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Simon Greer , Kevin Brown & Meredith Raimondo

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Gap Bridgers: Teaching Skills to Cross Lines of Difference

Simon Greer, Cambridge Heath Ventures^a
Kevin Brown, Spring Arbor University^b
Meredith Raimondo, Oberlin College^c

Abstract

Because polarization and demonization of the “other” are increasingly prevalent in today’s America, there are limited opportunities for deep and informed engagement across lines of difference, particularly on college campuses. “Bridging the Gap: Dialogue across Difference” (BTG) is a 2–3 week January term immersive experience that teaches students, from two very different higher education settings, the skills and approach to effectively communicate, understand and solve problems across lines of difference. BTG is predicated on the belief that engagement across difference strengthens, not weakens, our identities and calls on us to practice humility and curiosity. This work requires students to develop a set of skills and practices that too often go untaught. Piloted in January 2020 with Spring Arbor University and Oberlin College, BTG used a skills-based approach that tied together relationship-building, intellectual humility, and open-mindedness among people who disagree deeply to explore important matters. This article highlights experiences from the 2020 BTG pilot program and provides an in-depth description of the BTG approach and methodology.

In an increasingly polarized America, powerful forces in politics, media, and culture advance the notion that those with whom we disagree are the “other” and should be reviled and ridiculed. According to that narrative, students at Oberlin College, known as a bastion of liberal thinking in Oberlin, Ohio, are elite, intolerant “snowflakes.” Students at Spring Arbor University, a private, Christ-centered, liberal arts school in Spring Arbor, Michigan, are labeled as conservative, intolerant evangelicals. Each is supposed to view the other as the irreconcilable opposition.

^aSimon Greer (simongreer68@gmail.com) is the founder of Bridging the Gap. He works with unusual allies and diverse stakeholders building a movement of bridge builders committed to common good politics and addressing the spiritual crisis underneath our political crisis.

^bKevin Brown (kevin.brown@arbor.edu) serves as the chief diversity officer and director of intercultural relations at Spring Arbor University. Kevin has over 30 years of experience in secondary and higher education, as well as community leadership.

^cMeredith Raimondo (Meredith.raimondo@oberlin.edu) serves as vice president and dean of students at Oberlin College. Her work includes creating connections between curricular and cocurricular experiences, advising on life skills development, and bridging intellectual and personal communities.

In January 2020, students from the two schools took part in a winter term project called “Bridging the Gap: Dialogue across Difference” (BTG) to challenge views that depend upon increasingly limiting labels.¹

The goal of BTG was not to paper over differences or create some mushy middle but to honestly engage with the things held dear in each and every camp, trusting that no one is diminished in the process. This engagement was not a path to change minds but to cultivate curiosity about other people’s lives and why they think the way they do. The program began with skill-building within individual campus communities, followed by a formal exchange and encounter across the campus communities, and concluded with a policy application experience where the program participants worked collaboratively to study a pressing policy issue, synthesize learnings, and collaboratively present findings and blue prints for reform.

The coauthors of this article were co-creators of the Bridging the Gap pilot, with primary leadership from Simon Greer alongside deep collaboration from leaders at Spring Arbor and Oberlin. We believe that the learnings of this program, detailed within this article, provide valuable insight and concrete guidance for educators across higher education who are looking to develop similar civic, bridge-building skillsets among their student bodies.

Societal and Higher Education Context

There are many trends that have shaped our attitudes to engaging across difference and to the sheer size of the gaps between different sub-groups in our society. As authors of this article, we will not seek to land on one answer, but it is worth a brief review of the factors that contribute to this moment in America.

The last few decades have seen a decline of mediating institutions that have traditionally brought people together (Andreas, 2018; Lee, 2017). Whether those are mainline churches, labor unions, local political clubs, or neighborhood associations, there is a distinct decay in many of these important civic institutions.

Political partisanship has also radically increased. A recent study showed that 45% of Democrats would be unhappy if their child married someone who is a Republican; up from 4% in 1960. This unease about marrying across party lines is shared by Republicans, 35% of whom would be unhappy about their child marrying a Democrat (Najle & Jones, 2019).

Other social forces such as our re-sorting by race and economic class have left our society segregated and divided in ways many Americans thought were a thing of the past. Add to that nearly 30 years of scarcity, austerity, and anti-government campaigning, and the age old adage, “we are all in the same boat” is heavily under siege and more the exception than the rule. On top of these trends, there is the 24-hour news environment and a social media landscape that sort, distort, and focuses on extremes (Graff, 2018; Rank, 2009).

College campuses are not immune to the “us vs. them” divide. While the exploration of one’s own identity, values, worldview, and political philosophy is a necessary component of the college experience, it can come at the expense of understanding and respecting those who hold differing views. While talk of diversity has increased steadily in recent years, there is a shadow side to how it has unfolded. In many

¹ Bridging the Gap was created by Simon Greer. It is supported by The Arthur Vining Davis Foundation as well as the Interfaith Youth Core’s Courageous Pluralism Initiative (supported by the Fetzer Institute and the Charles Koch Foundation). Visit www.ifyc.org to learn more about IFYC.

cases, on college campuses in particular, diversity has become something one believes or an intention that one holds but not a practice. Tragically, too often the call for “diversity” has been reduced from the true promise of engaging diverse people and ideas as a practice to a commitment that one is simply expected to hold.

Today a “call-out” or “cancel” culture has taken hold where dismissing other points of view is often encouraged and where being exposed to alternative viewpoints can in some cases be considered “dangerous.” What is demanded currently is protection from the “other,” and what is applauded is shutting those voices down. In this process, people who see things differently are made to be a little less human by simplifying them, summarizing them, labeling them—and it is important to note that this dynamic exists on both progressive and conservative campuses.

Program Approach—Not Civility, Not Dialogue, Not Compromise

“Bridging the Gap” rests on a different vision. The BTG vision is to transform American culture to one where curiosity, not knowing, seeking out the other, finding comfort with discomfort, and engaging in productive tension are the norm.

Through an unusual combination of classroom learning, a cross campus exchange between students from Oberlin College and Spring Arbor University, and site visits with a broad range of stakeholders for a collaborative policy application, the goals of the BTG Winter Term Pilot Program was to teach students how to truly listen, understand, be heard, and seek common ground without attempting to change minds or having to compromise deeply held values. To accomplish these goals was hard work. And from pre and post program surveys along with daily reflections videos completed by all participating students, we know we were meeting these goals in very significant ways.

This was not an effort to dismiss the deep and genuine political differences in our country or to minimize the abhorrent behavior of hate groups. Rather, it was a concrete step to counter the powerful forces that seek to divide our nation by giving Oberlin and Spring Arbor students—some of our country’s future leaders—the tools to engage and ultimately find areas of common ground, shared humanity, and a sense of connection with those of different backgrounds and beliefs and with whom they share this country.

The program was structured in several parts and our deeper methodological approach will be explored in more detail below:

1. **Pre-Program:** Institutional commitment was essential for the success of this program. The effort began with extended meetings with the leadership teams from both institutions to ensure that the necessary interest, buy-in, and support existed before the project leaders moved into programmatic planning and implementation. We then worked with staff teams from both schools to co-design a recruitment strategy and application process that were distributed across both campuses to invite students to apply to participate in the pilot program.
2. **The Invitation:** BTG began with a simple yet surprisingly unusual invitation to its participants, an invitation that sits at the heart of this approach to building bridges and having courageous conversations. The text of the invitation, included below, is purposefully personal from project leaders to potential participants and in essential ways, this invitation sets the intention:

- 2.1. Our intention is to take seriously the things that others hold dear. If it matters to you then it will matter to me;
- 2.2. We are not here to convince anyone they are wrong or try to change them;
- 2.3. We are curious as to why others think the way we do, and rather than fearing we are diminished by listening carefully to ideas we might disagree with, we trust that we are enhanced by it; and,
- 2.4. We believe there is more common ground and experience than we can anticipate, and when there is not, we can fundamentally disagree with someone and still respect, even love, them.

Using this invitation, each campus worked to recruit about 8–12 students, reflective of their student body, to participate in the course.

3. The Course: The program was very intense with more than 125+ hours of combined classwork, fieldwork, and homework over three weeks. The structure for the course is summarized here and laid out in more detail in the next section of this article.

Skill Building

Part 1 of the winter term pilot program started on each campus with classroom instruction and training about building common ground, crossing lines of difference, acquiring listening skills, and overcoming blind spots. During this intensive curriculum, students took part in two full days of classroom learning sessions. Kristina Grace (senior business major, Spring Arbor University, personal communication, 2020) commented, “We focused on *how* to have hard conversations.”

Encounter

In Week 2 of the project term, we facilitated an exchange where Oberlin students traveled to Spring Arbor University to meet “the other” and begin the college-to-college encounter. Students not only practiced skills learned in Part 1 but also experienced different elements of campus life in order to give them insight into the daily lives of those students they were visiting. During this encounter, the students spent eight days living together. Elizabeth Stewart, (junior communications major, Spring Arbor University, personal communication, 2020) explained, “We all knew it was a safe space to learn and that meant it had to be a safe place to disagree Our goals were things like curiosity and intellectual humility, and it was a safe route because of the setup.”

Collaborative Application

After spending three days getting to know each other, the group then put their skills to further use by taking a collaborative approach to a policy issue. The issue they focused on was criminal justice reform. They began the deep dive by meeting all the stakeholders in the criminal justice system from state legislators and corrections officers, to formerly incarcerated individuals and advocacy organizations.

During this criminal justice immersion, students began to grapple with often conflicting issues, perspectives, and priorities toward a common goal of improving the criminal justice system.

Group Projects

As part of the pilot's conclusion, and the final phase of the program, the students spent two days together working on their final projects and preparing for the program closing. By the end of the project, these groups of two-three students (always a mix of students from both schools) each produced a final "criminal justice blue print" that reflected their learning and the common ground perspective they were able to forge with their peers from very different backgrounds and schools.

Program Methodology

Classroom Skill-Building

As outlined previously, the work on listening skills was the foundational teaching for this program. It starts with a somewhat spiritual or philosophical foundation. The BTG curriculum refers to this as the "Strong back, Soft front" approach. The idea is that when practitioners are firm and confident about their values and identity then, they do not have to be aggressive or combative when we meet new, divergent, or difficult ideas.

The notion of deep listening is introduced early on through the wise teaching of Persian poet, Hafiz, n.d./1999, who writes "How do I listen to others?/As if everyone were my greatest teacher/speaking to me/their cherished last words" (p. 99). This is a big idea for students and an intention that is very different from how most of us are trained to listen—especially when we think we are going to disagree.

In support of this intention, the BTG curriculum taught very concrete, and grossly undertaught, listening skills. These skills are taught in a way that the concepts and practices are building blocks that support one another. We build from the most basic to the more complex, taking time to practice each skill before moving on to the next.

Listening

Listen Silently. The most basic building block is to listen. But to really listen is not a common practice in our culture today. More often than not, when arguing or even in casual conversation, people pause in their talking to take a breath and maybe only long enough to "re-load" and prepare to shoot back against their opponent. What is uncommon is deep listening with the single goal of clear understanding, or more simply, being present with the speaker.

To practice this foundational skill, we break people into pairs and invite one person to share a story about something easy to listen to—a place they have visited or their favorite place in their home. The listener's job is to listen in complete silence. They are instructed to do nothing but listen, and they should be listening to more than the words. They are asked to listen and be present so they can hear the tone, observe the body language, and even notice what is not said. What they cannot do is interrupt, ask questions, tell their own story, or even speak at all.

As students are listening carefully, they are also encouraged to listen for "tells" like "never" and "always." We teach that those words and others like them often suggest a larger pattern is being shared and not just a simple description of an incident that may or may not matter.

“The living room was **never** cold.”

“We **always** got out of the city to visit my grandparents.”

These cues tell good listeners that there is something significant going on here for the person who is speaking. At this stage, students simply note these patterns as tools to deepen their listening.

Footprint. Once students have grown comfortable (more or less) with listening silently, we build on that skill with the idea of operating only within the “footprint” of what the speaker has given the listener. The listener continues to listen carefully, but this time they can only respond with words that the speaker used. So, if the speaker says, “My favorite room is the living room because that is where the most comfortable furniture is,” then those 16 words are the only ones the listener can respond to the speaker with—for example, “The most comfortable furniture is in the living room. That’s why it’s your favorite?” It might seem awkward or forced but this structured activity helps the listener to learn to stay focused on where the person speaking is going with their story. Rather than leading the speaker or shifting the focus to themselves, the listener is committing to staying present and attentive to what the speaker is offering.

Open-Ended Questions. Once students are accustomed to working with silent listening and then operating inside the footprint, then we introduce the use of open-ended questions. While there are many open-ended questions, we introduce two very reliable and simple questions as go-to’s for the students. In fact, these two became a sort of refrain throughout the program as students fell back on these frequently throughout the time we were working together.

1. Tell me more about that.
2. What was that like for you?

It is important to point out here that many people develop habits that lead them to try to sneak in questions along the lines of, “Don’t you think that was a bad idea?” as open-ended questions, but it is really an opinion somewhat poorly masked by a leading and somewhat closed question.

This set of foundational listening skills form the basis for effective communication across difference and across disagreement. When first introducing and practicing these listening skills, speaking participants are prompted to share something compelling and agreeable to the listener, making it easier to want to hear them and in that way motivating the listener to build strong listening skills. As we build on those skills and move to teaching “giving feedback” skills (discussed in the following), we start to get into topics that are more likely to stir up negative feelings and with those experiences, we introduce new skills to effectively communicate in more fraught situations.

Moving forward, we work hard to remember that listening must come first as it builds rapport, trust, and connection. Without those elements, feedback across difference will be very difficult.

Feedback Across Difference

Through a skit activity, students are invited to react to a staged dramatic scene in which the teacher storms into the room, tosses papers around, glares at different students, sighs, shouts, and storms out. Then students are asked to share what they saw happen during the brief skit. These students described seeing “anger, frustration, aggression” but rarely named things that were more specifically observable like “stomping your foot or crumpling paper.”

This common reaction creates an opportunity to talk about the difference between data (that which we can observe, see and quickly agree took place) and interpretation (the meaning we make of that data). This opportunity is eye-opening for many.

Based on this insight, the class then turns to the “ladder of inference,” where the next discovery happens. This is the concept that humans are not blank slates who make interpretations relying on data; rather, we live inside our prior experiences, values, worldview, and interpretations and mine for data that confirm what we already believe (Antal & Friedman, 2008; Ross, 1994; Spee, 2005).

The contention is that once two people, or a group of people, are in the realm of interpretation and contending with a divisive topic, it can be hard to find common ground because we humans often believe our interpretations are truth and are not even aware that we have unconsciously sorted out information that does not conform with our existing beliefs. In class, we, as facilitators, expose this pattern and then offer a framework to effectively convey feedback by getting beneath our interpretations, working with the data we have, and creating a context in which the feedback is likely to best be received.

The model is called the “4 I’s.” Each “I” refers to one step in the feedback process:

Intention. The idea here is that constructive feedback begins with a positive intention. If my goal in communicating with you is payback or revenge, then it is not a feedback conversation. Before starting the conversation, I ask myself, “What is my intention in having this conversation?” If the intention is something like, “To improve our work together” then I’m ready but if my intention is not a positive one, then I hold off on giving feedback until I am truly ready to initiate, and participate, in a constructive feedback conversation.

Incident. Once a positive intention is set, then the second “I” stands for incident which refers to having a specific example or “the facts.” What is it that happened, based on the data, that we both can agree transpired? Sometimes the discovery here is that the other party remembers the incident differently or does not remember it at all. In some cases, once the data are presented and discussed, one or both parties now see the incident differently, and the issue can sometimes be quickly resolved. Of course, that is not always the case. And, one party not remembering does not mean it did not happen.

Impact. Once there is a shared understanding of the incident, then the next step is to discuss the impact. This step is tricky because often humans would much prefer to go from data to their own interpretation of why the other person did what they did. But in this model, the person sharing the feedback is encouraged to disclose the impact the incident had on them rather than theorizing about why the other person did it.

For example, “We agreed that last week in our team meeting you had interrupted me a couple of times and that is because you don’t respect my opinion.” Instead, the speaker would share the impact it had on them. “We agreed that last week in our team meeting you had interrupted me a couple of times, and the interruptions led me to begin to question whether there is a place for me on the team, and so I worry that I won’t be able to effectively do my job.”

The latter is much more difficult to do and requires more vulnerability, which can be scary. However, the choice to be disclosing, to communicate the impact the incident had on me, helps the other party think sympathetically about this perspective because very often, the impact was not intended. It can allow the recipient of the feedback to more deeply consider how they might approach things differently to avoid that impact. Rather than feeling accused or defensive, they are invited to create a more positive impact.

Invention. The last “I” in the model is invention. Here is where the person initiating the feedback conversation would make a suggestion about how to find a different approach or solution in

the future. The two parties would discuss, based on their shared understanding and agreement about what happened, how they can now invent a way to do things differently going forward.

This simple model creates a framework that allows students to plan concretely, specifically, and structurally, how to have a hard conversation across difference with clarity, confidence, and humility. To practice this approach, we hand out a worksheet and ask each student to think of a real person and a difficult feedback conversation they need to have. They are given time to prepare for the conversation using the worksheet, and then a few volunteers come to the front of the room, one after another, and practice with instructors via role play. Facilitators then give students feedback about what it was like to be on the receiving end of the conversation and help them think through ways they could communicate more effectively.

Storytelling

The third element of the skill-building component of the program is storytelling skills. Building on listening and feedback, stories can support bridge building in a variety of ways. Storytelling helps one to

- be vulnerable
- de-escalate
- disclose
- show nuance
- convey how one came to think the way they do and believe what they believe (since the goal of these conversations is to create understanding, then this type of storytelling is crucial)
- humanize someone with whom you might disagree and provide the opportunity to share your own humanity

This is not meant to be a master class in the techniques of storytelling. The most important point is for students to understand the “why.” Students learn that often a good story can be more effective than trotting out more facts or seeking to poke a hole in someone else’s logic when the person is trying to move through a deep disagreement or apparent impasse in a conversation.

In addition to explaining the “why,” we provide the basics of good storytelling. These include ideas like

1. *Three Acts*: We talk about a good story having three acts like a good play. Act one needs you to meet the characters, act two creates tension, and act three brings resolution.
2. *Show, Don’t Tell*: Rather than telling someone the “movie was funny,” tell them the line that actually made you laugh.
3. The biggest challenges that people face in telling stories is often that they think telling a story would take too long, and so instead they describe the experience but do not convey the actual experience. We suggest rather that the power of the story is in the vivid details, in the particular.

In the classroom, we practiced these skills by doing one-on-one conversations on each of the two campuses before meeting the students from the other campus. This practice element is crucial because often students have an image of how to convince others and there is too little investment in the unique power of skillful one-on-one conversation where listening, feedback, and story-telling are practiced deeply.

The Encounter

The second phase of the program began when the Oberlin students arrived at Spring Arbor for eight days of living together in one dorm. This immersive experience created a foundation for the encounter and created the possibility of greater empathy, humility, and curiosity. It was essential to the depth we achieved.

In addition to living in a shared space, there were a number of key principles that undergirded the encounter portion of the program. Student participants were focused solely in an intensive encounter mode for about three days. During this time our focus was on the following:

1. *Start With Values and Stories*: The BTG approach does not begin by tackling issues—instead, we started by sharing values and getting to know each other’s stories. We explored values by looking at a deck of 50 cards² with images on them and having people select the cards that most and least speak to the values that they try to live by. By sharing the images, and the stories people have about the images, we were able to get much deeper than a conversation about words like *loyalty* or issues like *justice*.
2. *Stay in Motion*: Throughout the encounter, we were sure to keep students in motion, break into different smaller and larger group configurations to allow for interaction with different people in different combinations, and not to get stuck in a closed dynamic or dead-end conversation.
3. *Shared Experiences*: We also created many opportunities for students to have shared experiences. By giving them tasks to complete together or projects to work on in a group, we created a sense of teamwork, and we also gave them shared points of reference so they might look back and say “remember when we did that research together or even when we went to the store to get snacks together.” Having shared experiences helped form the basis for the group upon which they could build a sense of being one rather than two very different subgroups.
4. *Non-Verbal Activities*: Early on, and continuing throughout the program, we utilized a variety of non-verbal activities that encouraged students to work together and share their experiences by methods other than simply saying more and more words. For example, we facilitated an activity where people depict images of teams working at their best and worst, but they constructed the images out of each other—non-verbally, in total silence, and also without touching each other. And as we began to grapple with the issues where there may be deeply felt disagreements, we used an activity called “Lay It on the Line,” where statements were read aloud, and students positioned themselves silently along a spectrum from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree” in reaction to

² Picture Your Legacy™ is a product of 21/64 and is available at <https://2164.net/product/picture-your-legacy/>

each statement. There are then brief comments offered by selected students about why they positioned themselves where they did. This nonverbal positioning and then the brief exchange allowed us to reveal where there may be great, and surprising, divisions and start to explore those gaps without locking into a debate style format.

5. *Selectively Tackle Issues Head-On:* Our approach was instead to create unusual contexts for conversations and to set it up in unexpected ways. For example, after watching a brief film with a variety of competing perspectives, we prompted a reflective discussion by asking, “Share a time where your beliefs informed a private decision or a public position you took.” In the discussion, political topics certainly came into the fore—but because these discussions were set up as an invitation to reflect on beliefs, they were not arguments. The conversations were safe places to convey individual student truths.

During the encounter phase of the program, we also utilized the host campus and immersed ourselves in campus life. It was important not to create a cocoon in which the students interacted in a highly prescribed and protected manner without broader engagement. We wanted to create a genuine, and at times challenging, experience of what campus is like generally, allowing students to get more authentic exposure to the campus community. This experience also created an opportunity for students to start putting their skills into practice with others who were not necessarily reciprocating the listening, feedback, and story-telling skills that the group had been practicing. This experience of campus life came in the form of attending student events and eating meals in the dining hall, during which the host students invited their SAU friends to join the meal with their new Oberlin friends, allowing students an opportunity to explain the program to peers and facilitate dialogue across difference.

The Policy Application

In this final phase of the program, we go from skill-building and relationship development to applying these skills and experiences to a pressing public policy issue. The application phase of the program seeks to do four things.

First, students are diving deep into a policy issue to learn the nuances and complexity of the issues and imagine solutions. In the BTG pilot program the focus was on the issue of criminal justice reform. Criminal justice reform refers to efforts to transform the U.S. system of incarceration, including issues such as policing, bail, sentencing, conditions of confinement, programming, death penalty, parole, probation, and reentry. This issue works particularly well for this purpose, though many other issues could work as well, given that it is an issue with many sides/stakeholders.

Second, students are building the muscles of deep listening, holding multiple perspectives, crossing lines of difference, building unusual alliances, and negotiating toward better outcomes more generally.

Third, this collaborative work creates shared experience as the students learned together and were supported to work together to bridge many new gaps that confronted them during this exploration. Instead of seeing students from the exchange campus as the “other,” now they were acting as an intact group encountering external “others.” In this way, they bonded as they created shared meaning out of their experience.

Fourth, as students complete this policy deep dive (spending three days meeting with the range of criminal justice stakeholders) and begin to conduct their own research in groups for their blueprints for reform, they should begin a very important transition from being program participants to being

something more. They transition from consuming the content that is offered to owning it in a different way. Rather than being recipients, they become leaders in a movement that seeks to do things very differently.

In pursuit of these four objectives, we took a multi-stakeholder approach to policy reform. Over the course of three days, BTG participants met with corrections officers and their union, criminal justice reform advocates, formerly incarcerated individuals who are now leaders, the director of the Michigan Department of Corrections, and legislators who approve the corrections budget. We watched the film *Just Mercy* and visited the Vocational Village, a prison where those who are incarcerated learn skills that can help them get jobs when they get out. We were able to talk in depth with people serving time as well as the warden and other members of the management team.

Alongside this field work, the students also worked in cross-campus small groups. The first tool that we taught the students was the “power analysis.” This technique is drawn from community organizing and is a method that allows a group to look at competing policy agendas and consider the power dynamics that might shape what is possible. The students learned and practiced this activity as they began to define the issues for which they would create reform blueprints as their final projects.

Within their small groups, they were, themselves, defining the issues that they would address in their final projects, and so their journey from program participant to owner or movement leader was well underway and being strengthened through this practice.

Not only did we hope that they were building this sense of ownership through collaborative work like the power analysis and developing the focus for their team blueprint, they also demonstrated it by taking responsibility for conveying what they had learned to campus leadership. The students often worked together to design all aspects of important and concluding presentations. The full group of BTG participants worked together to develop and manage the entire presentation program for a panel of distinguished judges and to create a structure and flow for presentations to each campus president. For these two encounters, the students also prepared their stories, created the run of show, and managed the entire encounter using their newfound listening and storytelling skills to convey the power of the program. As the students worked together to tell their story to important decision makers, they took on a leadership role that went beyond simple participant but much more like a leader or an advocate.

Reflections and Conclusion

During the 2020 BTG pilot program, 17 students from Oberlin College and Spring Arbor University spent eight days living together engaging in courageous conversations across lines of difference. They explored each other’s values, worldviews, political ideas, faith traditions, and much more. Our goal was that the students who emerged from this rare opportunity were prepared to be bridge builders and to do their part of making it “cool” to cross lines of difference rather than simply calling people out. In fact on a recent reunion video call, 14 of 17 students said that they are very or extremely interested in being TAs for BTG the next year. And from the evaluation surveys completed at the end of the program, 92% volunteered to help bring BTG practices to their campus in other ways.

Leaders of BTG believe that equipping more students with the specific bridging skills, creating an experience where they encounter the perceived “other,” and fostering an environment where they collaborate and utilize a multi-stakeholder approach to solve pressing problems is a recipe for transforming the practice of conversation, bridge building, and leadership in higher education.

Participating in BTG reminded us that no group is monolithic and just when one might be tempted to think you understand a group or a dynamic, there are new surprises around every corner. The tensions are not always where you expect them.

Furthermore, BTG rests on the belief that the students who learn and practice these skills can in turn teach them to other students. It is a belief that the institutions that host these experiences can be ambassadors to other institutions who are hungry to address the limiting nature of the current dominant culture. And finally, there is the belief that by telling these stories in compelling ways you can change the broader narrative to one that sees heroism in every bridge builder.

There is a story, a caricature, of two factions in our country, right wing fanatics on the one hand and delicate lefty snowflakes on the other. What these students taught us is that each of them has a story, each of them is an individual, and each of them is strong. The headlines about our nation obscure that truth and are a gross distortion of this generation.

Students who participated in the pilot program made it clear that as future leaders they want much more than what is being offered today in higher education. When asked if they thought that BTG skills and practices should be incorporated into their school curriculum and course offerings, 100% of participants responded yes. Additionally, several students responded with recommendations for other ways their school should adopt this teaching such as including these skills in first-year orientation, offering a course dedicated to active listening skills, doing the BTG training for student senate, and training all faculty. In addition, 100% of the participants said they were more willing to ask their classmates direct questions in BTG as opposed to other classes. And 85% said they were more willing to openly disagree with classmates during dialogues and discussions in BTG as opposed to other classes.

Beyond the skills and approach, the goal was that the participants come to share a vision of a culture where the heroes are the bridge-builders. In some ways, it is a return to the spirit of the civil rights movement where courage, humility, love, and forgiveness were the animating values. If we can resurrect this spirit, or teach it anew, on campuses across the country, then we can equip the next generation of leaders to address our pressing problems, engage productively in seeking solutions, enhance our democracy and help America live up to its promise.

We hope that these young people are ready to honor each other's humanity, and to engage across lines of difference. And the early evidence indicates that they are. When asked to rank their level of agreement with "I am willing to use the skills I learned to engage across difference beyond this course," the average response was 4.8, with 0 = strongly disagree and 5 = strongly agree. One student went on to say, "I think we should intentionally engage firsthand with those who I disagree with. This skill would be useful in breaking the SAU 'bubble.'" And an Oberlin student added, "Oberlin should strive to have a more productive culture. I think it could greatly benefit to have community guidelines at Oberlin that encourage education through reconciliation and direct confrontation rather than humiliation"

In pre and post program surveys, participants were asked on a scale of 1 (least important) to 10 (most important) how important is it to you to meet and engage with people with whom you think you have significant political, ideological or religious differences or disagreements?" Before the program the average rating was 7 (out of 10) and after the program that number went up to 8.8; an increase of 18 percentage points.

This is just the beginning for Oberlin College and Spring Arbor University. We are committed to going deeper with this work and we are eager to work with other educational institutions to expand on this model. Our post-program evaluations and assessment mechanisms demonstrated that this model holds

great promise. We are eager to learn with others about how programs influence students' leadership behaviors and cultivate their leadership in diverse environments.

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