



Let's TALK



CONVERSATIONS
ON CAMPUS

Let's Talk: Conversations on Campus



You don't need to start an official organization on campus to use the Let's Talk principles. Here is a simple guide to provide you with the tools you need to host casual group discussions.

WHY TALK?

You know that the First Amendment guarantees freedom of speech. The *practice* of free speech, however, calls for more than the right to be free from authoritative suppression of speech. The First Amendment can be a call to action — not a tool to silence others, but an instrument of dialogue and engagement. To create and maintain a robust culture of free expression, we must be brave and willing to engage boldly with words we find offensive, to hear them out respectfully, and to explain why we disagree.

Fervent discussion surrounding tough topics creates and perpetuates a robust, intellectually-diverse community. These conversations are essential to higher education and its campuses. Without it, we run the risk of further polarizing our campuses, siloing our viewpoints, or cutting ourselves off from the very foundation of higher education.

We believe you have the power to change your campus by starting conversations. Today, this task seems far more difficult than ever before. With this guide, FIRE can help you lead tough or controversial conversations on your campus in a casual setting, without the formal structure of an established Let's Talk group!

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ACTIVITIES TO SPARK DISCUSSION:

Civil discourse games are a great way to launch casual discussions about difficult topics. We've suggested a few below, but we encourage you to try to come up with your own. It can be difficult to make people feel comfortable enough with each other to be honest and open about their viewpoints on controversial issues. We hope that these activities help you to break that ice and get talking!

When introducing discussion participants to a civil discourse, try to keep in mind the following points:

- Remember to excite your peers about viewpoints which differ from their own. Encourage them to regard beliefs with which they disagree as exciting opportunities for intellectual growth.
- Find ways of making discussion fun, and work on techniques which ensure a collegial environment where students feel encouraged to argue for their stances, not in order to "beat" their opponent, but to better understand their own and their discussion partner's point of view.
- Remind all participants that everyone will have a chance to make their case, and that healthy discussion requires listening as well as speaking.

HERE ARE SOME AGREEMENTS YOU CAN EMPHASIZE IN YOUR CASUAL DISCUSSIONS WITH PEERS:

- When I engage in discussions on controversial topics with you, I will allow you to state your own views and treat you with respect and dignity, even if I disagree with you. I will share my own views and make my own case, but I will not attack anyone personally, insult them, call them names, or otherwise impugn their character.
- I will *never* attack my discussion partner personally for holding different views than I. Attacks on other people represent the closing of our minds to new ideas, and that is when productive discourse breaks down.
- I understand that the goal of this conversation is to provide a space for students of all viewpoints to share their perspectives, and I promise to do my utmost to ensure that people of all points of view feel safe expressing their opinions.

Let's Talk: Conversations on Campus Activities

1. AROUND THE WORLD

Number of Players: 6+

Game Play:

- **Step 1:** Before playing, choose four questions from the heat levels described in FIRE's [Leader Moderation Guide](#), one from each spice level. Players who intend to ask the questions should bring their phones to the game to use as timers.
- **Step 2:** Arrange your group into pairs and organize the pairs into a circle so that there is an inner circle and an outer circle. Participants in the inner and outer circles should be facing their partners.
- **Step 3:** Ask your spice level zero question and give each pair 3-5 minutes to discuss. When the five minutes are over, ask the players in the inner circle to rotate to the outer-circle player to their right. Outer circle players should not move. Then ask your spice level one question and give each new pair five minutes to discuss. Repeat this process until all questions are asked.
- **Step 4:** When you have asked all four of your questions, sit down with your group and invite everyone to discuss their experience. Great questions for the group to think about and discuss are:
 - Did things get heated? Why did they get to that point?
 - What did you do to de-escalate the conversation?
 - What new information did you learn?
 - Have you begun to think about the topic in a new way?



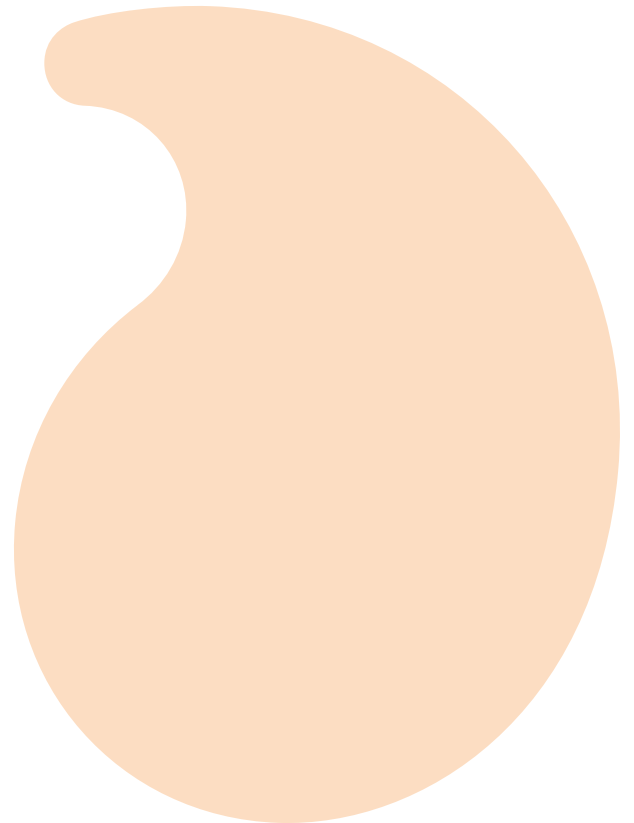
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1. FOUR CORNERS

Number of Players: 10+

Game Play:

- **Step 1:** Create five signs for each corner and the room's center, which read respectively: "Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree". Place the opinionated signs in each of the four corners, and then place the neutral sign on the floor or somewhere in the center of the room.
- **Step 2:** Share an arguable statement with your group members. This does not have to be a highly controversial opinion (though it can be). We suggest using the examples of heat level questions that we provide in our [Leader Moderation Guide](#) when creating these statements. For example, you could change the heat level one question, "Does voting make a difference? What criteria do you consider when you vote?" into the statement, "Voting in the United States does not make a difference." Using our heat level questions to create the statements allows you to match the statement to your group's heat readiness level.
- **Step 3:** Use the statement that you created in Step 2 to play the Four Corners Game, asking your participants to walk to the corner (or center) which represents their opinion about the statement.
- **Step 4:** Ask participants to chat with the other people "in their corner" for two-to-five minutes. Those in the center should each explain their ambivalence on the issue to other students in the center.



Let's Talk: Conversations on Campus Activities

Four Corners Game Play (Continued):

- **Step 5:** Ask each corner to nominate their strongest advocate to go to another corner. When going to another corner, the “strongly agree” advocate should go first to the “strongly disagree” side, and vice-versa. Similarly, the “agree” advocate should go to the “disagree” side, and anyone in the center should disperse themselves as they wish. Give the corners about five minutes to discuss with the strongest advocate visitor.
- **Step 6:** After five minutes, give the strongest advocates who switched corners the chance to decide whether they have changed their minds and wish to remain in their new corners or whether their opinions have not changed and wish to return to their original corners. Give them one minute to decide and to either move or stay where they are.
- **Step 7:** Now ask an advocate from each corner to explain their reasoning. Each advocate has 30 seconds to one minute to tell the other participants about their opinion. You may also ask advocates who changed their opinion to explain why their view on the issue changed. Those who remain in the center of the room should also choose an advocate to explain why they were ambivalent.
- **Step 8:** After everyone has explained their thoughts on the issue, sit down with the whole group and ask participants to reflect on the experience. You can ask questions like:
 - What did you learn from this exercise?
 - What did you like about it?
 - What difficulties came up?
 - Raise your hand if you’ve changed your mind.
 - Raise your hand if you learned more about the issue.
 - Raise your hand if you feel more confident about your position than when we began.

Let's Talk: Conversations on Campus Activities

3. WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Number of Players: 5+

Game Play:

- **Step 1:** Share an arguable statement with your group members. Similarly to the Four Corners Game, we advise that you use our heat level questions provided in our [Leader Moderation Guide](#) to create the statement.
- **Step 2:** Ask participants who agree with the statement to go to one side of the room and others who disagree with the statement to go to the opposite side of the room. Then, give participants 2-5 minutes to discuss their views with their teammates.
- **Step 3:** After 2-5 minutes, ask each side of the room to choose a spokesperson to express their view to the opposing side. Give each spokesperson 30 seconds to one minute.
- **Step 4:** After the spokesperson from each side explains their reasoning, ask the two groups to respond to each other's arguments and begin discussion. Allow discussion for 3-5 minutes, or for however long constructive dialogue prevails.
- **Step 5:** After the group discussion is over, sit down with everyone and discuss the experience. You can ask group members questions like:
 - Did your opinion about this topic change?
 - If it did, what changed your mind?
 - If it did not, did hearing from the other side at least provide more nuance to your original view?
- **A FIRE Hot Tip:** If, at any point of the game play, you sense the conversation becoming heated and unproductive, and you notice that the two sides have stopped listening to each other, remind participants that the goal of Let's Talk activities is not to win or necessarily to change the other side's mind. The goal is instead to listen to the other side and express your own view in a way that is collaborative and fosters better mutual understanding.

Let's Talk: Conversations on Campus Activities

4. THINGS IN COMMON

Number of Players: 5+

Game Play:

- **Step 1:** Divide the participants into three teams. Ask each team to find three things that all the team members have in common such as favorite season of the year, movie, favorite holiday and so on. Give participants five minutes to come up with these commonalities.
- **Step 2:** Ask one player from each group to share with the other two teams the three things that they have in common with their teammates.
- **Step 3:** After all groups have shared, you will present the teams with an arguable statement. Again, we suggest that you use our heat level questions to create the statement.
- **Step 4:** Ask the groups to discuss their opinions on the statement with their teammates. Instruct group members to give each person in each group 30 seconds to one minute to describe their stance. Then, when each person has described their stance, invite teammates to discuss the topic with each other.
- **Step 5:** After allowing five minutes for discussion, call all of the teams back together for reflection. You can ask participants questions like:
 - How do you think the commonality exercise at the beginning affected the conversation with your teammates about the chosen discussion topic?
 - Did the commonality activity make it easier or more difficult to talk about ways in which you disagree?
 - How did disagreement feel?
 - Do you think your group did a good job of keeping the conversation constructive?
 - If the discussion ever did begin to devolve, why did that happen? What did you do to get it back on track?
- **A FIRE Hot Tip:** Be sure to reiterate to participants that disagreement is great! It is an opportunity to learn more about your peers and also about views to which you may not have been previously exposed. And, most importantly, be sure to remind participants that the goal of this game is not to convince those with whom you disagree to agree with you. Rather, it is a chance to learn about another view that you haven't heard before or to gain a better understanding of opposing views that you have heard before.

Let's Talk: Conversations on Campus

PLEASE REMEMBER: YOU DO YOU!

We hope that these games help your discourse group become more comfortable with disagreement as a constructive and interesting activity that leads to better understanding and cooperation. However, if none of the activities that we suggest appeal to you and your group, feel free to create your own.

If you do intend to create your own discourse games (and we hope that you do), make sure that they encourage collaboration between participants and try to steer clear of debate-style formats that pit discussants against each other. Don't forget to send FIRE your new game creations so we may share them with other Let's Talk organizations.

The goal with exercises like these is to teach participants that discourse does not have to be an intimidating and scary thing. It can be an exciting, enlightening experience that brings discussants closer together instead of driving them apart.

ABOUT THE FOUNDATION FOR INDIVIDUAL RIGHTS IN EDUCATION (FIRE)

The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) is a nonpartisan civil liberties organization dedicated to defending student and faculty rights at our nation's institutions of higher education. FIRE defends constitutional liberties including freedom of speech, legal equality, due process, religious liberty, and sanctity of conscience on behalf of students and faculty nationwide. FIRE's core mission is to protect the unprotected and to educate the public and communities of concerned Americans about the threats to these rights on our campuses and about the means to preserve them.

FIRE effectively and decisively defends the fundamental rights of tens of thousands of students and faculty members on our nation's campuses while simultaneously reaching millions on and off campus through education and outreach. In case after case, FIRE brings about favorable resolutions not only for those individuals facing rights violations, but also for the millions of other students affected by the culture of censorship within our institutions of higher education. In addition to our defense of specific individuals and groups, FIRE works across the nation and in all forms of media to empower campus activists, reform restrictive policies, and inform the public about the state of rights on college campuses.



How FIRE can help

While Let's Talk groups have no formal connection with FIRE and will vary in size and structure, FIRE is here to provide guidance and resources. We have a team of experts at your disposal who can help decode and demystify your school's policies, help you talk to administrators, and offer any advice you need.

Whether you choose to host a casual discussion with your peers or start your own civil discourse group on campus, FIRE can help you get started.