

A Student Toolkit to Support Interpartisan Friendships on College Campuses

by *Tara D. Hudson, PhD*

by *Alyssa N. Rockenbach, PhD*

This toolkit contains guidance for students 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](#).

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.

1. Be intentional about engaging in good-faith conversation with individuals and organizations on campus whose political views may differ from your own.

If you're a member of a politically-focused student organization on your campus, prioritize and advertise making your group open to those who may hold different perspectives so that good-faith conversations across differences can take place. Additionally, attend events sponsored by organizations you may not agree with, in the spirit of good-faith dialogue and collaborative inquiry. To learn more about how to engage in good-faith conversation, we recommend the book *Try to Love the Questions: From Debate to Dialogue in Classrooms and Life* by Lara Hope Schwartz. In doing so, you may find common ground across your political differences: "Common ground is not a compromise between two positions; it means shared interests, values, motivations and concerns."² If you are interested in activism on campus—such as participating in protests, rallies, and demonstrations—consider attending an event that may be just outside your comfort zone or focused on issues you are seeking to learn more about. One participant in our study went with her politically different friend to a protest that furthered her understanding about critical social issues and her appreciation for activism. She shared, "Just being able to talk about that and going to that demonstration was super cool. And that's where the activism kind of comes in, just being activist and standing up for what you believe in."

² Schwartz, L. H. (2024). *Try to love the questions: From debate to dialogue in classrooms and life*. Princeton University Press, p. 32.

2. Advocate for and participate in opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities you need to constructively and respectfully engage in political conversations.

Many college students recognize the value of interpartisan friendships—including the participants in our study, and hopefully you, too! However, participants also highlighted that they received little to no preparation or support for reaching across political divides on their campuses, leading to discomfort and fear. One of the strategies we’ve recommended to campus educators is to provide more programming to develop the knowledge, skills, and abilities college students like you need to constructively and respectfully engage in political conversations. But for this to be effective, you and your fellow college students need to participate in these opportunities, and if they don’t already exist on your campus, to advocate for them. For example, if you’re an orientation leader, you might recommend a common reading book focused on how to navigate political differences in interpersonal relationships (for example, *I Never Thought of It That Way: How to Have Fearlessly Curious Conversations in Dangerously Divided Times* by Mónica Guzmán). If you’re in an honors program, a fraternity or sorority, or part of a living-learning community, you might offer (or ask for programs) such as [Campus Conversations](#) or one of the other programs we recommended in our strategy #2 for [campus educators](#). In your general education classes, you might encourage your instructor to have the class participate in Unify America’s [College Bowl](#) as an assignment or to incorporate some of the exercises provided by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression’s (FIRE) [Let’s Talk](#) initiative or [Braver Angels’](#) debate and dialogue design. An additional strategy is to participate in programs or classes to help you learn about identities, beliefs, and experiences different than your own. This has two advantages: you’ll feel more comfortable around peers who are different than you and will be more likely to see them as potential friends.

3. Understand that friendships across political differences will likely involve conflict, but that conflict doesn’t have to damage your relationship if you and your friend demonstrate mutual respect for each other as people who are more than their political beliefs.

When you and your friend are open to learning from each other in the spirit of good-faith dialogue and collaborative inquiry,³ rather than assuming that differences can only cause conflict, you will likely be more successful in sustaining your relationship. As one participant in our study advised, it’s important for college students in interpartisan friendships to “tak[e] the time to learn from others. We can find just how special each of our opinions are, and how our differences are important to one another.” One [model](#) for how to do this can be seen in the powerful 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.

³ Schwartz, L. H. (2024). *Try to love the questions: From debate to dialogue in classrooms and life*. Princeton University Press, p. 32.

And even when conflict arises, your friendship can still thrive if you and your friend respect each other as people and can “distinguish a good person from ... a political ideology that you disagree with,” as one participant in our study said. Aligned with this idea, we’ve found in our prior research that a majority (65%) of college students had disagreements with their friends about politics and yet successfully navigated those conflicts to sustain their relationship.⁴ While conflict around political differences will likely arise in an interpartisan friendship, in a healthy relationship, you and your friend are intentional about centering your love and care for each other as people during the conflict and taking steps afterward to repair any damage to your relationship you may have caused. That said, however, if your friend belittles you, makes you feel unsafe, or causes you pain or harm in other ways—that is, if it’s not a healthy relationship—then you’ll want to honestly consider whether it’s worth preserving and what the cost to you of staying friends might be.

4. Share with other students on your campus why you value your own interpartisan friendships, and model for them what a healthy interpartisan friendship looks like.

One of the most effective things you can do to foster an environment on your campus where interpartisan friendships can thrive is to be an example for others of why these relationships matter and model what they involve. Your peers will likely see your lived experience as a much more powerful and trustworthy endorsement than any programming campus educators provide; you and your friend are the living proof! The participants in our study talked about the many positive ways their friendships have transformed them. We encourage you to reflect on the value your friendship has brought to your life, and to be vocal in sharing your insights widely: with other friends on campus, in classes, in the campus organizations you’re involved with, and with family members and friends from high school, too.

To reach an even broader audience, consider sharing your experience online: You might create a series of videos with your friend about why you value the different perspectives each of you holds, what you have in common despite your differences, challenges you’ve faced in your friendship and how you’ve overcome them, how you resolve arguments, what you’ve learned from each other, and more. To put a 21st century twist on the famous quote attributed to Gandhi, “Be the influencer behind the change you wish to see in the world!”

If you have questions or additional recommendations to share, please reach out to us at thudso15@kent.edu or alyssa_rockenbach@ncsu.edu.

⁴ 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.