



CASE STUDY

College and High School Students Join to Experience Civil Discourse

According to a [recent report from Citizen Data](#), “the majority of Americans perceive polarization as [a] significant threat to democracy.” College students are by no means exempt from this concern. In fact, polarization is severe enough on college campuses that [Heterodox Academy’s 2023 Campus Expression Survey](#) reported that over 79% of surveyed students are “at least somewhat reluctant to discuss, ask questions about, or share their ideas...” on a host of controversial topics including, for example, the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict, free speech, trans identity, and sexual orientation. The Citizen Data report suggests that “humanization” might just “be the antidote.”

Driven by concerns about partisan animosity – the fact that Americans on opposite sides of the political spectrum not only increasingly disagree with but also *dislike* one another – the **College Debates and Discourse (CD&D) Alliance** – a joint initiative of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni (ACTA), Braver Angels, and BridgeUSA – empowers students, faculty members, and administrators to honor ideological diversity and foster civil discourse on their campuses.

The CD&D Alliance has facilitated hundreds of Braver Angels Debates and numerous workshops on college campuses across the country engaging thousands of students, faculty, and community members in transformative discourse around a plethora of divisive social and political issues. Participants consistently report that these immersive and participatory experiences invite them to listen deeply and engage respectfully on some of the most challenging issues dividing our nation today.

At **Molloy University**, a small liberal arts college in Rockville Center, New York, Professor and Chairman of the Philosophy Department **Howard Ponzer** assembled a small team of student leaders who began working with the CD&D Alliance to organize a series of Braver Angels campus debates. In the first session on November 4, 2022,



“As a teacher of history, I truly enjoyed the debate and its format. It was totally engaging, which is a difficult thing to do with high school kids. My students were not nervous around the college kids, in fact I think they were inspired by their performance, and it influenced them to speak more. **The Molloy students were very well prepared, and this was beneficial for my students to witness this.**”

-Jennifer Meighan

US HISTORY & AP HISTORY TEACHER
Richmond Hill High School Queens, NY

more than 60 students and faculty gathered in Molloy's Hays Theatre and focused on their chosen topic: *"Should physician-assisted suicide should be legalized?"*

In a subsequent debate on April 3, 2023, students drilled into the question, *"Does society unfairly prioritize sports over music and arts programs?"* Both events drew robust attendance, proved popular with the student population, and also caught the attention of the school's administration.

For the next debate held in fall 2023, Dr. Ponzer, the Molloy student team, and other campus leaders conceived a unique variation: bringing in students from **Richmond Hill High School** in the New York City Borough of Queens. Guided by the CD&D team, they settled on a debate topic that would appeal to a cohort of college and high school students: *"Does Artificial Intelligence provide more harm than benefit to humanity?"*

On December 1, 2023, more than 40 Molloy students gathered in Hays Theatre, joined by approximately 50 Richmond Hill High School students, who had been bussed to the campus with parental permission. This marked the first time that high school and college students came together to experience College Debates and Discourse programming.



participants to see "the value of a certain aspect of the other person's stance" even when they might not have agreed with that person. For her, this is an indication "that we're not all so different."

"The debate's impact on students fosters something that is critical in our current societal environment, which seems to be less and less tolerant of accommodating viewpoints that differ from our own. The tenets of empathy, civility, and respect are taught by articulating and listening to opposing arguments and either finding new common ground or respectfully disagreeing. I thought that the co-mingling of college and high school students worked brilliantly. It was wonderful to see the high school students engaging freely in dialogue and getting a feel for the college experience in a first-hand manner. "

-James Lentini

PRESIDENT, MOLLOY UNIVERSITY

Katie Ferrugia, a student organizer and recent graduate of Molloy's Nursing Management program, said that having high schoolers present and enthusiastically participating "brought a very powerful energy to the room. These debates are important because they can be the positive experience that shows that it can be safe to disagree."

Reflecting on the overall experience, Ferrugia explained that Braver Angels Debates provide an opportunity for

At Richmond Hill High School, U.S. History teacher **Jennifer Meighan** endeavors to expose her students to a variety of discussion formats. She explained that she chose to have her students participate in the first debate because she wanted to expose them to a new form of conversation. After their positive experience at the December 1st debate, it was easy to bring many of them back. "I offered a second spring trip to a different class and some students who previously attended," she

recounted noting the students' eagerness to participate. A second collegiate-high school debate was held at Molloy on April 12, 2024 – this time on the topic of marijuana legalization. Meighan described the debates as excellent and memorable for her students who were excited about the topics and inspired to be in a college setting.

Molloy University President **James Lentini** found value in the collaboration with Richmond Hill High. "I thought the co-mingling of college and high school students worked brilliantly," he said. "It was wonderful to see the high school students engaging freely in dialogue and getting a feel for the college experience in a firsthand manner." He went on to echo the importance of opportunities to humanize others while carefully and critically considering diverse perspectives on an issue: "The debate format beautifully demonstrates what we value in a Molloy education that allows a topic to be viewed from multiple angles, while respectfully weighing the merits of opposing viewpoints."

Following her graduation in June 2024, Katie Ferrugia shared that she suspects that the skills of civil discourse she has learned while participating in CD&D programming will prove helpful as she embarks on her career path in the healthcare field. "Being able to develop skills to have conversations with people who care about different things or view things in different

ways, I think, is part of being empathetic. And in healthcare, empathy is a very valuable trait to have."

As of summer 2024, Molloy's students, faculty and administrators, alongside partnering staff and students at Richmond Hill High, are exploring further opportunities for developing civil discourse skills. The cohort is looking ahead to a debate this fall in the wake of the 2024 presidential election.

"Even when people have stances that seem like they would be by design in opposition to each other, there's usually some element there that they will agree on. Or they can at least see the value of a certain aspect of the other person's stance. It's nice to be able to witness that, and I guess it shows that we're not also different. A lot of us want the same things, even if we disagree on the intricacies."

-Katie Ferrugia

MOLLOY UNIVERSITY STUDENT, CLASS OF 2024



COLLEGE DEBATES AND
DISCOURSE ALLIANCE

ACTA Braver Angels Bridge



If you are interested in fostering civil discourse by organizing a Braver Angels Debate or CD&D workshop in your classroom or on campus, please use this QR code to learn more and reach out to our team.