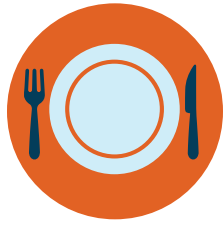


University of Wisconsin-Madison Deliberation Dinners

Year 2 Evaluation Executive Summary | 2024-25



12

Deliberation Dinners



24

Trained Facilitators



246

Students Completed
the Program



60%

Attended All Dinners

Through structured and thoughtful discussions and deliberation, students did not just share their own opinions — they learned to listen, ask questions, and reflect. Their desire to better understand differing perspectives grew as well as their willingness to engage across differences. Students reported gaining the skills and confidence to deliberate on controversial political issues within and outside of the Deliberation Dinners.

The Deliberation Dinners program, housed within The Discussion Project at University of Wisconsin–Madison, continues its mission to provide undergraduate students with opportunities to engage in meaningful deliberation on pressing public issues. Designed to foster engagement and learning, the program brings together students with different ideological positions to deliberate on complex issues in a respectful, welcoming setting that encourages exposure to multiple and competing perspectives. Participants represented a broad spectrum of political ideologies, academic levels, and demographic backgrounds. In its second year, the program doubled in size, hosting dinners across two nights each week and engaging faculty or academic staff facilitators from nine schools and colleges, all of whom participated in the Discussion Project. The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research built on insights from the pilot year to

complete the 2024–25 evaluation, offering a comprehensive assessment of implementation, student outcomes, and considerations for future program development.

Implementation

The Deliberation Dinners program was intentionally designed to support meaningful student engagement through preparation and structured activities. Students consistently praised the background materials and multi-layered structure—partner, small group, and whole group formats—for helping them feel confident and well-prepared. As one student reflected,

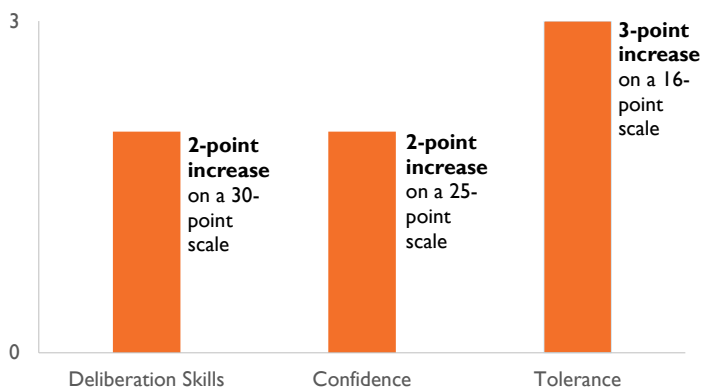
“I feel like the structure of the deliberation dinners has helped me not only learn about the topics we’re discussing, but it’s also helped me structure my arguments better. While also learning from the people at my table, learned about a whole array of topics... and hearing people’s opinions based on their different backgrounds and experiences, was also incredibly valuable.”

Facilitation emerged as a cornerstone of the program’s success. The faculty or academic staff facilitators, each with a table of 10–12 students, employed strategies such as structured turn-taking, strategic use of silence, and encouragement of peer-to-peer dialogue to foster respectful and inclusive deliberations. Both students and facilitators emphasized the importance of listening and creating space for all voices. Intentional efforts by both students and facilitators to validate contributions and build trust helped transform initial formality into genuine connection.

Outcomes

Students participating in the Deliberation Dinners program demonstrated statistically significant improvements in discussion skills, as shown in Figure 1. Gains were observed across nearly all demographic subgroups, including political affiliation, gender, academic level, international status, and race/ethnicity. Students described becoming more thoughtful, open-minded, and confident in expressing their views as well as more tolerant of listening to others' views. Facilitators noted increased patience, active listening, and respectful engagement.

Figure 1: Statistically Significant Change in Median Composite Score From Pre to Post Survey, by Survey Section



Student confidence in discussing controversial political issues also rose significantly (Figure 1). Gains were especially notable among juniors, women, left-leaning students, domestic students, and White and Asian students. Students credited structured practice, a wide array of perspectives, and a supportive environment for their growth. Facilitators observed previously hesitant students becoming more vocal and clearer in their contributions.

Tolerance of opposing viewpoints increased significantly overall (Figure 1) and across all subgroups. Students reported greater empathy, curiosity, and openness to ideological differences. Facilitators observed students becoming less judgmental and more willing to suspend assumptions. These shifts, supported by both survey and qualitative data, highlight the program's role in fostering inclusive deliberation.

Although overall there were no statistically significant changes in affective polarization, subgroup analyses revealed nuanced shifts: right-leaning and male students showed slight decreases, while female students showed

a slight increase. Despite limited statistical movement, qualitative data indicated increased empathy and a more nuanced understanding of differing views. Students became more aware of emotional reactions and assumptions, and facilitators noted a softening in tone and deeper connections across divides.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Deliberation Dinners program demonstrated strong implementation and meaningful outcomes, with students and facilitators reporting high levels of engagement, improved deliberation skills, increased student confidence and tolerance of others. These successes affirm the program's value and provide a strong foundation for thoughtful refinements that can deepen impact and broaden reach, as outlined in the following recommendations and considerations.

Students suggested extending discussion time, streamlining introductions, and rotating groups to increase exposure to varied perspectives. They also recommended introducing more controversial or diverse topics and providing preparation materials earlier and in multiple formats. Facilitators noted the need for supplemental topic resources and proposed smaller group sizes or multi-session formats. They also emphasized the importance of clear facilitation expectations and onboarding support for new students.

Given the data, WEC recommended reinforcing the importance of preparation by providing materials earlier and implementing exit surveys for students who withdraw from the program. Additional suggestions included introducing Facilitator Exit Tickets and structured debriefs to support ongoing evaluation, as well as considering alternative tools to better measure affective polarization.

About the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative

The Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC) is housed at the Wisconsin Center for Education Research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. WEC is a community of evaluators building capacity for conducting high-quality formative and summative preK-12 and higher education evaluation, research, technical assistance, and facilitation.