

- Vincent Munoz: I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.
- Betty Friendan: The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.
- Bettina Apthekar: There was a passion in what was being said, affirming this caused what people considered a sacred constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association.
- Alex Kappus: From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is Speech Matters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Alex Kappus, and this month I hold the honor of being your guest host. I joined the center community in 2023 as a fellow, to study the impact of the California Student Civic and Voter Empowerment Act. Since that time, I have remained actively connected to the center. A source of inspiration, community and service. I currently advance institutional strategy and student success at Carnegie Higher Ed, and am building on my research in civic education and voter engagement as a fellow through the Harvard University Democratic Knowledge Project and affiliated with the Allen Lab for Democracy Renovation. When I was invited to guest host an episode of Speech Matters, one of the first people whom I knew I wanted to talk to was today's guest, Caroline Mehl, co-founder and executive director of the Constructive Dialogue Institute.
- Caroline's work is situated at the intersection of free speech, civic discourse, and behavioral science, and she has spent her career helping institutions and individuals learn how to engage across deep divides. I'm excited to jump into my conversation with Caroline, but before we dive in, I'll hand things off to center communications and program associate Melanie Ziment, for this month's class notes, a look at what's making headlines.
- Melanie Ziment: Seven of the nine elite universities, originally approached by the Trump administration, declined an offer of preferential federal funding in exchange for signing what the White House pitched as a compact for academic excellence. As noted in last month's class notes, the memo asked institutions to adopt several policy changes such as restricting international student enrollment and eliminating race and sex from admissions and hiring, and policing campus units viewed as hostile to conservative ideas. Many university leaders push back, arguing the terms threaten academic freedom, institutional autonomy, and merit-based research.

Of the two institutions yet to reject the deal, Vanderbilt University publicly expressed reservations while the University of Texas at Austin remains the most likely to sign. The Trump administration also extended the compact to all US colleges with mixed results. New College, Florida and Valley Forge Military College signaled interest in signing, while Washington University explicitly rejected the proposal. Its chancellor stated that the university would not endorse, quote, "Any document that undermines our mission or our core values. Perhaps highest among these are commitment to academic freedom, access, free expression, and research integrity."

There is a new update in the Trump administration's ongoing negotiations with higher education institutions. To recap, earlier in the year, the administration froze hundreds of millions of dollars in federal research funds to a small group of elite campuses around the country, citing concerns over handling of anti-Semitism on campus and ongoing promotion of diversity, equity, and inclusion policies. In response, universities have taken various approaches to ease tensions and restore federal funds. Cornell University just announced a \$60 million settlement with the administration, bringing the number of cases settled to four of nine affected colleges. Negotiations with Princeton, Northwestern, Harvard, Duke, and the University of California Los Angeles are still ongoing.

At the end of October, the first Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on a case concerning MIT's handling of pro-Palestinian protests on its campus. The three-judge panel affirmed a lower court decision dismissing the lawsuit. The ruling is an important marker, as universities continue to navigate how to protect First Amendment-protected speech, while also complying with anti-discrimination laws such as Title VI. The panel wrote that Title VI does not require a university to, quote, "Quash protected speech." And found that MIT took adequate steps to address legitimate discriminatory behavior and harassment by some student protesters. That's the news. Now back to today's guests.

Alex Kappus:

Thank you, Melanie. Now on to introducing today's guest. Caroline Mehl is the co-founder and executive director of the Constructive Dialogue Institute. She has expertise in translating psychological research into innovative real-world applications. In her role, Caroline advises universities, workplaces, philanthropists, and communities on how to create more open cultures where people can navigate their differences effectively. Previously, Caroline was an associate research scholar and visiting scholar at New York University's Stern School of Business. She has experience in venture capital, social entrepreneurship and philanthropy. Caroline received her bachelor's degree from Yale and her master's degree from Oxford as a Blavatnik foundation scholar.

Caroline's writing has been featured in the Chronicle of Higher Education inside Higher Ed, Time, and the Harvard Business Review. She's on the advisory board of two national initiatives working to heal our country's divides. Disagree, Better, and Builders. Her organization, the Constructive Dialogue Institute or CDI, was founded to equip people with the skills and mindset to engage constructively across differences. Through evidence-based programs, they are working hard to strengthen the very fabric of democracy with a specific emphasis on supporting higher education. On a personal note, I've had the privilege of collaborating with Caroline and her team over the past two years through a partnership between Carnegie, formerly Credo, and CDI. Together, we developed and delivered a leadership institute for college and university presidents and their cabinets, focused on fostering campus cultures where dialogue and free expression can coexist even in the most turbulent times. Caroline, welcome to Speech Matters.

Caroline Mehl: Thanks so much for having me.

Alex Kappus: Absolutely. Well, let's start with the foundation here. What exactly is constructive dialogue? What's some of the science behind this approach?

Caroline Mehl: Yeah, so we define constructive dialogue as a form of conversation where people with different perspectives seek to understand one another without abandoning their own beliefs in order to live, learn, and work together. So really at its core is this focus on seeking mutual understanding. And we've distilled research from the behavioral sciences, from conflict resolution, into what we call the five principles of constructive dialogue. These are five evidence-based practices that you can use to navigate any type of conflict or disagreement. And to give you a sense of what the five pillars or principles are, the five principles are let go of winning, ask questions, share stories, respond rather than react, and find what shared. I'll tell you a little bit about what each of those means and some of the science behind it.

That first principle let go of winning, is really reacting to the fact that most people tend to enter disagreements thinking of them as a zero-sum battle. With either I win and you lose or vice versa. And when we enter disagreements in that way, we are essentially setting the conversation up to be a pitched battle. We are going on the offensive. And then what that does physiologically is that it sets the other person on the defensive because they feel as if they're being attacked. They feel as though it's a battle. And when we enter conversations like this, we are really committing to trying to defeat the other side as opposed to focusing on listening and learning. And those types of conversations tend to be very unproductive.

And what we know instead is that if you really shift the approach and the tone you take to a difficult conversation and you let go of winning and you shift from what we refer to as a warrior mindset to an explorer mindset, where you come with intellectual humility, curiosity, openness to learning and listening, it really transforms the entire conversation because it signals to the other person that this is a very different type of conversation. It's a conversation focused on mutual understanding and learning and discovery. And as a result, people typically respond very differently. And it not only creates the conditions for a more productive conversation, but again, it triggers our mirror neurons in such a way that other people tend to reflect back the same type of approach that you bring into the conversation. That's the first principle.

The second is to ask questions. Again, this practice sounds very basic of asking questions. One thing to note is that there are different types of questions. Not all questions are created equally. And so, asking open-ended questions that really invite deep reflection, invite people to share more about what's driving their underlying beliefs, this again opens up conversation. It allows more space for people to find areas of common ground, and it's a very effective tool in navigating difficult conversations.

The third principle is to share stories. What we know from the research is that while very often when we have a disagreement, we tend to think, let me just put together my strongest set of facts and evidence, and if I come with this rock solid case, then you will hear my evidence and then of course you'll change your mind. And we all know from experience that that very rarely happens when you're talking about issues that touch upon our deep commitments and convictions and things that are core to our identities. What the research finds is that when issues that are deeply wound up in our core convictions and beliefs are challenged head on, we often react as if we are facing a physical threat.

And we go into fight, flight or freeze and we kind of shut down and often become even more entrenched in our existing beliefs. But what research shows is that if you really instead engage at a more intuitive and emotional level, then you can open up more understanding and people tend to be less defensive. And storytelling is a very effective way of doing that. That's the third principle.

The fourth principle is to respond rather than react. Again, this taps into the fact that very often when we have these difficult conversations, it starts to feel as though things are speeding up, they kind of spin out of control. We're often saying things that we later regret, engaging in ways that we think are the worst version of ourselves. And the reason for that again goes back to the fact that very often in these disagreements are fight, flight or freeze responses are activated. And in those moments, our prefrontal

cortex, which is responsible for our executive functioning and critical thinking and reasoning, basically shuts down and we're flooded with stress hormones that make us very reactive. And this principle is really about becoming more in tune with yourself and being able to recognize when you're starting to see those signals of that fight, flight, or freeze reaction, and gaining some skills to help yourself engage in emotion regulation to regain control and those moments so that you're able to navigate them more thoughtfully.

And then the final principle, find what's shared, is centered on this notion that in the midst of a disagreement, often we have much more in common with the other person than we might think. This has many different levels. One is that very often we are so consumed by whatever the disagreement is that we lose sight of the fact that more often than not, there are at least pieces of the topic that we do agree on. And if you take the time to figure out, okay, well maybe we agree on 30% of the problem, but we disagree on 70% of the problem, just even naming that, that 30%, there's alignment there that can help build the opportunity for further conversation, for more exploration of figuring out ways that you do agree or finding pieces that you do agree on separately.

But relatedly, we also, again, we tend to become so focused on the disagreement that we might impose that on the identity of the person. Say, oh, but this person, we assume all these bad intentions and labels to them. The more that we reflect on, what do we have in common here? Where do we have shared identity, shared humanity? It can really again, help create a foundation of trust that builds the framework and foundation for further conversation and further opportunities to actually find points of common ground.

Alex Kappus: Thank you so much, Caroline, for laying that groundwork and really centering our audience and understanding what you mean by constructive dialogue. And clearly, each of the principles has scientific purpose. And my favorite is the intellectual humility piece. I think the idea that maybe I don't know everything, it really leans into that spirit of higher education as a space for engaging with diverse viewpoints. In your role, you spend a lot of time working with educators and leaders, especially across higher ed. What are some of the themes that crop up across those conversations?

Caroline Mehl: There are a few key things that I've been hearing recently. One is I'm seeing this really deep commitment among many leaders and educators across higher ed, towards values like dialogue, inquiry, free expression, pluralism. It's very clear that there is this authentic commitment to these values among most of the leaders that I speak to. I find that very encouraging. The other thing that I'm hearing a lot in conversations is that leaders will often... I'll ask them, "Tell me about what's going on in your

campus." And what I hear repeatedly is they'll say, "The vast majority of our campus is also committed to those values." Most students are coming onto campus hungry to engage in these types of thoughtful, meaningful conversations across lines of difference. One campus I was speaking to recently shared that they actually did some survey research with their students and they found that more than 90% of students said that they were eager to engage in conversations across lines of difference.

But the third theme that I hear consistently is that there is this fear and uncertainty around doing so. And that tends to track to two different things. One is that people tend to assume that other people don't want to engage in these types of conversations. Again, survey data bares that out, where about half of students in most major pools say that they feel uncomfortable speaking up. Students tend to say that they think other students don't want to have these types of conversations. And the other major component that is driving a lot of this fear that I hear from stakeholders across higher ed is concerns related to social media and concerns that anything you say at any moment can be recorded, taken out of context, posted online, and it could really have tremendous negative repercussions. And those are the three kinds of interrelated topics that I'm hearing quite consistently.

Alex Kappus: Wow. Really, really critical insight there. Especially this idea that students in some cases are sort of fearing the ability to speak up. Given those themes, how do you think constructive dialogue plays a role in helping address that fear factor?

Caroline Mehl: Our work at CDI really focuses on creating cultures that support constructive dialogue. We're not just thinking about the skills, we're thinking about what are the cultural elements that would allow this to happen? I hear in that two key challenges and two key opportunities. The first is this, what I would refer to as an epistemic ignorance problem. Where there's this gap between what people want, they want to be able to engage, they want to have these types of experiences, but their expectation is that others won't or that others will respond negatively. And in order to resolve that issue, you really need to focus on setting norms and expectations on campus that creates the conditions for people to feel more comfortable engaging.

Things like making more public and vocal that, "Oh, actually the majority of people on this campus want these types of conversations." Using tools like anonymous polling at the top of conversations about challenging topics that reveal the diversity of perspectives in the room. There are different types of techniques that you can use to address that challenge and set the conditions out for people to feel more comfortable.

But the second challenge is really a skill gap where part of the reason that people feel uncomfortable is also that they don't have the skills to navigate these conversations effectively. We all know from personal experience that even if you're well-intentioned, talking about highly charged, highly sensitive topics is just inherently difficult. And there's a real opportunity to support students in gaining the skills and confidence they need to navigate these conversations more effectively, supporting faculty and staff with the skills they need to be able to create the conditions and facilitate difficult conversations such that constructive dialogue just becomes a norm on the campus.

Alex Kappus: Caroline, thank you so much. The skills gap made me think about social media and the fact that students, they're now growing up on screens, and I can see where students are sort of needing some deliberate and intentional designed educational experiences that help strengthen that muscle to express themselves openly with somebody else that they disagree with vehemently. We often talk about free expression and inclusion as perhaps being at odds or in conflict, but is that the case? And how do you navigate the tension between protecting free speech and also ensuring belonging?

Caroline Mehl: I also hear this all the time. I think that this has been the narrative in higher ed for almost the past decade. And I think that this is really a false binary of thinking of free expression and inclusion as being at odds. And I think of these two things as really being two sides of the same coin. And if you think back to any experience that you've had where you felt comfortable speaking up openly, expressing your views, it was probably in an environment where you felt like you belonged because otherwise you probably wouldn't have felt comfortable expressing yourself. At the same time, it's really impossible to have true inclusion and belonging if people don't feel comfortable speaking up and fully expressing their views and identities. As a result, we see these values as being prerequisites for one another. You really can't have one without the other.

The way that we think about it is really trying to find an appropriate balance that reflects a culture of psychological safety. And when I say psychological safety, psychological safety is distinct from emotional safety. Psychological safety is an academic concept developed by the Harvard Business School professor Amy Edmondson, that is really focused in organizational behavior theory, and it's all about creating a team or organization where people feel they won't be punished or humiliated for speaking up with ideas, questions, concerns, mistakes that they have. What research has found consistently is that having a culture of psychological safety is actually essential for having high-performing teams where people feel like they can take risks, where they can do groundbreaking work, and it's also an essential ingredient for preventing different types of issues in various workplaces.

For example, in manufacturing and airfare or airlines, psychological safety is really critical to avoiding any type of major safety issue. In hospitals, it also is associated with better health outcomes for patients when people feel like they can fully express themselves, express their concerns. We see psychological safety as really what we're striving for, where it's balancing both free expression and belonging.

Alex Kappus: Very thought-provoking. What I hear you saying is that there are perhaps certain conditions necessary for dialogue to be constructive, good faith, shared humanity recognize. Can you say a little bit more about how maybe an instructor, an advisor, or maybe even a peer can create a space or an environment that promotes or supports that psychological safety as you defined it?

Caroline Mehl: Yeah. There are a couple of things. One really valuable tool is just setting norms at the outset of any kind of convening. And that looks like really just establishing with a group, what are the expectations that we should set for one another for this space in order to have that outcome where people can feel comfortable fully expressing themselves? And doing so in a way where you're not just imposing the norms, but you're really inviting the group to contribute, really helps get buy-in. And also again, reflects what are the different stakeholders in this group need in order to feel this way?

The other valuable piece of setting norms is not only are you setting expectations, but if some norm is violated, by having set norms at the outset, it creates the opportunity to go back and revisit those norms if there's been a norm violation, and use it as a way to get people back on track to say, at the beginning of this conversation, we established that we would behave in XYZ way. Let's return to that norm. It's a really, really helpful tool. The other thing that facilitators, whether it's a faculty member, a student leader, a staff member can do is they can exhibit some of this themselves. They can do things like talk about times when they change their minds, they can say when they're uncertain about something, they can share mistakes that they've made. By modeling this, they're demonstrating that this is a space where this is actually encouraged behavior.

Alex Kappus: Fantastic norms, and practicing intellectual humility is what I heard. Caroline, as you know, critics from both ends of the political spectrum have been critical of dialogue work, arguing on one end that dialogue is just another tool of advancing DEI. Or from others, that dialogue is in fact a way to mute dissent or ignore marginalized voices under the banner of civility. What's your response to those across the political spectrum who see dialogue as a way to smooth over rather than confront hard truths?

Caroline Mehl: I often hear after major polarizing events, people will say to me something like, "There's no point in engaging with the other side. I'm totally done with them. They're past the point of no return." And when people say things like that, they're effectively writing off half of the country, and they're not really thinking through like, well, what is the alternative to dialogue? The alternative to dialogue is violence and civil war. If we truly get to a place where we are refusing or incapable of engaging in dialogue, the alternative is violence. I think that at the end of the day, this is really a bipartisan goal where continuing to engage in dialogue despite our very real differences is the only way that we can avoid violence, and it's also the only way that we can actually make progress on our shared concerns.

Alex Kappus: Well said, Caroline. Many who work in this space, myself included, civic engagement, voter education, dialogue work. It's really hard to present this work in a manner that can't be poked at or accused of being partisan in one way or another. How do you mitigate that concern or how do you combat the accusations of your work being accused as being partisan one way or another?

Caroline Mehl: I'll say that we actually don't hear this very much, and I think it's because we are so intentional about being nonpartisan in everything we do. And there are four key things that we do that I think have been really helpful. The first is that we really work with people from across the political spectrum. We work with Republican governors, we work with chief DEI officers, and we just have a diverse coalition of partners because we are appealing, again to this nonpartisan, bipartisan set of shared values and goals.

The second thing that we do as an organization is that we essentially practice institutional neutrality, which I know is a hot buzzword in higher ed right now. What that looks like for us is that we just don't comment on any issues publicly that are not directly related to our mission. And that's been really hard over the years, but I think it's something that's been really important because we are seeking to be this neutral third party. We don't want to tip the scales in any way. We also don't want to be perceived as being biased in any direction on any type of issue, because it's essential for us and for our work to be able to come in and support people in navigating their differences on these topics.

The next practice that we follow is that we're also really intentional when we develop any of our programming, that we get feedback from stakeholders across the political spectrum. They are reviewing it, they're monitoring it for language, for design, and we really want to ensure that our programming resonates with people across the political spectrum and is experienced as nonpartisan. And then the fourth tactic that we take is that as an organization, we are very committed to research. We are

conducting research on an ongoing basis to evaluate the effectiveness for our tools, using that to inform ongoing duration and improvement.

But we also develop all of our programming based off of the latest behavioral science research. And as a result, I think because we're always grounding our work in research, again, it communicates this sense of non-partisanship. It's very non-ideological. I was talking about how does the brain work? How do we physiologically respond to things? And I think that's something that because it's really tapping into our shared common humanity or common sense of being a human being and the inherent challenges and shortcomings that we have, I think it's something that resonates with people across the political spectrum.

Alex Kappus: Thanks, Caroline. And I saw those practices front and center in our work together over the past two years. Just the intentionality that you and others on the CDI team take to take that sort of extra step to make sure that language and framing of activities that folks across the political spectrum might not interpret something as being pro one party or pro one ideological perspective over another, but really creating that space where folks can be engaged with one another in authentic ways.

Turning to some current events, you and your co-founder, Jonathan Haidt, wrote a piece for the Chronicle of Higher Education after Charlie Kirk's assassination, entitled 'The Path Forward After Political Murder: The Solution to Violence Isn't Less Speech, It's Better Dialogue.' That title really stuck with me, but I wonder what if the solution of better dialogue doesn't work fast enough to repair our socio-political environment? How do we respond to the urgency of polarization and rising political violence while building a culture that could actually take generations to change?

Caroline Mehl: I do agree that this is absolutely a generational project, but at the same time, I think that dialogue, constructive dialogue, is actually the most important solution for that very particular problem. And the reason I say that is that there's very clear research that shows that political violence is the direct result of shifting from disagreeing to demonizing and dehumanizing. And the reason why I say that is that there's this really important distinction between what is known as issue polarization and affective polarization.

Issue polarization is basically the idea that we might disagree vehemently on a particular issue, but despite our disagreement, we can still be friends. We get along totally fine. And what's important to recognize is that issue polarization is just part of living in a democracy, right? We will of course, always have differences in opinions, and that's not inherently a bad thing. That's actually a good thing. That's what a free democracy is all about. But affective polarization refers to the gap that we feel between our own side

and the other side. We feel really positively towards those who are part of our political group, and we have very negative feelings towards those of the other political group.

And we've seen that in the past decade, affective polarization has been rising steadily and affective polarization is incredibly toxic, and it plays no positive role in a democracy. It's essentially just hating people because of what they believe. And the research shows that as you again, have more and more dislike for others, you start to attribute more and more negative things to them. Research shows that more and more people of both political sides attribute negative characterizations to the other side. They'll say that they're immoral, they are ignorant, et cetera. And the more that you then see the other side as not just wrong but dangerous, the more that you feel a sense of moral license to stop them at all costs. You actually feel as though it's a moral imperative that because the other side is so deeply flawed and so dangerous to our democracy, it's your moral responsibility to prevent them at all costs, even if that means justifying violence against them.

We've been seeing the rates of support for political violence increasing as affective polarization has been rising. At the end of the day in order to combat this problem, part of it is definitely an issue at the leadership level. Political leaders are shifting the norms, shifting the political rhetoric in a way that also is dehumanizing their political opponents. But at the end of the day, in order to address this problem, this is a cultural problem and there needs to be a return to recognizing our shared humanity, building bridges across our differences. And again, finding ways to find common ground and keep that conversation open.

Alex Kappus:

Differences are a good thing. I think that really stood out to me in your response. And it's only when it moves to a space of hatred and that this person is so flawed and so against me that there's no chance that they could come around, that it sort of leads into the space of violence.

I want to pull on the thread there in following up here. You'd mentioned political leaders, and I would argue across the political spectrum, have sort of turned the volume up and have contributed to that affective polarization that you talked about. And people are losing faith in our democracy. A Times-Ciena Poll published just last month asked Americans to indicate the top problem facing the country. Not surprisingly, number one was the economy, but number two was political division. And the same poll indicated that the majority of Americans believe that we're too divided to solve our problems. Given that, is dialogue still a viable strategy when the underlying systems feel broken or to some that democracy itself is under attack?

Caroline Mehl: It's a really important question, and I would say that I don't see dialogue as a silver bullet to save our democracy. I see it as nested within a much broader set of strategies that are all necessary. When I think about this issue of how to strengthen our democracy, I think about elections and voting, democratic institutions, information ecosystem, and our civic culture. Elections and voting, interventions look like things like increasing voter access, replacing current voting systems with things like rate choice voting to ensure better outcomes, strengthening democratic institutions. Making sure that our governing institutions are actually functioning properly, reducing gridlock, are representative. And then you have this whole bucket of our information ecosystem. Really ensuring that there's trustworthy news that our social media spaces or spaces that are not spreading falsehoods. And I think that as AI is accelerating and becoming more and more mainstream, this issue in particular is more and more important.

That last bucket is around civic culture. What we've seen, again from historical examples, is that even if you have the infrastructure in place to support democracy, there's a critical cultural and normative component that needs to support it. If you have the infrastructure, but you don't have that civic culture and those civic norms, democracy can crumble very quickly. And that's where I see dialogue coming in. Where having healthy discourse across divides is a critical piece of having a strong and healthy civic culture that allows for those other pieces to function. And they're all of course, interrelated. They go in both directions. And so again, I don't see dialogue as being in and of itself the solution, but I think it's a critical component to this set of interventions that are all necessary to strengthen our democracy.

Alex Kappus: That's really helpful framework for thinking about situating constructive dialogue, the four levers and specifically the civic culture element. I'm curious, why has CDI focused so much on higher education as a key strategy within that civic culture and infrastructure?

Caroline Mehl: That's a great question. It's something that we have spent a lot of time thinking about. One piece of it is that when I think about the problem, I really think it's a pervasive problem across American society. The issue though is it's really hard to change American society when you just think of it as this broad thing of more than 300 million Americans. And the most effective way of changing a society is really trying to change specific segments of the society one at a time. We specifically focused on higher ed as our main focus, so not necessarily our only focus for a couple of reasons. One is that from a developmental perspective, college students are at an age that they are really well-disposed to be considering these types of concepts. They are both developmentally mature enough that they can really grapple with these subjects, but they're not so fixed that they are

unwilling to change their perspectives. They're very malleable. They're at this place where they're forging their worldviews and identities. It's really the kind of best place to intervene from a developmental perspective.

The second reason is that institutions of higher ed, their really core function is all about the production of knowledge. And their core principles are around supporting rigorous exchange of ideas, free expression, dialogue, inquiry. And it just felt extremely well aligned with what we are trying to accomplish. The last piece is that for many people, attending higher ed is really the first time in their lives that they are living in a community that is extremely diverse. They're exposed to many different worldviews, people from different backgrounds. And again, it just felt like the right moment to help young people develop a set of skills and really help prepare the next generation for democratic citizenship.

Alex Kappus: Thank you, Caroline. Of course, I'm biased. I also work in higher education as my emphasis, and I agree. I think it's a really powerful space to influence the kind of world that we want to live in. And you talked about the developmental perspective, but I also think about adult learners and graduate and professional students, and also how colleges and universities are deeply embedded into the communities that they serve. I worked at a community college in a rural community, and that college was a hub for civic engagement, right? They actually hosted local candidates for debates and things like that. And I think it's really smart that your organization has really emphasized the importance of higher education as part of embedding constructive dialogue as a practice, as a skill. It's sobering and it's hopeful that campuses might still be seen as places where students can learn how to think for themselves while also not forgetting the importance of striving to come together across differences.

Shifting gears just a little bit. I want to ask about leadership and culture change in higher education. As I shared over the past two years, Carnegie partnered with CDI to design and deliver a leadership curriculum for college presidents, and their cabinets focused on building campus cultures that model constructive dialogue. To date, over 40 college and university cabinets have gone through this CDI Leadership Institute, including a cohort of high profile private institutions just last month. Can you share why it was important to you and CDI to develop an institute for senior leaders in higher ed to grapple with all of these issues?

Caroline Mehl: What we find is that the challenge of creating a culture of inquiry and dialogue in higher ed is something that really requires a system level approach to solving. And engaging those senior leaders is really critically important for thinking about how are they tackling this issue? How are they thinking strategically about this across the entire university, not just in a kind of ad hoc one-off approach. Getting that specific audience

engaged in the work was really important, but then what we've also found is that this work is really hard. No one in higher ed has figured out how to solve this problem. And we see this as an opportunity to really support those leaders who are very busy.

They're constantly being tasked with putting out different fires and responding to urgent demands. And carving out the space for them to really dedicate to doing this work, I think is really valuable. And also providing them with expertise and frameworks so they are not feeling as though we need to totally reinvent the wheel as they're approaching this work, but instead, we can share our insights. And also we are helping them engage with one another to share learnings and best practices with their peers. That has been another really helpful component of this cohort model where they are just engaging in shared learning all the time.

And in particular, what we offer to this group is a model that we call the five pillars of campus culture change. Based on our research in behavior change research, culture change research, and also our work over the past few years of more than 150 campuses across the country, we've identified five specific strategies that campus leaders can focus on in order to again, comprehensively think about driving positive culture change on their campuses.

And the five pillars are a leadership commitment, focusing on the curriculum pedagogy. The third is co-curricular experience. The fourth is policies, processes, and structures. And the fifth is measurement and organizational learning. And the idea is that those five pillars all together capture the entire ecosystem of an institution. And in order to really drive meaningful culture change, you need to be operating across those models, across those different pillars.

And what that looks like in practice, going one by one, so the leadership commitment, really ensuring that presidents, provosts, trustees, are deeply committed to this work, are making a public and vocal commitment to this work. Their mission statements, their values, their strategic plans reflect this, they're allocating resources to it. The second pillar is about curriculum and pedagogy. Ensuring that there are courses and opportunities for students to learn these types of skills, engage in this type of way, but also even more broadly, really thinking about how faculty can develop the pedagogical skills to infuse this into their teaching, regardless of the topic at hand.

Ensuring that their syllabus, it reflects multiple perspectives around contentious topics, ensuring that they have the skills to set norms, invite conversations, invite dialogue, and also intervene if things start to go a little bit sideways. The co-curricular piece is really thinking about from

orientation to graduation, what are all the different touch points that can give students exposure to diverse perspectives, see constructive dialogue modeled, give them opportunities to start to develop these skills and habits. And then the policies, processes, and structures are really the nuts and bolts or the infrastructure that keeps everything on track, puts everything together. That's another essential piece. Policies like having clear time, place and manner policies that specify what is considered appropriate protest behavior on this campus. Not just ensuring that you have those policies in place, but ensuring that people actually know about them so they understand what are their rights, what are their responsibilities, but also ensuring that they are enforced in a consistent way.

And then the fifth pillar is, again, measurement and organizational learning. Making sure that campuses are actually evaluating the work that they're doing in this area, tracking what's working, what's not working, to inform organizational decision-making, to decide what should be scaled up, what are the gaps in our work, to really make sure that they're actually making progress on these issues.

Alex Kappus: It's fantastic that you've developed such a helpful tool for framing a culture of constructive dialogue on college and university campuses. It's also really inspiring that senior leaders are viewing dialogue work as such a good fit with the mission of higher ed, the vigorous exchange of ideas. It also is a reality that many view higher education negatively or don't trust the industry to fulfill these core roles in our society. Caroline, what can leaders do, do you think, to earn back trust? And do you think this dialogue work is part of the solution?

Caroline Mehl: I do think it's a part of the solution because I think that a lot of people, when you look at those recent polls, there was a poll a few months ago from Gallup and Lumina, and they found that public trust in higher education is not at an all-time low. There's a slight improvement from last year, but it's near an all-time low. I think the most significant concern that people had were issues related to perceived political imbalance or concerns around political issues on campus. There's a whole bucket of different pieces of that, but that was the number one concern.

I think that campus leaders really demonstrating and truly doing the work to ensure that their campuses are spaces where people from across the political spectrum feel comfortable and welcome and they're able to engage in conversations that are hard. I think that that's something that's really important that will go a long way in building back the trust of the public.

Alex Kappus: Thank you so much. Getting expression, inclusion and leadership to work in harmony might be one of higher ed's biggest tests in this moment. Caroline, you've been doing this for years, through moments of polarization, backlash, uncertainty, and hope. What's something that you've changed your mind about along the way? Maybe even something that you once believed deeply about dialogue that no longer holds true for you?

Caroline Mehl: I think when I first started this work, I naively assumed that people would just embrace this because they of course would care about democracy. What I've found is that a lot of people are deeply concerned about democracy. Again, there's a lot of research that shows that this is one of the top concerns among the public right now. But at the same time, we found that people aren't necessarily as motivated as I am to this work. We found that it's really important to be able to connect this work to people's individual motivations. There is actually a lot of reason to do so.

These skills around engaging in conversations across lines of difference are not just good for our democracy, but they also help individuals personally, professionally, academically. Being able to make that case and help people connect those dots of actually these are skills that are really going to set you up for success in all these different domains of your life, we found that that is a much more effective way of getting buy-in from different stakeholders.

Alex Kappus: Absolutely. Good for democracy and good for a flourishing life. Caroline, before we wrap up, I want to ask you what has become something of a Speech Matters tradition. We like to leave our listeners with one action that they can take. Something to read, reflect on, or try to advance constructive dialogue in their own sphere. What would you suggest?

Caroline Mehl: I think if I could recommend one practice, it would be to give people the benefit of the doubt more. When you hear something that you strongly disagree with, rather than leaping to the worst conclusion about the other person, try asking yourself why would a rational well-intentioned person think this? And then pretend you're an anthropologist and genuinely try to answer that question. Engage with them in a way where you are just acting like you are this external observer that is just truly curious about why they believe what they believe. While you might not change your mind, your perspective of why people believe what they believe might be radically altered as a result.

Alex Kappus: It's such a practical suggestion and something that I will definitely try to practice this week and many weeks beyond that. Caroline, thank you so much for being a guest today. Thank you for what you're doing to help higher education, specifically to live up to its civic mission.

Caroline Mehl: Thank you so much for having me.

Alex Kappus: Well, that's a wrap for this episode of Speech Matters. Thank you to our guest, Caroline Mehl, and to the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement for this opportunity to guest host. You can learn more about the Constructive Dialogue Institute at constructivedialogue.org and find resources on free speech, civic learning, and higher education at freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu. Thank you for listening. Stay engaged, remain hopeful, and continue to engage with the center community.