium comprising colleges, universities, and related groups dedicated to advancing inclusion, equity, and diversity in the higher education workforce. Its mission is to assist institutions in recruiting and retaining a highly talented and diverse workforce, promote collaboration between institutions and a network of professionals, and pool resources to develop innovative tools that can be shared and leveraged by all.

As a HERC member, all employees have access to [HERConnect](#), a platform to:

- Access HERC member resources, tools, articles, and reports.
- Network with over 5000+ peers.
- Post questions to the community.
- Register for upcoming professional development webinars.
- Share a resource.
- Explore Recruitment and Retention Resources, including our search committee training toolkit and videos.

## Frederick Douglass Institute Collaborative (FDI Collaborative)

[The Frederick Douglass Institute Collaborative \(FDI Collaborative\)](#) hosted the 2024 Douglass Debates Research & Creative Arts Conference on April 9 and the 2024 Douglass Debates Conference on April 10 at Millersville University. The Douglass Debates provide students with valuable, high-impact opportunities to work with faculty and staff, allowing them to build critical knowledge and skills focused on the art and science of debate and persuasion. Congratulations to the 2024 Douglass Debate winners, Nico Mosashvili and Luke Wheeler from West Chester University.



Other PASSHE institutions participating included Commonwealth University-Bloomsburg, Millersville University, and Kutztown University. Stay tuned for more details about the 2025 Douglass Debates and how your institution can participate in this student-focused high impact practice.



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that utilize “tools developed by the [Difficult Dialogues National Resource Center](#) to engage with a controversial topic in a respectful environment in which listening and understanding, not persuading, is the goal.” Dr. Tracey Robinson, Chief DEI Officer at West Chester University, provides professional development opportunities focusing on *Teaching in Turbulent Times*. She points to daily news that often reminds us of moments in our society fraught with controversy and contention. During the interactive workshop, participants work proactively to develop strategies that may ensure that classrooms are places for civil discourse and respectful disagreement. The topic is explored using note-worthy case studies. Dr. Robinson also facilitates a workshop titled “Creating an Inclusive Classroom,” where faculty are introduced to real scenarios related to designing, managing, and teaching in higher education in today’s climate.

There are undoubtedly many more examples of similar opportunities for personal and professional development, and I encourage you to contact the Chief DEI Officers on your respective campuses to learn more.

In the interim, I leave you with a few more of my favorite resources:

1. [The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy](#) at Kansas State University (n.d.). *Principles of Good Civic Discourse*:
  - Provide framework for dialogue (establish ground rules; framework should recognize any cultural differences).
  - Provide all with voice (create safe rhetorical space; manage inequalities of access and power).
  - Focus on issues. Invite/encourage a variety of perspectives (inclusiveness).
  - Value evidence variety – testimony, statistical evidence, narrative storytelling.
  - Seek common ground and consensus when possible.
  - Avoid personal attacks.
  - Resist relying on ideological sloganeering.
  - Seek to understand rather than to persuade.
2. PA’s Center for Women and Politics at Chatham University. (n.d.). [Civil Discourse Toolkit](#).
3. Doug Lederman. (2023). Inside Higher Education. [Showcasing Solutions for Better Campus Dialogue](#).
4. National Conflict Resolution Center. (n.d.). [The Code of Civil Discourse](#).



**September 2024**

- **2024 PASSHE Summit RFP Deadline** – The deadline for submitting RFPs has been extended to September 12.
- On September 17, at Slippery Rock University, the SRU Office for Inclusive Excellence and the Political Science and History Departments will host an event titled "Free Speech, Hate Speech and Protest: Understanding the First Amendment" in preparation for the upcoming presidential election. The event will feature a panel discussion with participation from faculty, staff, and community partners.
- From September 23-28, Shippensburg University's Office of Inclusion, Belonging, and Social Equity will celebrate Diversity Week. The events are open to the public and will include a keynote speech by [Dr. Javier Avila](#) titled "The Trouble with My Name," scheduled for 5 p.m. For additional information, please contact [MRuiz@ship.edu](mailto:MRuiz@ship.edu).

**October 2024**

- The theme for the Gender and Minorities Conference at Kutztown University, which will be held from October 2 to 4, is "AUTHENTICALLY YOU." [Proposal submissions](#) are due by September 4.
- **DeBaptiste Frederick Douglass Institute Lecture** – West Chester University is hosting the Fifth Annual Dr. Clifford E. DeBaptiste Frederick Douglass Institute Lecture on October 10, from 3 pm to 5 pm. The lecture, titled "America's Alternative: Embracing the Prophetic Possibilities of Frederick Douglass," will feature distinguished speaker Rev. Dr. Kyle Boyer, Pastor of Mount Carmel Church of God in Christ.
- **2024 PASSHE Summit** – The 2024 PASSHE Summit will be held at Millersville University on October 28 and 29. This year's theme is "Uniting for Inclusive Student Success."

**November 2024**

- **From Trauma to Resilience: Promoting Mental Health Among Immigrants** – West Chester University will host a discussion on promoting mental health among immigrants on November 13, from 4:30 pm – 6:30 pm at a location to be determined. The discussion will be facilitated by doctoral student clinicians.

**Alena Clark, Assistant Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Initiatives**

**PennWest Clarion**



**What first sparked my interest in DEI?**

Growing up in a small town in Colorado, I became passionate about learning diverse languages and cultures. As a student ambassador for the Belarus Youth Leadership Program, I worked on cultural exchange and community projects, deepening my commitment to helping international students and highlighting diverse cultures and stories.

I studied Global Studies and Anthropology in my undergraduate years, and my honors thesis focused on student perceptions of diversity on campus. I pursued a master's degree in Sociocultural Anthropology in Belgium while working for a Kenyan NGO. This experience reinforced my commitment to diversity and inclusion.

**Why did I pursue a career in higher education?**

I pursued a career in higher education due to my deep passion for continual learning and the vibrant campus environment. My journey began with research and continued through my work in Student Leadership and Engagement, where I discovered the impact of creating inclusive campus spaces. Even in Belgium, I worked in social innovation at the university, learning innovative techniques to engage students from diverse disciplines.

Higher education inspires and motivates me because it offers endless growth opportunities for me and the students I work with. I am dedicated to supporting others in their journey to become their best selves while uniquely and engagingly enhancing their understanding of DEI concepts. This blend of continuous learning, student support, and the potential to make a meaningful impact is what drives my passion for a career in higher education.

**What excites me most about my work?**

I'm excited about my work because it allows me to create spaces for people to expand their worldviews, reflect on their identities, and engage with diversity and inclusion. I advocate for DEI through innovative and accessible approaches, and I'm thrilled to help develop initiatives and events that enrich our campus community and equip students with valuable skills for the future.

Please contact [dei@passhe.edu](mailto:dei@passhe.edu) to include your events or highlights advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion on your campus in the upcoming issue of *Connectivity*.