Making the case for civil discourse

April 20, 2026



Chris Otten, professor of practice in business and legal studies, led a workshop on April 15 designed to help students, faculty and staff navigate difficult conversations.

Three in four college students say it’s acceptable at times to shout down a speaker to prevent them from speaking on campus, according to a recent survey by the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression. That’s a finding that troubles Chris Otten.

“The idea that most students think we should shut down speech, this just breaks my heart,” said Otten, a professor of practice in business and legal studies at the Freeman School. “We should engage with people we disagree with.”

Helping to make those often difficult conversations a little easier was the focus of an interactive workshop Otten led on April 15. “The Art of Civil Discourse,” a presentation of the Freeman School's Office of Workplace Excellence and Community Engagement, was designed to equip students, faculty and staff with practical skills they can use to manage highly charged conversations and generate productive, meaningful exchanges.

“Think of it as how to disagree without being disagreeable,” Otten said. “I’m not telling you what to think — it’s not the role of higher education to tell you what to think — but I am trying to tell you how to think and how to engage with others.”

Otten cited a number of factors contributing to a society-wide decline in civility, including algorithmic radicalization, the loneliness epidemic, declining church attendance and participation in traditional social activities, and the lingering effects of COVID-19.

“Remember social distancing?” he asked. “Think about that. We did an entire policy based on taking what is human nature and obliterating it. I’m not here to tell you that there wasn’t a time where it made sense, but even proponents of it would admit it had dangerous side effects.”

Those effects play out daily on the national stage, with elected officials and commentators modeling what can only be described as uncivil disagreement. On college campuses, meanwhile, more than 50% of students report they routinely self-censor themselves to avoid being singled out or harassed over their opinions.

But there is hope, and Otten said it starts with first identifying similarities between yourself and the person you’re engaging with. Whether it's an obsession with cats, a favorite restaurant or a football team you both cheer for, those shared interests build the foundation for meaningful engagement.

“When we figure out that this person has similarities to me, our wall starts coming down,” Otten said. “There’s a ton of psychological research that shows that.”

And when one starts with similarities, Otten said, differences take on a new dimension.

“They become less negative and more interesting — how did this difference arise when we have so many things in common,” he explained. “And when things are interesting, that encourages better conversation styles that lower the temperature.”

Ultimately, Otten argued that civil discourse is essential for constructive dialogue, a cornerstone of civic and academic life that involves analyzing and evaluating competing ideas in order to expand knowledge and generate benefits for all. To achieve that goal, however, participants need to be able to discuss emotionally charged topics without getting emotional.

The key to that, Otten argued, is exercising good communication skills and critical thinking.

- **Engage in active listening**. Make eye contact. Mirror back what is said and reflect on it. Ask questions for clarity and understanding. Focus on connections and things you have in common.

- **Practice critical thinking**. Support your positions with facts and evidence. Advocate for your position when it’s your turn to present. Keep an open mind. Don’t jump to conclusion or make assumptions.

“Commit to the possibility that you could be wrong,” Otten added. “Humility goes so far in having really interesting conversations with people.”

While practicing good communication and critical thinking skills can’t prevent disagreements, it can make those disagreements less confrontational and ultimately more productive.

“That’s really what it comes down to,” Otten said in conclusion. “It’s like riding a bike. The more times you have these difficult conversations and survive, the more you realize you’re going to be okay.”