A Campus Educator Toolkit to Support Interpartisan Friendships on College Campuses

This toolkit contains guidance for campus educators, including administrators, faculty, and student affairs staff, to support interpartisan friendships on their campuses. We define interpartisan friendships as close relationships between individuals who support different political parties or hold divergent political views.[1]

The strategies and resources we recommend here integrate wisdom from three sources: (1) the lived experiences of and recommendations by college students with interpartisan friends, as shared through our narrative research study, (2) recommendations from practitioners in higher education, and (3) the research literature on college students' interpartisan friendships as well as friendships across other social boundaries such as race, ethnicity, and religious, secular, and spiritual identity. We also encourage readers to read about the findings from our research project, [The Promise and Perils of Interpartisan Friendships for Fostering Democratic Learning and Reducing Values-Based Polarization on Campus](#).

Strategies for Campus Educators

#1: Educate yourself about the educational power of interpartisan friendships, so you can communicate their value to students, colleagues, campus leaders, policymakers, and funders and respond to critiques.

One of the challenges identified by campus educators within our professional networks was the need for resources and language to communicate the value of and educational imperative for supporting interpartisan friendships among college students to colleagues, funders, and other stakeholders. Much of the research we've done in this area provides empirical support for why friendships across partisan as well as other social boundaries matter,[2] and we especially encourage you to read about the findings from our research project, [The Promise and Perils of Interpartisan Friendships for Fostering Democratic Learning and Reducing Values-Based Polarization on Campus](#), through which this toolkit was developed. We also recommend two additional resources from outside the field of higher education that provide compelling empirical

[1] Rockenbach, A. N., Hudson, T. D., Shaheen, M., Chinoun, R., & Kanwal, A. (2024, November). Friendship as political bridge-building: Ideological and attitudinal change among students with interpartisan friendships in college. Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.

[2] Hudson, T. D. (2018). Random roommates: Supporting our students in developing friendships across difference. *About Campus, 23*(3), 13-22; Hudson, T. D. (2022). Interpersonalizing cultural difference: A grounded theory of the process of interracial friendship development and sustainment among college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(3), 267–287; Hudson, T. D., & Rockenbach, A. (Forthcoming 2025). "This is how we heal these divisions": Exploring prosocial outcomes of college students' boundary-crossing friendships. *Journal of College Student Development*; Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., Mayhew, M. J., & Zhang, L. (2021). Examining the relationship between college students' interworldview friendships and pluralism orientation. T*eachers College Record, 123*(7), 1-36; Rockenbach, A. N., & Hudson, T. D. (2024). Transforming political divides: How student identities and campus contexts shape friendships between liberals and conservatives. *AERA Open, 10*(1), 1-15; Rockenbach, A. N., Hudson, T. D., Mayhew, M. J., Correia-Harker, B. P., Morin, S., & Associates. (2019). *Friendships matter: The role of peer relationships in interfaith learning and development.* Interfaith America [formerly Interfaith Youth Core]. https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/friendships-matter-the-role-of-peer-relationships-in-interfaith-learning-and-development/

support for why interpartisan friendship is a powerful intervention for reducing partisan animosity and polarization in the larger U.S. society: (1) Hartman, R., Blakey, W., Womick, J., Bail, C., Finkel, E. J., Han, H., Sarrouf, J., Schroeder, J., Sheeran, P., Van Bavel, J. J., Willer, R., & Gray, K. (2022). Interventions to reduce partisan animosity. *Nature Human Behaviour, 6*(9), 1194-1205; and (2) Levendusky, M. (2023). *Our common bonds: Using what Americans share to help bridge the partisan divide.* The University of Chicago Press.

Additionally, many of the bridge-building organizations we identify later in this toolkit provide white papers and data that can help you craft a compelling argument for why this work matters (e.g., the Constructive Dialogue Institute offers multiple reports, free to download, on the Publications section of their website). While these organizations' data-backed resources may not address the power of interpartisan friendship *per se*, they do present compelling evidence for the value of bridge-building. And as the empirical research footnoted in the previous paragraph documents, interpersonal relationships such as friendship are a particularly powerful context in which bridge-building occurs, because we care about our friends far more deeply—and can see them as fellow humans worthy of empathy and grace—than we care about casual interactants or complete strangers: "Our personal ties offer us a route to improve our politics."[3]

As educators invested in your students' civic and democratic learning and development, we encourage you to review these resources to craft an argument specific to the needs of your campus and the student populations you serve. Educating yourself on the empirical literature and other data that documents why interpartisan friendship matters is also an important step toward becoming an advocate on your campus and being able to more effectively support students in their efforts to navigate political differences with peers (amplifying the previous strategies). Nonetheless, we recognize having a quick "elevator speech" is always helpful, so here's how we would concisely frame the argument:

> Partisan divisiveness and animosity, which often shows up as disparagement of and outright animosity toward those on the political "other side," is a growing threat to democracy in the U.S. It amplifies anti-democratic attitudes as well as prejudice and discrimination toward members of minoritized groups, and it undermines social support systems and trust—not just in society at large but also among members of college and university communities. Higher education has a civic mission of preparing students to thrive in a democratic and pluralistic world,[4] yet without intervention by educators, the increasing campus polarization—across partisan divisions as well as other sociocultural identities, with which political beliefs are often deeply intertwined—makes this mission increasingly challenging to achieve. Friendships that transcend sociocultural differences such as race, religious belief, and partisanship can serve as powerful sites for college students' democratic learning, enabling them to develop and exercise critical attitudes and skills such as appreciation for pluralism, enhanced empathy, and the ability to have conversations in which they respectfully explore and engage with their differences. Through interpartisan friendships, college students learn to see those on the political "other side" not as enemies but rather as people who deserve care, respect, and empathy.

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[3] Levendusky, M. (2023). *Our common bonds: Using what Americans share to help bridge the partisan divide.* The University of Chicago Press, p. 138.

[4] See, e.g., Hurtado, S. (2007). Linking diversity with the educational and civic missions of higher education. *The Review of Higher Education, 30*(2), 185-196.

These effects may then generalize throughout students' social networks, helping to heal divisiveness on their campuses. Indeed, "among those who are the least supportive of racial and religious pluralism, the presence of just one person [in their friendship network] who does not share their attributes in terms of party, race, or religion has a significant impact on their views."[5]

One additional argument we've encountered and want to address is that college students' friendships are beyond the bounds of what campus educators should concern themselves with, or that what we are proposing—that is, creating campus conditions and fostering student learning to support interpartisan friendship—is social engineering. To counter this argument, we offer two points. First, interpartisan friendship is an incredibly powerful tool for reducing partisan animosity and divisiveness as well as for fostering the civic and democratic learning colleges purportedly value and aim to develop in their students, as we discuss above. And second, *all* of education is social engineering, and colleges and universities have always engaged in social engineering by choosing whom to admit (or reject) as students; allocating financial aid on the basis of merit versus need; determining the general education outcomes all students attain; deciding what co-curricular programs, student clubs and support services to invest in … the list of examples is endless and covers nearly everything institutions do in the realm of academic and student affairs. Indeed, in *Democracy and Education*, the preeminent educational philosopher John Dewey asserted, "The development within the young of the attitudes and dispositions necessary to the continuous and progressive life of a society cannot take place by direct conveyance of beliefs, emotions, and knowledge. It takes place through the intermediary of the environment."[6] In other words, effective education necessitates designing environments conducive to inculcating students with these desired attitudes and dispositions. The bottom line, as we see it, is that our job as campus educators is to educate our students so they can positively participate in and contribute to our society after they graduate—and creating a campus environment in which interpartisan friendships can thrive is one powerful way to achieve this goal, especially in our current political environment.

#2: Commit to developing your own knowledge, skills, and abilities for constructively and respectfully engaging in political conversations, and model for students how to have these conversations.

In order to effectively develop students' knowledge, skills, and abilities for constructively and respectfully engaging in political conversations, campus educators must continually develop their own facility in this area. It also requires them to model how to have these conversations, so students can see these skills in action; this, in turn, communicates an expectation for how campus

[5] Jones, R. P., Jackson, N., Orcés, D., Huff, I., & Snodgrass, M. (2022). *American bubbles: Politics, race, and religion in Americans' core friendship networks.* Public Religion Research Institute. https://www.prri.org/research/american-bubbles-politics-race-and-religion-in-americans-core-friendship-networks/, p. 28.
[6] Dewey, J. (2001). *Democracy and education* [eBook edition]. Penn State Electronic Classics Series Publication. (Original work published in 1916), https://nsee.memberclicks.net/assets/docs/KnowledgeCenter/BuildingExpEduc/BooksReports/10.%20democracy%20and%20education%20by%20dewey.pdf, p. 27

community members are expected to behave when it comes to engaging across political and other differences.[7]

As a campus educator, how can you develop your own knowledge, skills, and abilities? We believe the best way to do so is to participate in many of the same opportunities and programs we identify in strategy #4 below, which are not limited to students; for example, Unify America offers the Unify Challenge, a version of their College Bowl program open to "everyday people." Other organizations, such as Braver Angels and the Listen First Project, offer events, training, and resources for the public. Facilitating programs for students is also an excellent way to learn alongside them. Additionally, we encourage you to join existing communities of practice, such as Wake Forest University's Educating Character Initiative, to bring existing faculty and staff development programs to your campus, and to replicate or adapt existing institutional models (like those at The Ohio State University and American University listed above) for your own institution. There are also many excellent books that aim to develop readers' knowledge, skills, and abilities for constructively and respectfully engaging in political conversations; we've mentioned some throughout this toolkit, and more are published every year. Another book we recommend to campus educators is Mary Anne Franks' *Fearless Speech: Breaking Free from the First Amendment*, which outlines the differences between reckless speech and fearless speech and the need to move away from the former and toward the latter in the interest in protecting the spirit of the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and its protections of free expression.[8]

#3: Model the practice of interpartisan friendship through your own actions.

Participants in our study commented about not seeing much, if any, support for interpartisan friendship—or even for reaching across political divides—among faculty, staff, and administrators on their campuses. And in conversations we've had discussing our study with campus educators, many of them have said the same thing, noting that they don't often see bridge-building or friendship among colleagues at their institutions. And yet even without institutional support, nearly two-thirds of college students report having a politically different friend;[9] what might this proportion be if students received support from campus educators and saw them modeling these relationships themselves?

In our previous work on friendships across religious, secular, and spiritual identities, we've noted the importance for campus educators to model the practice, which helps to create a campus climate conducive to crossing social boundaries for friendship and to establish boundary-crossing friendships as an institutional norm.[10] The same is true for interpartisan

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[7] Rockenbach, A. N., Hudson, T. D., Mayhew, M. J., Correia-Harker, B. P., Morin, S., & Associates. (2019). *Friendships matter: The role of peer relationships in interfaith learning and development.* Interfaith America [formerly Interfaith Youth Core]. https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/friendships-matter-the-role-of-peer-relationships-in-interfaith-learning-and-development/

[8] Franks, M. A. (2024). *Fearless speech: Breaking free from the First Amendment.* Bold Type Books. Dr. Franks presents an overview of her book at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vU7XBmAvaTk.

[9] Rockenbach, A. N., & Hudson, T. D. (2024). Transforming political divides: How student identities and campus contexts shape friendships between liberals and conservatives. *AERA Open, 10*(1), 1-15.

[10] Fehr, B., & Harasymchuk, C. (2022). Conceptions and the experience of friendship in underrepresented groups. *Personal Relationships, 29*(3), 451–487; Hudson, T. D., & Rockenbach, A. (2025). "We met in a place that fostered exploring": Campus environments that influence boundary-crossing friendships. *Innovative Higher*

friendships: as a campus educator, it's important for you to demonstrate to students that you: value and intentionally build interpartisan relationships, both personal and professional; participate in opportunities to connect with others across political differences; and reflect upon the ways political differences or partisanship shows up in your relationships. By enacting—not just espousing—interpartisan friendship as a value, you "will reinforce a culture of [political] cooperation and inspire students to seriously pursue diverse social circles and friendships."[11]

#4: Offer programming to equip students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to constructively and respectfully engage in political conversations, and incorporate this programming into the curriculum to reach the widest number of students.

One broad area of programming participants in our study reported needing—but often not receiving—to support interpartisan friendship was mediated discussions to help students learn more about current political issues and policies from varied perspectives without the fear of getting into conflict with those on the "other side." The goal of these discussions should not be to change anyone's political beliefs, but rather to develop the skills necessary for constructively and respectfully engaging in conversations with peers across political differences. Participants also discussed the importance of developing students' knowledge about current events and issues, so that they can engage in conversations about political topics in an informed and open-minded way with peers who hold differing perspectives.

Several participants highlighted one structured mediated discussion program in which they had participated: Campus Conversations is a program developed by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) American Democracy Project, and they offer a toolkit for campuses who wish to launch this initiative. We also requested recommendations from campus educators across the U.S. who are working in the civic engagement and bridge-building realms. They recommended some "plug and play" resources that can be easily adapted by campus educators in curricular and co-curricular contexts:

- Living Room Conversations "began in 2010 with the idea that a structured, intimate conversation format could empower everyday citizens to discuss important issues with friends of differing backgrounds and political affiliations."[12] The resources include conversation guides, facilitation training, and an asynchronous course on connecting through conversation, as well as institutional licensing options.
- Unify America offers multiple programs through their Civic Gym. Their programs, which take place online as one-time events available every fall, spring, and summer, give students the opportunity to engage with peers at campuses across the U.S. in guided discussions about important issues such as mental health, immigration, and free speech.
- The Constructive Dialogue Institute offers a variety of resources for higher education institutions that can be incorporated into general education courses as well as first-year

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Education, 50, 461-485; Pettigrew, T. F. (1998b). Prejudice and discrimination on the college campus. In J. L. Eberhardt, & T. Fiske (Eds.), *Confronting racism: The problem and the response* (pp. 263–279). Sage.

[11] Rockenbach, A. N., Hudson, T. D., Mayhew, M. J., Correia-Harker, B. P., Morin, S., & Associates. (2019). *Friendships matter: The role of peer relationships in interfaith learning and development.* Interfaith America [formerly Interfaith Youth Core]. https://www.interfaithamerica.org/research/friendships-matter-the-role-of-peer-relationships-in-interfaith-learning-and-development/, p. 17.

[12] Living Room Conversations. (n.d.). About us. https://livingroomconversations.org/about/, ℙ1.

experience, student leadership, and residence life programs. They also have training available for faculty and staff. A limited number of resources are available on their website for free, while others require financial investment.

- The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression (FIRE) offers multiple resources through its Let's Talk initiative, including conversation guides, topical questions, and exercises designed to support dialogue across difference, available on their website as free pdfs.
- The nonprofit organization Braver Angels offers workshops and training events for colleges and universities. The college-specific section of their website links to multiple free resources, including a curricular toolkit for faculty who want to adapt their student debate and dialogue design in their classrooms.
- The Listen First Project, a coalition of 500 organization focused on bringing U.S. Americans together across political divides, offers a Bridging Divides Badging & Microcredential Program, featuring a rubric for designing "courses that teach the basic skills needed to be an effective bridge builder."[13]

Our campus educator network also recommended several institution-based comprehensive programs as models other institutions may wish to adapt:

- The Ohio State University's Civil Discourse for Citizenship program, which includes an academic certificate, a co-curricular certificate, an undergraduate fellows program, an undergraduate course, and in-person and online programming for students, as well as a teaching endorsement for instructors.
- The Program for Leadership and Character at Wake Forest University offers scholars and ambassadors programs, courses, fellowships, discussion groups, retreats, and special events for students, and they also offer an Educating Character Initiative for educators interested in character on campuses across the U.S. and internationally.
- American University's Project on Civic Dialogue "helps students cultivate a love of and the skills for listening and communicating across differences"[14] through programming including an academic certificate, facilitated discussions and other events, peer facilitators, and small grants open to students and other University community members; they also sponsor a faculty fellows program and events for faculty and staff members.

Based on observations from our research, we recommend that programs to develop college students' knowledge, skills and abilities in navigating political differences be incorporated into existing classes (e.g., general education requirements), rather than making it something extra for time-crunched students to add to their packed schedules. Making it a course requirement would also reach a greater proportion of students, not just those who choose to make it a priority. Several participants in our study were part of honors programs on their campuses that incorporated initiatives such as Campus Conversations, but we believe these opportunities should not be required only for select populations; indeed, the students who may need these programs the most may be those whose pre-college backgrounds tend to be underrepresented within honors programs. When the majority of students are prepared to engage respectfully and constructively

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[13] Listen First Project. (n.d.). Bridging divides badging & microcredential program. https://www.listenfirstproject.org/bmc-credential-program, ℙ6.
[14] American University. (n.d.). The project on civic dialogue. https://www.american.edu/spa/civic-dialogue/, ℙ1.

with peers who hold opposing beliefs, and who can approach such interactions willing to listen rather than with defensiveness or trepidation, the possibility of interpartisan friendship development is far more likely.

#5: Establish programming that models how students can navigate political differences within friendships, and incorporate these into the curriculum to underscore the educational and civic value of this ability.

Multiple participants in our study observed their campus peers struggling with the misperceptions and fear of conflict that often color interactions across political differences, thwarting the possibility of seeing peers across the aisle as potential friends. College students are hungry for institutional support that helps them and their fellow students see that conflict and hatred are not inevitable when interacting with a peer who holds different political beliefs, and they want and need programming that models how to navigate political differences within interpersonal relationships such as friendship. As one participant put it, students need

> more training on how to just be civil and to listen, and to know that we can be wrong and that's okay, and that we can still walk away from that conversation with our belief but not have to make the other person feel terrible … no matter what side you're on, we're gonna give you just some like 101 training, just like, "These are some tips we have."

Another participant suggested programming addressing how college students can navigate political differences within their friendships, or even other interpersonal relationships such as marriage. She suggested "bringing in students that have a healthy political, different friendship to kind of be like, 'This is how we did it' and talk about the challenges that they faced and how they overcame them. … to actually show that it can happen and it can work." One powerful model available online that campus educators might use in co-curricular programming or classes is the friendship between a Muslim woman and a Jewish woman who came together to find common ground just two weeks after the October 7, 2023 Hamas attack on Israel.

As with the previous strategy (#4) regarding programming to prepare students to engage in political conversations, programs that model how to build bridges across political differences within friendships should be incorporated into the curriculum, to have the widest reach and minimize demands on students' time. Further, embedding these programs into the curriculum communicates two important ideas to students and other campus stakeholders: (1) that the ability to navigate political differences within interpersonal relationships is a critical civic outcome necessary for participation in a democratic society that all graduates of the institution are expected to attain, and (2) that friendships crossing political (and other) boundaries have educational value.

#6: Communicate the value of and (re)commit to investing in language classes, which provide a uniquely supportive context for the development of interpartisan and other boundary-crossing friendships.

This strategy was inspired by a particularly insightful recommendation made by one participant in our study. This participant described language programs and classes as "friendship incubators" because "in these language classes, you can see a lot of cross-cultural and cross-ideology

relationships. … language programs really allow you to have that external view in life, of like the view outward of understanding." Adding to their power as friendship incubators is the fact that language classes tend to be smaller than many other classes undergraduates take, especially at larger institutions, and they require a lot of interaction among students. Yet despite the value of language classes, many colleges and universities have reduced the number of classes and majors they offer in foreign languages in recent years.[15] And while language classes are not essential for interpartisan friendship, they provide a context that may be uniquely conducive to fostering the development of these relationships. Therefore, campus educators—not just those teaching language classes—need to communicate the value of and imperative for investing in language classes as one powerful space on campus for fostering interpartisan friendships among students.

#7: *Provide co-curricular programming and social/recreational opportunities that enable students to recognize and build upon what they share—despite their political differences—as a basis for friendship.*

While helping students develop their facility and comfort with political conversations and navigating political differences within their friendships is important, it is also important to help students recognize the similarities and common ground they have with politically different peers, so they can break out of established patterns of homogeneity. In his book *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference*, John D. Inazu discusses several exemplary interpersonal relationships, including friendships, that have developed across ideological differences and why they matter. He concludes, "Meaningful relationships … do not depend on compromise or change bridging ideological distance;" rather, the individuals he describes "overcame distance in another way: through shared experiences and common enterprises."[16]

Our own prior research on friendships crossing the social boundaries of race and religious, secular, and spiritual identity (RSSI) has revealed the importance of providing campus spaces and opportunities that allow students to discover and build upon their similarities to cultivate friendship.[17] When college students discover shared interests in activities (e.g., sports, video games, cosplay), academics (e.g., major), or tastes (e.g., movies, music, sports), or when they identify similarity along other dimensions (e.g., a shared faith background, coming from the same part of the state or country), it provides a foundation upon which they can build and sustain

[15] Fischer, K. (2023, November 15). It's a bleak climate for foreign languages as enrollments tumble. *The Chronicle of Higher Education.* https://www.chronicle.com/article/its-a-bleak-climate-for-foreign-languages-as-enrollments-tumble; Palmer, K. (2024, May 15). Defense department cuts 13 of its language flagship programs. *Inside Higher Ed.* https://www.insidehighered.com/news/global/study-abroad/2024/05/15/defense-department-cuts-13-its-language-flagship-programs.

[16] Inazu, J. D. (2016). Common ground: Relationships across difference. In *Confident pluralism: Surviving and thriving through deep difference* (pp. 116-124). University of Chicago Press, p. 122.

[17] Hudson, T. D. (2018). Random roommates: Supporting our students in developing friendships across difference. *About Campus, 23*(3), 13-22; Hudson, T. D. (2022). Interpersonalizing cultural difference: A grounded theory of the process of interracial friendship development and sustainment among college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(3), 267–287; Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., & Mayhew, M. J. (2023). Campus conditions and college experiences that facilitate friendship across worldview differences. *The Journal of Higher Education, 94*(2), 227-255.

a friendship that transcends their differences.[18] Equally important is having spaces on campus that foster informal peer interaction and social engagement (like studying and dining together or just hanging out) through which students can build and deepen friendships through pursuing their shared interests and having conversations to "authentically explore what they have in common as well as come to a deeper understanding of their differences."[19] As John D. Inazu notes, "our physical separation can be a significant impediment to our ability to bridge relational distance. ... Sharing literal common ground facilitated relational common ground."[20]

Several of our participants, as well as campus educators we spoke with, emphasized the importance of intentionally de-centering political differences to support interpartisan friendships. Additionally, an important contribution you can make as a campus educator is to challenge the assumption many students hold that they couldn't possibly share anything with a peer who holds a different partisan identity, and instead to help them find common ground and see each other as multifaceted individuals rather than narrowly comprised of their political beliefs. We therefore recommend designing events to allow students to find this common ground, rather than in a way that reinforces partisan divisions (e.g., Republicans versus Democrats). By "common ground," we mean "shared interests, values, motivations and concerns."[21] Indeed, research has found that individuals on opposing sides of the political aisle actually have far more in common than they think or that popular rhetoric about political divisiveness leads us to believe.[22] Reducing these misperceptions by identifying common ground across partisan divides reduces affective polarization—negative feelings toward those on the political "other side"—and also creates the conditions in which interpartisan friendships can develop and flourish.

One model program recommended by our network of campus educators was The Connection Project at the University of Virginia:

> Through a graduated series of activities and guided discussions, participants gradually learn just how much they have in common beneath the surface. As trust and connection build, they ultimately learn to have remarkably deep, supportive, and open interactions with one another, building a true sense of community.[23]

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[18] Hudson, T. D. (2022). Interpersonalizing cultural difference: A grounded theory of the process of interracial friendship development and sustainment among college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(3), 267–287; Wimmer, A., & Lewis, K. (2010). Beyond and below racial homophily: ERG models of a friendship network documented on Facebook. *American Journal of Sociology, 116,* 583–642.

[19] Hudson, T. D., & Rockenbach, A. (2025). "We met in a place that fostered exploring": Campus environments that influence boundary-crossing friendships. *Innovative Higher Education, 50,* 461-485, p. 479; see also Hudson, T. D. (2022). Interpersonalizing cultural difference: A grounded theory of the process of interracial friendship development and sustainment among college students. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 15*(3), 267–287; Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., & Mayhew, M. J. (2023). Campus conditions and college experiences that facilitate friendship across worldview differences. *The Journal of Higher Education, 94*(2), 227-255.

[20] Inazu, J. D. (2016). Common ground: Relationships across difference. In *Confident pluralism: Surviving and thriving through deep difference* (pp. 116-124). University of Chicago Press, p. 123.

[21] Schwartz, L. H. (2024). *Try to love the questions: From debate to dialogue in classrooms and life.* Princeton University Press, p. 32.

[22] Hartman, R., Blakey, W., Womick, J., Bail, C., Finkel, E. J., Han, H., Sarrouf, J., Schroeder, J., Sheeran, P., Van Bavel, J. J., Willer, R., & Gray, K. (2022). Interventions to reduce partisan animosity. *Nature Human Behaviour, 6*(9), 1194-1205; Levendusky, M. (2023). *Our common bonds: Using what Americans share to help bridge the partisan divide.* The University of Chicago Press.

[23] University of Virginia. (n.d.). The connection project. https://theconnectionproject.virginia.edu/, P4.

Their website offers helpful guidance for how other institutions can bring The Connection Project to their campuses, and so far, two additional institutions (Virginia Tech and Georgetown University) have implemented it for their students.

We also want to amplify a related recommendation by one of our participants, who encouraged colleges and universities to offer programming that helps students learn about varied identities and beliefs so they can look beyond their differences to identify potential friends rather than relying on stereotypes or assumptions that reduce someone to one aspect of their identity. Although this participant focused his suggestion on race and sexual orientation, the alignment between these identities and partisanship[24] suggests that such programming may also support interpartisan friendship development, fostering greater heterogeneity within peer networks on campus. Such initiatives may prove especially powerful for students coming from homogeneous pre-college backgrounds, and may have the greatest potential impact in the "critical window" of the first year on campus, which we discuss next.

#8: Be intentional in creating first-year experiences (e.g., orientation groups, residential communities, first-year experience courses) that are politically as well as socioculturally diverse and that provide informal, social opportunities through which students can build friendships.

Prior research, including our own, has emphasized the importance of establishing interaction across social boundaries (including across political identity and beliefs) as a norm during the "critical window" of students' first year—and especially first weeks—on campus.[25] The interaction and friendship patterns students develop during this time are likely to persist throughout their time in college;[26] during this time, educators have the opportunity to shape those patterns so that crossing social boundaries, rather than polarization and homogeneity, become the expectation and norm.

One participant in our study commended her university for "encouraging people to be friends with people in their house." She explained that because students are randomly assigned to their first-year houses (residence halls), "that really does a good job of exposing you to different people who might have different political beliefs than you, or just like different backgrounds in general," leading to interpartisan friendships like her own.[27] Another promising strategy is to create political and socioculturally diverse orientation or first-year experience groups. Through

[24] Hartman, R., Blakey, W., Womick, J., Bail, C., Finkel, E. J., Han, H., Sarrouf, J., Schroeder, J., Sheeran, P., Van Bavel, J. J., Willer, R., & Gray, K. (2022). Interventions to reduce partisan animosity. *Nature Human Behaviour, 6*(9), 1194-1205; Iyengar, S., Lelkes, Y., Levendusky, M., Malhotra, N., & Westwood, S. J. (2019). The origins and consequences of affective polarization in the United States. *Annual Review of Political Science, 22*, 129-146; Morgan, D. L. (2021). Nuancing political identity formation in higher education: A phenomenological examination of precollege socialization, identity, and context. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education, 14*(1), 12-24.

[25] Hudson, T. D. (2018). Random roommates: Supporting our students in developing friendships across difference. *About Campus, 23*(3), 13-22; Hudson, T. D., & Rockenbach, A. (2025). "We met in a place that fostered exploring": Campus environments that influence boundary-crossing friendships. *Innovative Higher Education, 50,* 461-485.

[26] Wimmer, A., & Lewis, K. (2010). Beyond and below racial homophily: ERG models of a friendship network documented on Facebook. *American Journal of Sociology, 116,* 583–642.

[27] For more on how random roommate assignment can support friendships across social boundaries—with some cautions and considerations—see Hudson, T. D. (2018). Random roommates: Supporting our students in developing friendships across difference. *About Campus, 23*(3), 13-22.

these "forced proximity groups," as one participant described them, "you're kind of forced to be … with people who have nothing in common to you besides the fact that you're both freshman," leading students to interact and even develop friendships with peers whom they otherwise might never have interacted, interrupting the tendency toward comfortable homogeneity. We refer to this as "diverse propinquity": when students from diverse social and ideological backgrounds are placed in proximity to one another. Whether through residence hall assignments or orientation groups, students can interact with each other in informal, comfortable environments and discover what they have in common across their differences, giving boundary-crossing friendships the opportunity to bloom.[28]

#9: Continue offering programming and other opportunities (e.g., residential experiences) to support interpartisan friendship development for students throughout their time on campus, rather than limiting these opportunities to first-year students.

Although the first year is a critical window for fostering interpartisan friendship, we also want to highlight a recommendation by another participant in our study, who advised campus educators to not just target students in their first year on campus with emails or other communications about campus events and opportunities. Rather, make sure you're reaching out to students throughout their years on campus because students' beliefs and values may be changing, and they may engage with something in their third or fourth year that they wouldn't have in their first year: "It definitely should be an ongoing thing rather than just an initiative email thread for incoming or transfer freshmen."

#10: Foster a campus climate conducive to interpartisan friendship by welcoming respectful expression of diverse political identities and perspectives and by expecting and training student organizations to bridge political divides.

The larger context in which friendships are situated can either support or inhibit their development.[29] On college campuses, one of the contextual factors influencing boundary-crossing friendships is the campus climate. In a climate where students' identities are supported, where they feel they can be their authentic selves, and where they see other students crossing social boundaries for interaction and friendship, these relationships thrive; the opposite is also true, with negative climates creating a context in which students feel uncomfortable or unsafe reaching across social boundaries.[30]

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[28] Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., & Mayhew, M. J. (2023). Campus conditions and college experiences that facilitate friendship across worldview differences. *The Journal of Higher Education, 94*(2), 227-255; Hudson, T. D., & Rockenbach, A. (2025). "We met in a place that fostered exploring": Campus environments that influence boundary-crossing friendships. *Innovative Higher Education, 50,* 461-485.

[29] Adams, R. G., & Allan, G. (1998). Contextualising friendship. In R. G. Adams, & G. Allan (Eds.), *Placing friendship in context* (pp. 1-17). Cambridge University Press; Vela-McConnell, J. A. (2011). *Unlikely friends: Bridging ties and diverse friendships.* Lexington.

[30] Hudson, T. D., Rockenbach, A. N., & Mayhew, M. J. (2023). Campus conditions and college experiences that facilitate friendship across worldview differences. *The Journal of Higher Education, 94*(2), 227-255; Hudson, T. D., & Rockenbach, A. (2025). "We met in a place that fostered exploring": Campus environments that influence boundary-crossing friendships. *Innovative Higher Education, 50,* 461-485; Rockenbach, A. N., & Hudson, T. D. (2024). Transforming political divides: How student identities and campus contexts shape friendships between liberals and conservatives. *AERA Open, 10*(1), 1-15.

One way to foster a climate conducive to interpartisan friendship—and interpartisan interactions—is to support campus groups representing a range of political beliefs and perspectives as well as expression from a wide range of perspectives in the spirit of open inquiry and good faith. (Doing so necessitates also implementing strategies #2 and 4, so students and other campus community members are equipped to share their perspectives respectfully and constructively.) As a campus educator, you may be inclined to discourage students' political expressions in an attempt to reduce divisiveness on campus, yet doing so may instead *enhance* divisiveness by communicating that conflict is inevitable across political differences and therefore students should suppress their beliefs when interacting with others who may not share them. As many of our participants' experiences have shown, bridging political differences within a close, interpersonal peer relationship is both possible and meaningful. There exists an important caveat, however: encouraging expression of a diverse range of beliefs "is not a reason to accept bigotry, intolerance, and other ideas that reject our equality with one another … recognizing that some debates are not legitimate is part of a healthy democratic culture."[31]

We also encourage institutional leaders to allow faculty members to more explicitly express their political beliefs, within the parameters of academic freedom.[32] Students are perceptive to the environment around them, and when they see faculty or other members of the campus community (from any point along the political spectrum) suppressing their perspectives, the message they receive is that their own political beliefs will not be welcomed by others on campus or even met with hostility, precluding authentic interpersonal relationships across differences. As we've noted elsewhere, "A classroom environment where political differences are assumed and honored may go a long way toward helping students realize the potential for reaching across partisan differences and establishing friendships."[33]

Finally, one participant in our study noted the importance of institutions providing training to politically oriented student organizations on how to "be more open to having conversations" with those on the other political side. Such training can improve the campus political climate by providing students with the tools to engage respectfully across political identities and beliefs as well as by establishing a campus norm that politically oriented student organizations are expected to bridge—rather than reinforce—political differences.

#11: Help students recognize that while interpartisan friendships are valuable and meaningful, they should never lead to harm.

Conflict is likely, if not inevitable, in interpartisan friendships, and if handled well, conflict doesn't have to damage a friendship; in fact, handling conflict respectfully can actually

[31] Levendusky, M. (2023). *Our common bonds: Using what Americans share to help bridge the partisan divide.* The University of Chicago Press, p. 155. We also recommend reading Franks, M. A. (2024). *Fearless speech: Breaking free from the First Amendment.* Bold Type Books, which addresses the important distinction between reckless speech, which—although legally protected—should be discouraged, and fearless speech, which should be protected and encouraged.

[32] American Association of University Professors. (n.d.). *1940 statement of principles on academic freedom and tenure with 1970 interpretive comments.* https://www.aaup.org/report/1940-statement-principles-academic-freedom-and-tenure-1970-interpretive-comments

[33] Rockenbach, A. N., & Hudson, T. D. (2024). Transforming political divides: How student identities and campus contexts shape friendships between liberals and conservatives. *AERA Open, 10*(1), 1-15, p. 11

strengthen a relationship, as the experiences of many participants in our study demonstrate. Yet college students are often afraid of reaching out to peers who don't share their political beliefs for fear that they'll be met with derision or hate, or because they believe they couldn't possibly share any values or interest with someone who identifies with the opposing political party—even though, as we noted earlier, research has consistently found that people have far more in common across partisan divides than they realize.

However, several participants in our study discussed friendships that caused pain—where they felt disrespected, belittled, unheard, or were unable to express their authentic selves. We recognize that in the current U.S. political climate, crossing partisan boundaries can carry significant risk, especially for students who hold minoritized sociocultural identities; indeed, our own prior research found that Black students are less likely to report having interpartisan friends,[34] possibly for this reason. Campus educators cannot expect students from minoritized groups to engage in peer interactions that carry the risk of harm or trauma, and we are not suggesting that students who have historically been—and continue to be—excluded from higher education, and whose rights and safety are currently being eroded at the state and national levels, should jeopardize their mental or physical well-being or human dignity for the sake of interpartisan friendship. Programming and mentoring to support interpartisan friendship development must include attention to the risks that may arise—especially for minoritized populations vulnerable to harmful interactions. Encourage students to take agency and clearly define their expectations as they consider friendships with those who do not share their views.

In conclusion, we believe your responsibility as a campus educator is to implement the strategies detailed above to equip students on your campus with the knowledge, skills, and abilities they need to respectfully and constructively engage across political differences, help them find common ground, and provide campus environments conducive to developing and sustaining interpartisan friendships. We also believe it's important to communicate—and model—to your students that it is possible, and often deeply meaningful, to have a friend whose political beliefs differ from your own. Despite what popular rhetoric about unbridgeable partisan divides suggests, students are likely to experience empathy, care, and respect rather than harm in these relationships, especially on campuses where strategies to support interpartisan friendships have been implemented. At the same time, we believe it's important for you, as an educator, "to acknowledge the costs that can come with bridge-building relational work and to support students in identifying the boundaries they wish to establish in their friendships–including the types of friendships they pursue–to reduce the potential for harm."[35]

If you have questions or additional recommendations to share, please reach out to us at thudson15@kent.edu or alyssa_rockenbach@ncsu.edu.

[34] Rockenbach, A. N., & Hudson, T. D. (2024). Transforming political divides: How student identities and campus contexts shape friendships between liberals and conservatives. *AERA Open, 10*(1), 1-15.
[35] Rockenbach, A. N., Hudson, T. D., Shaheen, M., Chinoun, R., & Kanwal, A. (2024, November). Friendship as political bridge-building: Ideological and attitudinal change among students with interpartisan friendships in college. Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) Annual Conference, Minneapolis, MN.