

UW-Madison Deliberation Dinners 2024.10



Deliberation
Dinners

University of Wisconsin-Madison
The Discussion Project

Started in the 2023-24 academic year, the **University of Wisconsin-Madison Deliberation**

Dinners Initiative provides undergraduate students opportunities to deliberate about important political issues in ideologically diverse groups of peers. Through this initiative, students develop the ability to analyze challenging and authentic political issues, improve their speaking and listening skills, and come to recognize the importance of considering multiple and competing ideas.



The Students

- 250 undergraduate participants are divided up into two cohorts that will each attend a total of six dinners throughout the academic year.
- In late August 2024, all UW-Madison undergraduate students who will be on campus both semesters in 2024-25 were emailed an application to apply. The application asked students to complete the Pew Research Center's [Political Typology Quiz](#) so that they could be grouped in tables of ten that are ideologically diverse.

The Structure

- In 2024-25, Cohort A meets on six Monday evenings and Cohort B meets on six Tuesday evenings.
- Students arrive at 5:00pm and eat a buffet dinner with their table group peers and facilitator. At 5:30pm, students start structured warm up discussions. Then, students participate in an hour of deliberation, which is not debate, but a form of discussion in which participants critically examine an issue and weigh benefits and trade-offs of different solutions to the problem. The programming ends at 7:30pm with small and large group debriefs. All students must complete a digital exit ticket before they leave.

The Facilitators

Each table has a Faculty or Academic Staff Facilitator who is with the same group of students for all six dinners. Facilitators must have taken The Discussion Project, a professional learning course on high quality discussion.

Topics and Issues for Deliberation in 2024-25

1. Should marijuana be legalized, regulated, and taxed in Wisconsin?
2. What should future U.S. foreign policy on aid to Ukraine be? **new issue in 2024-25*
3. Should Wisconsin expand nuclear power generation capacity?
4. What should Wisconsin do to address rising gun violence in the state?
5. What abortion policies should Wisconsin have?
6. Should Wisconsin provide publicly-funded vouchers for students to attend private pre K-12 schools? **new issue in 2024-25*

How successful were the UW-Madison Deliberation Dinners in 2023-24?

Below are highlights from the evaluation report from the Wisconsin Evaluation Collaborative (WEC). WEC collected and analyzed the following data in their mixed methods evaluation study: Transcripts from student and facilitator interviews and table observations during the dinners, as well as pre, post and exit ticket (after each dinner) survey results.

Students overwhelmingly approved of the format and structure of the program.

Students reported that the format and structure made it easy to participate (94%), allowed for inclusive conversations (95%), and engaging conversations (94%). They felt valued (95%) and comfortable (95%) during the discussion, and they enjoyed the discussions (93%). Students agreed that different viewpoints were able to be heard and shared in a respectful way (94%), and that the discussion helped them understand opinions different from their own (88%). Students also reported that the discussion provided an opportunity to learn from their peers (95%).



Skill Improvement

- **Overall analysis from WEC:** “Students discussed gaining knowledge about topic areas, gaining confidence in their ability to communicate their ideas, and their ability to listen and ask questions.”
- **Critical thinking skills (quote from a student):** “So I've hadn't gotten into the habit of asking them [other students in my classes] for greater clarification on their ideas, asking them, where do you come from? What do you think? What exact experience leads you to believe this, leads you to argue this? Or, like, when we're reading books, for instance, when it comes time for interpretation, like a line or passage or whatever, I interpreted it differently than they do, perhaps. So it's a little bit like, “Okay, why?”
- **Increased confidence with making contributions (quote from a student):** “I think that coming into college, one of the biggest things that I was afraid of was like speaking in front of a group of people again, especially on like topics like political issues, specifically topics that I'm not versed in and this made me feel more comfortable speaking in front of a group of my peers.”

Sense of Belonging and Inclusion

- **Increased ability to interact well with others (student):** [I improved] “being able to accept discussion as deliberation, rather than as debate, sort of distancing myself from the concept of having my pride being part of the state of a conversation and just doing it for intellectual curiosity, I think was something that's developed as well.”
- **Feeling that opinions were respected (student):** “When I was talking, I always felt respected. And I never felt like there was a moment where I didn't want to speak my mind or I, you know, wanted, I was scared of sort of sharing what I truly believed.”