

**Navigating Safe and Brave: A Report for Deliberative Centers and Educational Institutions**

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## Executive Summary

This white paper aims to be a resource for deliberative programs and universities to use to better understand how to negotiate the tension between safe and brave spaces while working to balance free speech, productive dialogue, and supporting minority voices. The research and analysis provided in this paper serve to understand the level of engagement deliberative centers have with these concepts and identify where their organizations can use safe and brave to improve facilitative moves, maximize participant output in deliberative conversations, and honor free speech. This paper will provide practical suggestions for where this information can be utilized, highlighting where within university settings this research is relevant.

## Defining Key Terms

“Safe” and “Brave” spaces are concepts that are arguably inherent to multiple facets of life. Though not typically outwardly stated, nearly every environment contains elements of safety or bravery that influence or impact what happens in that space. Recently, the concepts of safe and brave spaces have become central to conversations pertaining to higher education, free speech, and productive dialogue, and are beginning to become more and more relevant to deliberative spaces. Thus, it’s important to clearly define these terms. **Safe spaces** are characterized by assuring, which is often hard to do, physical safety. Whether or not psychological safety should be supported under the parameters of safe spaces is a controversial debate that warrants further discussion. Despite that, safe spaces are grounded in the idea that having these two things is essential to fostering an open environment where individuals have the capacity to perform at their best. So, in the context of conversational safe spaces, “It seems easier (even wiser) to defer decisions to the next elected board or council than to wade into the high volume shouting

matches and ad hominem attacks that can characterize public discourse. That is, safety is found in non-action” (Holt-Shannon & Mallory, 2014, p. 6). Thus, “individual officials can feel safer in this case, and there is less overt public hostility when such actions are deferred...” (Holt-Shannon & Mallory, 2014, p. 6).

Research and analysis of safety have found that, definitionally, safe spaces imply “that danger, risk, or harm will not come to one in that space—that the space as constructed precludes the possibility of those phenomena” (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 2). This insinuates the idea that safety, and spaces that are characterized as such, are ultimately informed by the notion that the audience feels “safe” because they won’t be offended or invalidated by the actions of the speaker - decreasing the possibility of criticism, ostracization, or confrontation. Consequently, this *appears* to encourage openness of conversation and that *almost* every voice can be heard so long as the mental and physical well-being of participants is not threatened (in this sense, allowing every voice to be heard could have the potential to venture into unsafe). Though safe spaces inherently support sharing and validating, they also discourage being challenged and can cause certain arguments, identities, and opinions to be excluded from the space for the sake of safety. In this way, one can begin to see the inherent tensions that arise from exploring the benefits and drawbacks of safe spaces.

Alternatively, **brave spaces** embrace criticism and debating or dialoguing different ideas and perspectives. Scholars Arao and Clemmens who coined the concept of brave spaces understood that the definition of safety, and by default the concept of safe spaces, is unrealistic in that there is no guarantee that there won’t be danger, discomfort, or harm in certain situations, especially ones where difficult conversations may be held. Thus, brave spaces are based on the assumption that it takes bravery to enter into a space that allows for heat or conflict, and ideally

personal growth. Brave spaces strive to result in “the transformation of old patterns and approaches to new kinds of rich, nuanced, adaptive solutions” (Holt-Shannon & Mallory, 2014, p. 3). To embrace the brave elements of a particular space, one accepts that “real learning requires some risk and discomfort” and that “there is indeed likely to be danger or harm—threats that require bravery on the part of those who enter” (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 2). However, they are comforted, or rather supported, by the idea that “those who enter space have the courage to face that danger and to take risks because they know they will be taken care of—that painful or difficult experiences will be acknowledged and supported, not avoided or eliminated” (Cook-Sather, 2016, p. 2). In summation, this is the essence of what it means to experience a brave space on the individual level, being:

driven by the knowledge that when we open ourselves up, give a part of ourselves to the world around us, that our discomfort will somehow leave us stronger and greater instead of damaged and embarrassed...facilitat[ing] regeneration and growth after these moments happen. (Ali et. al, 2017, p 5)

At the same time, brave spaces possess a large benefit to the community. Bravery is needed from groups of people in order for us to accomplish the breaking down of barriers and a heightened level of thinking. To cite Kaner’s Diamond of Participatory Decision Making, bravery is necessary to move through the Groan Zone, where familiar opinions, diverse perspectives, and opposing ideas are grappled with to attempt to move toward greater understanding. The only way to reach convergent thinking and come to a well-informed and thought-out decision is to move through the Groan Zone, yet it’s incredibly difficult to sift through foreign ideas that may not align with the status quo. Thus, bravery is an essential piece of this process and can lead to rewarding payoff for communities working through this process (Kaner et. al, 2007, p. 41).

For the sake of this paper, it’s important to also be aware of how these concepts are intertwined with **free speech** and freedom of expression. Free speech is deeply entrenched in

complex legal nuances and definitions, resulting in a phrase that is often lightly thrown around with little to no understanding of what it actually implies. Even the U.S. Supreme Court has struggled to define exactly what constitutes free speech. In the simplest terms, “Freedom of speech is the right to speak, write, and share ideas and opinions without facing punishment from the government” (Wex Definitions Team, 2021, n.p.). While this may seem straightforward, there are actually quite a few exemptions under certain circumstances - especially when it comes to institutions of higher education. According to the U.S. Courts, “Students do not shed their constitutional rights at the schoolhouse gate” as set by *Tinker v. Des Moines*, 393 U.S. 503 (1969) (United States Courts, n.d., n.p.). At the same time, there are instances where freedom of speech is not protected in university settings, such as the “time, place, manner” restrictions and how free speech is sometimes restricted in the classroom for the sake of the learning environment (United States Courts, n.d.). This illustrates how the concept of free speech in a university setting is not black and white, thus making it more difficult to attach a concrete set of rules and standards to the practice of free speech in various spaces in a university environment.

Connected to this is the discourse around **hate speech** and other forms of speech we find harmful, such as obscenity, threats, and libelous speech. Hate speech is commonly defined as:

any form of expression through which speakers intend to vilify, humiliate, or incite hatred against a group or a class of persons on the basis of race, religion, skin color, sexual identity, gender identity, ethnicity, disability, or national origin. (American Library Association, 2017, n.p.)

According to the specifications set forth by the Constitution, hate speech *is* protected under the First Amendment. In alignment with the purpose of the First Amendment, the government does not have the right to punish this kind of speech *unless* “it directly incites imminent criminal activity or consists of specific threats of violence targeted against a person or group” or if it meets a certain standard under the categories of Obscenity, Defamation, Fighting words,

Incitement, or Threats/intimidation (American Library Association, 2017)(CSU System, n.d., n.p.). Though it may seem simple to categorize what speech is criminalizable or allowed and what is not, these terms are backed by years of complex case law and thus shrouded in ambiguity.

For the sake of deliberative practitioners in universities, the complex nature of free speech and hate speech on college campuses makes it difficult to set clear expectations for the learning environment and accurately portray and create spaces for productive conversation. Additionally, within the broader debate between safe and brave spaces, many loud voices argue for one or another. For example, the Dean of the University of Chicago is vehemently against safe spaces and all they stand for, arguing they cause students to “retreat from ideas and perspectives at odds with their own” (Grieve, 2016, n.p.). In contrast, commentary made by Morton Schapiro, president of Northwestern University, resurfaced affirming the value of safe spaces, stating, “I’m an economist, not a sociologist or psychologist, but those experts tell me that students don’t fully embrace uncomfortable learning unless they are themselves comfortable. Safe spaces provide that comfort” (Schapiro, 2016, n.p.). However, deliberative practitioners aren’t focused on fighting for one over the other but rather strive to find the right balance between both, which can be a complicated endeavor as the right amount of both often depends on the situation.

Safe spaces have the potential to silence opinions and limit ground-breaking conversations, while brave spaces could lead to the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes and threaten the well-being of participants, so how do deliberators balance these issues despite the ambiguity of free speech and hate speech? How can facilitators and process designers use their

training to create and foster an environment during deliberative processes that aim to get the most out of participants without violating free speech or threatening different identities?

### Where Is The Tension?

For several years, educational institutions were steeped in literature around safe spaces. Every classroom was developed into an environment where the intention was to make marginalized individuals feel more comfortable in their identities. There was also substantial growth in anti-bullying rhetoric during this time when society began to perceive pushback against opinions and experiences, particularly in educational settings, as a form of bullying, and thus movements formed against it. However, scholars and practitioners began to realize that, because these individuals are in consistently “close proximity to differently identifying neighbors” these spaces are not necessarily “risk-free environments” (Ali et. al, 2017, p. 5). Furthermore, there was growing concern about safe spaces venturing too far over the line of censorship, with the potential for intellectual isolationism to occur as was catalyzed by the release of a letter about the removal of safe spaces to undergraduate students from the University of Chicago. Thus, most scholars, educators, and civic collaborators began to move away from safe and adopted brave.

This transition could largely be seen as an overcorrection from safe spaces as many academic and democratic institutions began to see a regression of engagement in difficult discussions - individuals felt there was too much coddling, ideological extremism, or a threat to free speech as a result of the “safe space” ideology. Then, from about 2018 to the present (2023), the ever-evolving and changing meter of preference has begun to slide back toward the middle of the spectrum, focusing less on imposing a one or the other mentality and more on incorporating the essential aspects of both. Research by Heterodox Academy and IDEALS found that “a

combination of safe and brave spaces is needed to help students develop appreciative attitudes toward people of different social identity groups” (Singer, 2018, n.p.).

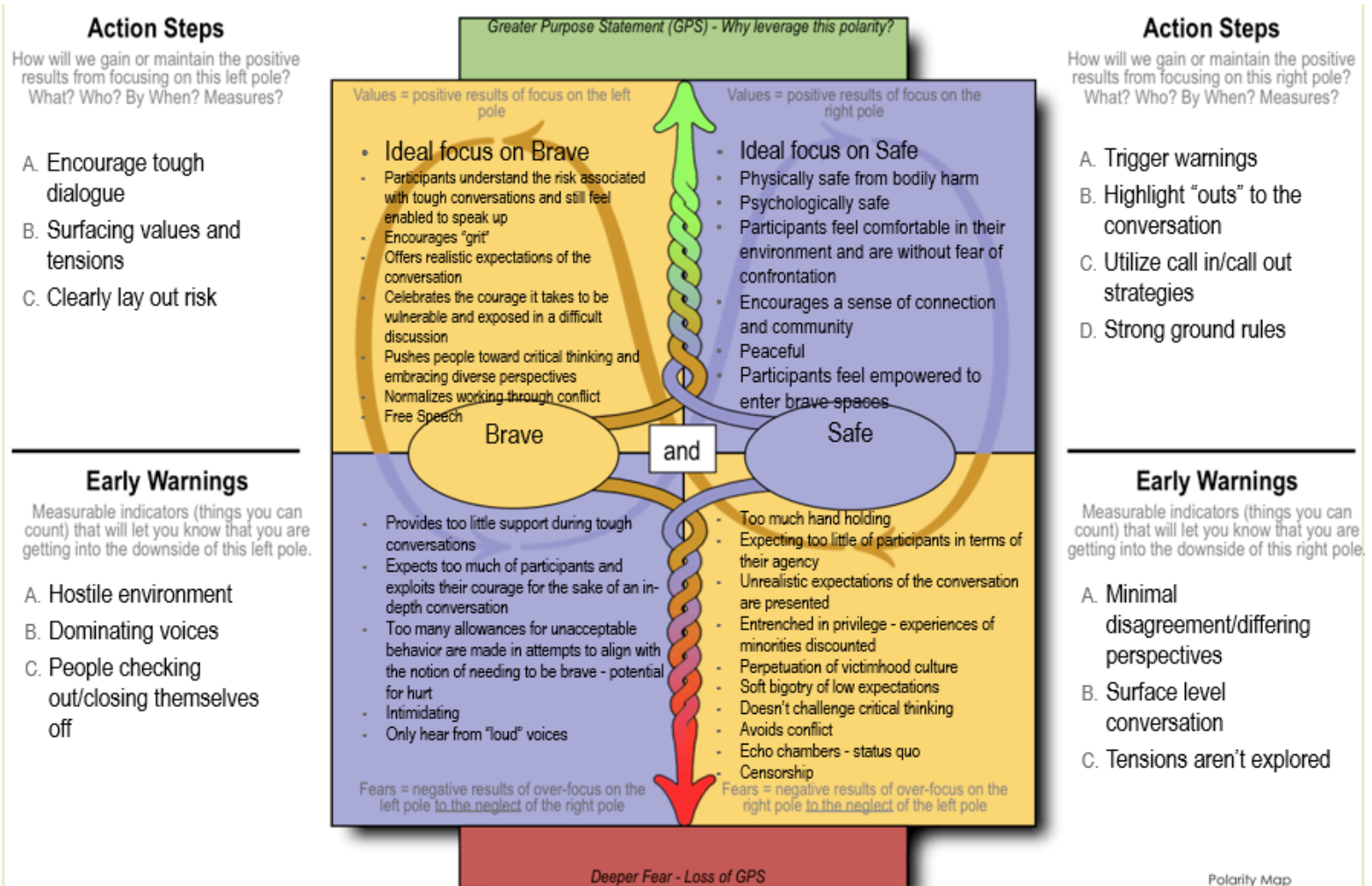
These findings suggest that individuals do need a nurturing and inclusive environment in order to better appreciate people from different social identity groups. Yet they also need brave spaces for exchanges and exploration which are often unsettling and uncomfortable. Safe spaces, they said, provide participants with the empowerment and internal understanding necessary to enter brave spaces (Singer, 2018, n.p.). It’s beneficial to maintain these elements of safe and brave spaces despite the nuance surrounding the definitions. However, thinking through these shifts is more complicated than is presented in this paper as different universities and centers of learning reacted differently to the discourse around safe and the introduction of brave. It’s important to keep in mind that there’s never been across-the-board consistency in how these terms have developed through time. For example, one could argue that the rise of the term “woke” - initially representing a warning from the Black community to stay alert for police brutality and then co-opted to signal a “denigration of leftist culture by the right” - instigated another shift in the ever-continuing fight between one term over the other (Romano, 2020, n.p.). As “woke” became increasingly polarized, many individuals pushed for braver ideology as “woke” was negatively associated with “coddling.” Similarly, an article titled “Stop treating students like babies” noted that the war between Gaza and Israel paired with what could be argued as the most polarized election in recent history also sparked a shift, with educational institutions offering students a “retreat to designated safe spaces” where they can process the tense state of the world (Khalid & Synder, 2024, n.p.). As noted, the constant shift between safe and brave makes for complexity in trying to better negotiate the two.

The tensions between these terms become even clearer once applied to deliberative settings. The mission of the Center for Public Deliberation and other centers or programs focusing on deliberation is to preliminarily achieve a diversity of perspectives, an exploration of differences, and the discovery of common ground. Consequently, this results in the ultimate mission of supporting quality decision-making and problem-solving, which links with the idea of free speech. We need free speech to achieve the preliminary aspects of deliberation and support quality inquiry to reach well-thought-out decision-making. Whether or not these goals can be reached through *either* safe or brave spaces is a constantly competing tension, one which would be beneficial for deliberative centers and their associates to explore.

Paradoxical to the nature of safe spaces, we use the tools of deliberation to uncover those things that divide in order to find a shared path forward or to help us shift from exaggerated conflict to more reasonable conflict. This means we often have to outwardly venture into and embrace spaces that require a degree of courage, open-mindedness, and “grit,” - bravery - to decrease or mitigate polarization. However, concurrently we must also create spaces where “diverse points of view can be expressed, deeply held differences can be explored, and the potential for discovering common ground amidst the cacophony can be nourished” (Holt-Shannon & Mallory, 2014, p.3). This type of work runs counter to the natural tendency to want to agree to disagree, “manage differences,” find “consensus,” or help everyone to “just get along” (Holt-Shannon & Mallory, 2014, p. 3).

Polarity maps, which highlight the “upsides” and “downsides” of two poles, are helpful tools deliberative practitioners often use to gain a better understanding of competing tensions. Engaging in polarity mapping helps deliberators better understand the tension between two poles, allowing us to see the positives and negatives of each approach. By laying out all aspects

of two different concepts on opposite sides of a visual map, we can more clearly see the strengths and weaknesses of an issue in order to more effectively move toward greater understanding (Pugh, 2024, n.p).



A potential "Greater Purpose Statement," or why deliberative centers might choose to leverage the polarity of safe and brave spaces, is ultimately to achieve better decision-making, but could also be to create an environment where a diverse variety of voices can be heard, where

participants feel empowered to engage in potentially difficult discussions that allow for pushback/agreement and discovery/creativity, and where these elements can be supported through proactive efforts toward both physical and psychological safety. This would allow for a better way of engaging ideas, working through problems, sparking productive conversation, and ultimately better decisions that lead to improved ways of managing our shared problems, fulfilling the goal of deliberation.

Antithetically, a “Deeper Fear” that may occur out of losing the Greater Purpose Statement has the potential to be that so much focus is put toward overemphasizing one of these ideologies that the greater purpose/mission of the CPD is lost or buried, conversations break down, and tensions aren’t explored. When focusing too much on safety, one may run the risk of expecting too little of participants in terms of their agency and presenting unrealistic expectations of the conversation. Too much safety can perpetuate victimhood culture, promote echo chambers of the status quo, and in some ways support practices of censorship and an avoidance of critical thinking. “The soft bigotry of low expectations,” a phrase coined by Michael Gerson and popularized by George W. Bush, involves not expecting marginalized people or minorities to meet the same standard of behavior or achievement set for most people is a more subtle and subconscious form of prejudice that would result from an overemphasis on safety as well (Rubel & McCloskey, 2019, p. 2). Arao and Clemmens also argue that safe spaces may “encourage entrenchment in privilege” of those, in particular, who think they do not need to make themselves vulnerable, and that the language of safety can “contribute to the entrenchment of dominance and subordination” (Arao & Clemens, 2013, p. 6).

There’s also the very considerable issue of unconstitutionally violating free speech. As previously stated, an over-emphasis on building and maintaining safe spaces can perpetuate

ensorship of the self and others out of fear of discomfort, pushback, or conflict. For deliberative centers that choose to base their processes entirely on safety, not only does this run counter to the general mission of deliberative inquiry, but it could also violate a constitutional right. If a public institution creates and enforces ground rules that remove controversial opinions, no matter how prejudiced or emotionally harmful, a case could be made that this violates freedom of speech. Furthermore, similarly to the goals of deliberation, many argue that the goal of universities is inquiry, which is ultimately the primary advantage of bravery, evoking a payoff that extends beyond the individual:

Free expression of one's opinions is a mere part (and arguably not even the most important part) of the larger activity that our colleges and universities are dedicated to: inquiry that leads to the discovery, preservation, and transmission of knowledge and understanding of the world in all its variety. Our universities and colleges are where ideas should be rigorously examined, challenged, and refined through thoughtful discourse and evidence-based argumentation. (Arnold, 2024, n.p.)

Thus, the larger mission of universities and deliberative centers alike cannot be achieved without protecting and promoting free speech, which is paramount in creating an environment where thoughtful discourse and the challenging of ideas can occur. In order to maximize participant output in deliberative conversations while also attempting to design a process that engages all voices present, consideration must be given to the potential impact on free speech that overly safe spaces elicit.

Alternatively, when we focus too much on bravery and too little on safety, we may experience a lack of support and physical/psychological safety during tough conversations, expect too much of participants, and end up exploiting their courage for the sake of an in-depth conversation, and potentially cause harm to marginalized or vulnerable populations.

Furthermore, an overemphasis on brave spaces could also result in too many allowances being

made for unacceptable behavior in order to align with the concept of being brave which can be intimidating for some participants. Research suggests that we need to lay a groundwork of safety first to allow for the development of bravery. Open inquiry - “questioning, seeking evidence, and advancing knowledge” - cannot happen if individuals do not first feel supported or have some sense of belonging (Arnold, 2024, n.p.). Attempting to balance both safety and bravery in an informed way is based on the understanding that if participants can make a hard leap, and use bravery and courage to enter into a space that may be tough on them and others, they’ll be met with a soft landing, which incorporates the classic elements of safety seen in safe spaces. In this sense, individuals aren’t assured they’ll be kept from discomfort/harm, but they know caveats or support systems are in place after the fact that will allow them to feel heard, respected, and intellectually challenged. Of course, falling in accordance with advice provided in the student workbook distributed to CPD students, a deliberative facilitator's job is not to find the *perfect* balance between two tensions, but rather to work to venture back toward the middle ground when we start to move too far toward one pole.

## Interviews

In order to better understand how this polarity can be managed, throughout the course of this paper I interviewed three well-established facilitators, process designers, and leaders from separate institutions: Dr. Lori Britt, Co-Director of the Institute for Constructive Advocacy & Dialogue at James Madison University, Dr. Sara A. Mehlretter Drury, Founding Director of the Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse initiative, and Dr. Lisa-Marie Napoli, Director of the Political and Civic Engagement program at Indiana University Bloomington. The aim of these interviews was to gauge the level of engagement deliberative institutions have with safe and

brave spaces, as well as what strategies centers or programs already utilize to create spaces that aim to promote inclusivity and productive dialogue.

Generally, all three interviewees expressed that they prefer to avoid attaching “safe” or “brave” to their work because, as Drury stated, “each term has become very politically charged in a way that’s unfair to the intention of each term” (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). Rather, it seemed to be the consensus that describing the environment through various elements of safety and bravery - such as allowing for open expression of ideas, acknowledging discomfort, respecting your peers, and leading with empathy - was the preferred method of setting expectations for the conversation. Napoli even advocated for the use of the word “environment” over “space,” as she received feedback that “space” was too ambiguous (L. Napoli, personal communication, Oct. 8, 2024). It appeared as though more logically minded people, who couldn’t conceptualize the “energy and emotion” that build spaces in the metaphorical sense, were able to more clearly understand what would be expected of them in an “environment” where courage, curiosity, productivity, and constructive dialogue was central (L. Napoli, personal communication, Oct. 8, 2024). Additionally, Britt mentioned that she began using the term “safe space” in her work around 2013 when the transition to brave began to happen, and quickly moved away from safe as she realized the “limitations of trying to guarantee emotional safety” in a discipline where that is inherently impossible to do (L. Britt, Oct. 17, 2024).

Despite this reluctance to *assign* these terms to a deliberative conversation, all participants agreed that maintaining and utilizing elements of safe and brave spaces is paramount. As Napoli expresses, “I think they’re game changers” (L. Napoli, Oct. 8, 2024). Britt

states that both safe and brave spaces, and the most ideal elements of both, are important with facilitators and community members:

When I'm facilitating with a broad-scale community project or even just a small one, it's important to establish that in this room we'll do things a little differently and if we're really going to have an impact or advance an understanding that's richer and fuller of a complex wicked problem, we need to risk being vulnerable and being brave and questioning things. (L. Britt, personal communication, Oct. 17, 2024)

Furthermore, Drury cited a particularly interesting example where the use of a safe space helped lay the groundwork for a braver one in the context of a conversation about equity and inclusion in workforce development. This specific process encountered barriers with different languages as this community had a primarily Spanish-speaking population. Drury saw this as a scenario for creating a safe space for individuals who "tended to be in a workforce to speak about their experiences for equity and inclusion in a safe space" (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). For Drury, she viewed this less as a solely convening process and more as a first cycle in the deliberative process, where they created an "enclave safe space where they can grapple with equity and inclusion in a community with a lot of blue-collar jobs that are filled by individuals who are immigrants and first-language Spanish speaking" (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). By treating this enclave deliberation grounded in tenants of safety, Drury believed they were able to foster a much deeper sense of goodwill. In this case, understanding this specific aspect of the wicked problem was the first cycle in the process of deliberative inquiry, allowing for a much more productive lead into the second cycle where this then "informs a braver space for deliberation" where facilitators and framers can then perform their responsibilities of bringing in the enclave safe space into the broader cycle of deliberative inquiry. This allowed a braver space to be born where participants could recognize that "safer"

stakeholder voice and new perspectives could be created, ultimately showcasing the powerful potential of leveraging safe and brave.

## Recommendations

As established throughout this paper, elements of safe and brave spaces are inherent to the deliberative process and a necessary tension to explore when it comes to institutions of higher education. Due to its relevance, it would behoove deliberative centers and universities to increase awareness of the two terms and employ strategies for better managing the tension between the two of them and working toward a balance of both. For example, there are numerous areas of Colorado State's Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) in which this concept of balancing the tension between safe and brave is applicable - Facilitation, Ground Rules, Convening, Process Design, and Project Choice/Framing.

## Facilitation

In terms of facilitating, within the CPD's student workbook, there are 10 responsibilities laid out under the section, "An Effective Facilitator; Balancing Responsibilities." Responsibilities two, four, five, eight, and 10 could be considered the most relevant to safe/brave. For example, responsibility two - "Allow[ing] the participants to own the process and topic as much as possible, balancing that need with the deliberative goals of the event." - involves helping participants productively achieve their goals without dominating the event. This arguably envelops classical elements of bravery in that this responsibility promotes individual agency for the sake of enriched conversation and group growth. However, this responsibility is also something that should be considered under a "safe spaces" lens. If the conversation is venturing into genuine physical and psychological danger, and participants begin to shut down

due to various forms of threat/harm, it may be pertinent for the facilitator to adopt a more dominating or controlling role in order to preserve the safety of the space. Much like this second responsibility, the other responsibilities as mentioned above of an effective facilitator involve maintaining the safety and respect of the deliberative space while also encouraging consideration of a broad range of views, the drawbacks of their perspectives, and the benefits of opposing views. Sections of the workbook such as this, when analyzed through the ideologies of safe and brave spaces, help facilitators prioritize allowing groups to feel heard and in control, while also being diligent about working to maintain both psychological and physical safety. Like with all tensions, the job of the facilitator isn't to get the ideal balance but to bring situations back to the middle of the extremes.

The various facilitative roles are another interesting element of the CPD's student workbook which has the potential to be especially relevant to safe and brave spaces. The "Motivator" is tasked with igniting a fire within the group and praising good behavior in order to help encourage participants to venture toward concepts of bravery while maintaining the good, comfortable behavior that characterizes safety. The "Bridge Builder" must create and maintain a safe and open environment for sharing ideas, building a bridge for consensus, and helping groups better understand their differences, inherently engaging elements of both safety and bravery. The creation of a safe space is, obviously, safe, while maintaining an open environment can push against safety as it creates an opportunity for discomfort or conflict. The "Clairvoyant" facilitator must watch carefully for signs of potential strain, weariness, aggravation, and disempowerment, and respond in advance to avoid dysfunctional behavior. This plays more toward the safe side of things as the main objective of this facilitator is to create and maintain an environment without discomfort or hardship. "Although it's almost always better to avoid a direct confrontation

between participants, should such an event occur, [the Peacemaker] must quickly step in, reestablish order, and direct the group toward a constructive resolution” (Carcasson & Sprain, 2018, p.56). Again this plays more toward the maintaining of a safe space, while the constructive resolution provides the opportunity to venture back toward the brave engagement of different perspectives and ideals. While the Motivator could be argued to be the bravest of the roles, you’ll note that they all tend to lean toward the safer end of the spectrum. This then prompts a need for perhaps another facilitative role to be developed that allows facilitators to step into a braver positionality to encourage the contestation of ideas respectfully and productively in case the conversation becomes an unproductive echo chamber.

In my interviews with deliberative practitioners, many also shared how they use facilitative techniques and training to instill knowledge of elements of safe and brave spaces in their facilitators. Dr. Napoli stated that “it’s certainly part of the training we do for our student facilitators” to encourage both safety and bravery in their community conversations. (L. Napoli, personal communication, Oct. 8, 2024). One of the most important things that Napoli trains her student facilitators on is to really try and create an “atmosphere of vulnerability” and to position it as not a weakness, but a “strength which takes so much courage” (L. Napoli, personal communication, Oct. 8, 2024). In this sense, vulnerability “encourages [participants] to have permission to be able to open up themselves in this experience in a new kind of way, where they can feel free to be more courageous, curious, and not be afraid of questions”) L. Napoli, personal communication, Oct. 8, 2024). Through this process, Napoli believes informing on the broader elements and goals of safe/brave spaces and “the training for student facilitators is how we can better support our participants” (L. Napoli, personal communication, Oct. 8, 2024).

## Ground Rules

After thorough consideration of the internal theories and practices central to the practice of facilitation, the next step would be to consider what specific “levers” the CPD and other deliberative centers might have to allow facilitators, process designers, or researchers to adjust to safer or braver spaces as needed. Perhaps one of the most obvious and easy to manipulate would be the ground rules of each event. For the CPD, they include:

- Be honest and respectful
- Listen to understand
- It's ok to disagree but do so with curiosity, not hostility
- Be brief so everyone has an opportunity to participate.

How can deliberative centers use these ground rules as a lever to adjust toward safer or braver during process design if they know, for example, they'll be engaging in a topic that requires a bit of prioritizing one over the other? Including stricter rules, discussing potential “outs” for participants like stepping away from the room, or setting timed reminders of the ground rules to really drive them in are all ways in which process designers and facilitators can leverage the ground rules to best fit within a specific scenario.

Dr. Britt highlighted her own strategies for personalizing the ground rules to meet the needs of her deliberative processes and participants, stating that she prefers to use the term “group agreements” or “guidelines” over ground rules as she's received feedback from her processes that ground rules feels too authoritarian (L. Britt, personal communication, Oct. 17, 2024). She argues that it's essential to adapt language to the changing world around us and, if a deliberative center wants to enact democratic processes, they “shouldn't be using ground rules...and should craft them collaboratively” to increase the agency participants have in their discussion. Along a similar vein, Dr. Drury believes that it's important to “identify what ground

rules will be necessary to create a deliberation where we can hear from the full breadth of stakeholder perspectives, and have people feel like they can bring their full selves to the table.” (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). To accomplish this, Drury claims there are two components - the first being the “brave, free speech component” and the second is “how do we make people feel comfortable” (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). One way to do this is to “shift the ground rules based on the issue and the setting, and one of the most powerful things you can do is invite the public to develop their own set of ground rules in addition to your own to create a mutually agreed upon set of ground rules” (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). Based on what this paper has deciphered from the literature and the interviews, the conclusion can be drawn that essentially, centers can manipulate the ground rules to reflect a safer or braver ideology as needed.

## Convening

Evaluating the convening process of a deliberation and remaining aware of the populations being invited, as well as the topic of discussion pairing these invited individuals are perhaps some of the most interesting and important elements of convening which can be adjusted toward safer or braver. This largely includes and relates to enclave deliberation: “a discussion of like-minded people” (Gronlund, 2013, p. 1). This could be considered a lever for safety if enclave deliberation is utilized to protect and even prioritize marginalized voices by meeting with them separately. On one hand, convening a broad range of people with a broad range of perspectives increases bravery, but having a specific invited audience where only people with similar experiences or standpoints meet increases safety. Of course, there are upsides and downsides to this, such as increasing group polarization or perpetuating echo chambers, but it is

certainly something to consider in process design when exploring the tension between safe and brave spaces. As Dr. Drury posits, “In order to create a space where marginalized communities can have a voice, enclaves are necessary so they can have a space where they feel they can express themselves freely (S. Drury, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2024). It’s also possible for processes to combine both enclave and whole group deliberations, where the community is split into several smaller enclaves before the larger deliberation comes together to build a groundwork of safety before braver work can be done.

Holding forums with small group discussions is another tool deliberative centers can adjust through the lens of safer or braver. Asking individuals to speak up and share their opinions in small group settings is arguably safer and allows more room for elements of bravery rather than engaging in large-scale discussions with hundreds of people. In this sense, the size of tables at events is something the CPD and deliberative centers have at their disposal to leverage a situation toward safe spaces or brave spaces.

## Process Design

Deliberative knowledge, including training on handling trauma (trauma-informed facilitation), knowing moves to rephrase or handle a difficult person (calling in/calling out), etc, and background materials provided to facilitators and participants before the event, are all tools available to deliberators to incorporate into process design to combat conflict based on different facts and to push toward a braver space of discussion. The various facets of deliberative knowledge enable facilitators to read a situation and quickly judge whether it would benefit the substance of a conversation to move into a safer or braver space. For example, if process designers are creating a discussion around housing and homelessness, it’s a very real possibility

that participants could show up to the discussion with a fair bit of trauma related to the topic. In this case, the process designer may want to encourage facilitators to employ trauma-informed facilitation and methods of healing-centered engagement, which “is strength-based, advances a collective view of healing, and re-centers culture as a central feature in well-being,” and affords participants “agency in the creation of their own well-being” (Ginwright, 2018, n.p.).

Engaging individual opinions before the forum is another “lever” the CPD has to help get a better sense of problematic opinions that may come up (or, often, see that most comments are not problematic) before an event and better prepare for how to handle them. If there appears to be an influx of controversial opinions coming in before a forum, and process designers know a diverse audience will be present, both facilitators and process designers will want to embrace a safer space for the event. Alternatively, if most comments are in fact unproblematic, CPD associates can comfortably open up room for some of the tougher, yet more rewarding, elements of bravery.

Another interesting element of process design that deliberative centers and universities may be interested in adopting is a technique proposed and practiced by Dr. Britt. Britt states that we “need to make sure we’re surfacing assumptions” during processes and conversations that tackle tough issues. While training her student facilitators, Britt teaches students to do this through having practice conversations in class, asking, “What assumptions do you think people have about this topic” and telling them to write their assumptions down on a tent card (L. Britt, personal communication, Oct. 17, 2024). Then, she tells them to write it on both sides of the card, so both the individual and the other participants at the table are continuously aware of all the assumptions present in the conversation. She often replicates this activity during the actual process itself with community members depending on the topic and group. The point of this is

that we must recognize the assumptions we and others have and think beyond - “when you learn to voice that assumption and hear different perspectives, you gain so much... if someone continuously brings up an assumption at some point you need to name it so it can be discussed, ask ‘where are you drawing on for this, can you see how this assumption may be both true and not true, it seems like there might be an assumption here’ without making someone feel defensive” (L. Britt, personal communication, Oct. 17, 2024). By incorporating this activity into process design, adequately training and preparing facilitators to carry it out, and setting an expectation of non-judgemental transparency for the conversation, deliberative discussions, and difficult conversations can greatly reap the benefits of a braver way of thinking.

Additionally, process designers could choose to include multimodal forms of communication in their discussions. Drury presented the fascinating idea of having a media tool for participants to utilize during the discussion should they feel hesitant to openly share their opinions. Drury argued that a lever for safety that more deliberative practitioners should take advantage of is having an online, potentially anonymous commenting tool for participants to share their concerns or opinions if they don’t want to share them out loud. The comments would be submitted to a convener, who would then be responsible for bringing them to the attention of the large group. In this case, the participant's voice would still be heard and their thoughts would still have the opportunity to be shared and discussed among the community, yet in a much “safer” way. This is just another of many ways process designers can shift a discussion in a safer or braver direction based on the content being discussed and the identities present.

## Project Choice/Framing

Finally, the framing of a discussion or event is an interesting lever to explore. Does the discussion guide include controversial opinions? Are diverse audiences who both agree and disagree reacting to such opinions? For what reasons might the framework of an event exclude or highlight certain concepts, actions, or tradeoffs? All these questions relate to and lie within safer and braver spaces, and can be leveraged to assess or adjust forums toward either space based on predicted necessity. It is also important to be cognizant of what kinds of projects deliberators take on. If it is a project that has more marginalized people or is a particularly difficult topic that student facilitators don't feel comfortable handling, it may not be ready for deliberation and perhaps requires something different. Though deliberation is an incredibly useful tool for productive decision-making and community collaboration, it is not the be-all end-all. Not every topic is ready for or requires a deliberative process, and it's in fact better to be aware of this fact than try and force a premature conversation.

## Next Steps and Conclusion

While this paper is a good starting point for deliberators and institutions of higher education to use in considering the implications and applications of safe and brave spaces, it is just the tip of the iceberg. There is still plenty more to consider when it comes to the tensions between these two polarities. We must continue to question when and where it is appropriate to bring in elements of either space and how we can continue working toward the best balance of the two, moving away from extremes and closer to moderation. When should enclave spaces be combined with larger group deliberation? What are the implications of letting the community collaborate on ground rules or group agreements? How do we ensure we remain aware of the line

between free speech and hate speech while fostering bravery and laying the groundwork for safety? Should we even be using the terms “safe” and “brave?” These are all questions practitioners should continue asking themselves as the world changes between preferences for safe and brave. As my interviewees often alluded to, perhaps it is better to merely describe the expectations of each space instead of attaching politicized and polarized definitions which will ultimately be skewed one way or another. Or, perhaps there is a more appropriate third term we should consider. One which seems so obvious and yet has not been used in the discourse around safety and bravery.

Take the overlapping forms of interactive dialogue by Dr. Martin Carcasson. The venn diagram posits that dialogue and debate overlap with deliberation to decipher conversations and produce analytical results. Dialogue does so through fostering understanding and listening to all participants' stories, which is not inherently safe but is characterized by a non judgemental nature. This is compared to the inherently *judgemental* nature of deliberation, which makes tough decisions through weighing tradeoffs, and debate, which evaluates arguments through the clashing of ideas (mcarcasson, 2023). Deliberation needs dialogue beforehand to create a sense of relationship and understanding, incorporating elements of safety to build the groundwork for bravery. Ultimately, this constant combination of characteristics from safe and brave spaces causes individuals practicing facilitation, deliberative techniques, or the intentional implementation of safe and brave spaces to ask a number of questions. If dialogue is safe and debate is brave, and both come together to overlap with deliberation, then would it not make sense to utilize “deliberative spaces” - entirely contingent on the expectations of that process, center/program, and mission - the ideal combination of the terms, where participants willingly accept the expectations of the space and temper their less productive thoughts (a safer form of

self-censorship) because they know the space warrants that? It is certainly an interesting concept to further investigate.

Though the research surrounding safe and brave spaces and the nuance surrounding the terms is an ever-evolving conversation, it is important to consider under which situations these terms are especially relevant. Deliberation is one such discipline where the application of safe and brave spaces has implications for several areas and is already present in several deliberative theories and practices. The tension between safe and brave spaces should thus be explored for the sake of balance, so the beneficial elements of the terms can be taken advantage of, and free speech can be navigated with as much care and consideration as possible. Understanding the history of the terms, where they lie under a polarity map, how they apply to deliberative discussions, and how they relate to the CPD more specifically are all helpful ways in which this polarity can be balanced, further understood, and ultimately leveraged to ideally achieve its greater purpose.

## Appendix I: Interview Questions

1. Do you use the terms safe or brave at all? Is there another term you define these tensions as?
2. What do these words mean to you?
3. Do you think using and considering safe and brave is important? Why or why not?
4. In your experience, do safe and/or brave spaces lead to more productive or impactful outcomes in your center's work?
5. Do you think there's potential for safe/brave spaces to affect free speech in any way? If so, how?
6. How does your center facilitate the creation of safe spaces in your deliberative processes?
7. In what ways can you see elements of safety and bravery present in deliberation? How do certain moves, facilitative or conversational norms, or elements of process design fall into safe or brave?
8. What strategies or practices does your center use to encourage bravery and openness in discussions?
9. What do you think I should look into further?

## Appendix II: Facilitator Responsibilities

Facilitator Responsibility	Description
Remains impartial about the subject of the forum.	Deliberative facilitators avoid expressing their own opinion or evaluating the comments of the participants based on their own perspective. However, moderators are not “neutral” or disengaged, and in fact they should be passionate about democracy and about the process itself. Facilitators should be invested in helping the community and supporting democracy. At the CPD, we believe “neutrality” leaves the facilitator too detached from the larger goals of deliberation.
Allows the participants to own the process and topic as much as possible, balancing that need with the deliberative goals of the event.	Facilitators facilitate (i.e. help others achieve their goals more productively), they don’t control or dominate. Based on the other responsibilities, they must intervene as necessary, but should also realize that doing too much may be worse than not doing enough. As much as possible, facilitators should allow participants to direct the conversation, as they will then take more ownership of its results. Deliberation is about bringing the voice back to the people. They need to feel heard and in control. Ideally, the group deliberates on its own and the facilitator is only necessary to keep time. That all being said, groups rarely do the hard work of deliberating on their own, so the deliberative facilitator is often rather busy making interventions tied to the other responsibilities.
Keeps the deliberation on track in terms of time and subject matter.	Facilitators serve as timekeepers, making sure the time is used well, the pace is appropriate for notetaking and the participants, and the group transitions to new questions or sessions as necessary based on the process plan. In addition, when comments go too far astray, bring participants back to the process (though at times what seems to be a tangent may be useful).
Manages the group well and encourages everyone to join in the conversation and ensures no one dominates.	Facilitators must attend to both the task and relationship dimensions of the group’s work. Work with the participants so people know the order of speaking and do not get frustrated with procedural issues, seeking the right balance between having too much and too little structure to the conversation. Facilitators should be aware of who has spoken and who has not, ensure that all voices get heard if possible, and no voices dominate the discussion (such as strong advocates or experts). Getting everyone to participate is important, not just for the deliberation, but for those individuals as well. People need to be heard and validated, and it is the facilitator’s job to ensure that those things happen.

<p>Models and encourages democratic attitudes and skills.</p>	<p>By exhibiting strong listening skills and asking good questions, facilitators can model the behaviors they are hoping the participants will develop. This includes maintaining a safe and respectful environment, and keeping the floor open to all perspectives and ideas. Deliberative facilitators can also praise certain participant behaviors (the sharing of a difficult story, the asking of a high-quality question), while remaining impartial to the actual content/perspective of the information shared.</p>
<p>Does not take on an “expert” role with the subject matter, and seeks to maintain a productive balance in the discussion between facts being irrelevant and facts being too much of a focus.</p>	<p>The facilitator’s role is not to teach the participants about the issue - even if it is a subject they know very well. Facilitators in particular need to think like non-experts in the room, and if jargon is used, ask for clarification as a service to less informed participants. Facilitators need to be prepared for their events but they cannot assume that everyone has the same background or understanding regarding the issue. One of the main tensions within deliberative work is between experts and data being too much or too little of the focus, and facilitators can play a key role in working to help negotiate that natural tension.</p>
<p>Helps participants identify the values and underlying interests that motivate their perspectives.</p>	<p>In deliberation, participants’ values, motives, and underlying interests—their reasoning—are just as important, if not more so, than their positions and opinions. Sometimes people with different opinions share the same motive or value, and that similarity can form the basis for common ground. Facilitators should train themselves to listen for the underlying values and bring them out in the conversation for the participants to discuss. Since participants would rarely explicitly cite values, the facilitator can play a key role in making the implicit values more explicit.</p>
<p>Helps participants develop mutual understanding and consider a broad range of views, particularly the drawbacks of their perspective and the benefits of opposing views.</p>	<p>Facilitators ask thoughtful and probing questions to surface costs and consequences, whether intended or unintended, and play devil’s advocate as necessary. Facilitators in particular should serve as a pathway for the underrepresented opinions and perspectives. If there is an issue that is closely tied to the conversation at hand and no one brings it up, it falls to the facilitator to highlight the potential issue and allow the participants to decide whether or not it merits more conversation.</p>
<p>Helps participants identify and work through key tensions within and between their perspectives.</p>	<p>At the center of deliberative processes, particularly for the CPD, is the need to negotiate tensions and paradoxes that lie at the heart of the wicked problems we face. Doing such “choice work” and “working through” is hard work, and rarely happens on its own, therefore</p>

	facilitator interventions may be critical to helping participants complete such tasks.
Manages several deliberative tensions, seeking the ideal middle ground (for example, idealism v. realism, complexity v. simplicity, depth v. breadth, etc.)	When groups slide too far toward any extreme, the facilitator should intervene to help them move back toward the other pole.

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