

# Bringing Civil Discourse *Back to Society*

Civil discourse often seems to be in short supply nowadays. Political talk shows feature fiery partisan exchanges filled with yelling and interrupting. Social media posts ridicule people with opposing views and intensify echo chambers. People focus on getting their way rather than engaging others in a dialogue grounded in mutual respect. In short, it seems like people do not know how to disagree anymore.

Stuart Sidle, Ph.D., dean of the School of Social and Behavioral Sciences (SSBS), believes that

higher education — and Mercy College in particular — has an important role to play in bringing civil discourse back to society.



Photo by John Raiola  
Stuart Sidle, Ph.D.

The challenge on campuses lies in balancing free speech and the free exchange of ideas with the need to protect the most vulnerable and marginalized.

Throughout the year, the Mercy College faculty discusses how to emphasize civil discourse within their courses. They design learning objectives that require students to converse respectfully across differences and create assignments that prompt students to make arguments from multiple perspectives. In class, they model how to disagree with others and hold students accountable for evidence-based arguments.

Beyond those ongoing efforts across the College, SSBS has also created entire courses and programs — namely Model United Nations (UN) courses, the Dispute Resolution Certificate program, and the International Relations and Diplomacy Program (IRDP) — that explicitly teach skills that foster civil discourse.

Mercy's Model UN courses

prepare students to participate in a simulation of the United Nations. In order to assume the roles of diplomats, students must learn to present informed opinions in compelling ways and negotiate to find solutions to major world problems — both skills that directly support civil discourse.

"The diplomatic skills you learn in Model UN can help you in any workplace," Sidle said. "All workplaces are political. To engage and persuade coworkers, it's essential to make points respectfully and clearly, to be able to lead constructive conversations, to learn how to talk about difficult topics in ways that make other people listen. Students who learn these diplomacies are more tactful, more confident and more effective in the workplace."

The Model UN team is lucky to have the support of Michiko Kuroda, lecturer in International Relations

and Diplomacy, who spent 30 years working at the United Nations, including in peacekeeping and peacebuilding missions.

She said

that her certification as a mediator significantly helped her career. Since she came to Mercy in 2013, the Model UN team has won awards every year — most recently in 2021, the team achieved Honorable Mention Delegation and three Outstanding Position Paper awards.

Mercy also offers a 15-credit Dispute Resolution Certificate program, which is open to students and community members and trains them in conflict management. The program begins by helping students connect with their inner selves and their own approaches to conflict before guiding them to explore how people behave in conflict and how to resolve conflict through negotiation and mediation. Along the way, students develop active listening,



Photo provided  
Michiko Kuroda



Students came together at the MercyManhattan Campus for the Model UN 2021 conference, which was held virtually.

nonviolent communication and mediation skills — all of which foster civil discourse.

“We draw them in to making their lives better through self-awareness, understanding and not judging themselves,” said Dorothy Balancio ’68, Ph.D., program director and professor of Sociology. “If their lives are better, their families are happier.

With happier family lives, their relationships are healthier. When their relationships are healthy, they work more productively. And then, they can help their communities.”

The program draws students from various majors and provides a 35-hour intensive mediation training as part of

the certificate program that prepares students to serve as mediators in the New York State Community Mediation Centers and the New York State Unified Court System.

Another degree program offered by SSBS is the IRDP program that was created to prepare students from underrepresented social backgrounds for careers in diplomacy. As they learn about global affairs and diplomacy, students develop a deep appreciation for cultures around the world and the ability to communicate and negotiate effectively to manage various forms of conflict — all outcomes that foster civil discourse.

As part of the program, students are required to take the Model UN courses and participate in the annual Model UN conference — an experience that Program Director and Associate Professor Eduardo Albrecht, Ph.D. praised as “learning by doing.” They must also complete an

Photo by John Raiola



Eduardo Albrecht, Ph.D.

internship, often at the United Nations.

“IRDP is part of a broader school effort at fostering dialogue across different cultures, political points of view, and nationalities,” asserted Albrecht.

“Civil discourse is really in the culture of the entire school.”

Even though civil discourse seems to be in short supply at times, Mercy College is working hard to graduate the next generation of leaders and citizens who can engage others in respectful dialogue and navigate conflict effectively — paving the way for them to lead successful careers and for our world to become more connected, more inclusive and more peaceful.

Photo by Leslie Kahan



Dorothy Balancio '68, Ph.D.