

Belonging Lab: Facilitating & Finessing Team Dialogue

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Project Summary

Housed at Berkeley Haas, this advanced co-curricular training program on dialogue across differences sought to foster critically engaged undergraduate and graduate student communities committed to effectively leading diverse teams and making decisions that affect people at scale. Through progressive skill-building workshops led by external subject matter experts, students learned techniques to facilitate constructive discourse rooted in diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging as leaders at UC Berkeley and in society.

Through practitioner workshops and discussions, applied practice, and peer coaching, the mixed cohort of undergraduate and graduate student leaders:

- deepened their knowledge of how to **improve dialogue within and between groups**;
- boosted their **confidence in having sensitive conversations** about complex challenges, championing new ideas, and humanizing the "other"; and,
- developed advanced skills in conflict management and **transferable facilitation techniques**.

At its core, the program sought to enhance students' curious and compassionate leadership to create and maintain spaces for individual and collective resilience.

Impact

The Belonging Lab offered transformative programming for 65 undergraduate and graduate (MBA) students to engage in critical dialogue on campus, particularly during a time when affective polarization continues to stymie open conversations.

Advanced Facilitation Workshops

A cohort of 11 students (2 undergraduate, 2 visiting, 7 graduate) and 2 professional staff engaged in a four-part series of workshops, learning from expert practitioners on best practices for cultivating a culture of openness, freedom of expression, psychological safety, and belonging. This workshop series was advertised as an advanced-level offering following a highly successful 8-week "Leading Across Divides" fall program for

an 80+ student and alumni cohort (94 NPS). Next cycle, shifting to the Fall may result in higher attendance by positioning the program after new student orientations.

Peer Dialogue Dinners

The Belonging Lab offered parallel, “Breaking Bread, Building Bridges (B4)” programming, where 12 student facilitators hosted eight off-campus dinners for 54 total graduate student participants on a pressing free speech topic: *should DEI training/courses be mandatory?* In our post-program survey, students shared that B4 dinners allowed them to “have a deep and meaningful discussion with less fear of being judged like in a class setting [where] only like viewpoints are expressed.” Others described the program as a “community-builder” – a “space for people who wouldn’t otherwise gather to engage in meaningful dialogue,” and “talk openly and deeply about something without judgment.” This program increased participating students’ openness to diverse perspectives and opposing opinions beyond the selected topic.