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CIVIL DISCOURSE IN NONPROFIT PROGRAMMING

A Comprehensive Review

Presented to New Hampshire Humanities

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Over the past year, New Hampshire Humanities, a statewide nonprofit aimed at connecting and cultivating communities across cultures, has seen a rise in antagonistic outbursts and verbal attacks during its lecture series, Humanities on the Go. They have tasked us with finding a solution to limit these disruptions in order to run a more effective speaker series. This report details our process and our plan to remedy problems for NH Humanities. We recommend that NH Humanities use a two-pronged approach for a solution: a code of conduct and facilitator training. Together the code and the training will allow NH Humanities to regulate and, if the circumstances require it, to remove the disruptive parties from events to that ensure their programming remains productive.

1. INTRODUCTION

New Hampshire Humanities is a statewide nonprofit that hosts a series of educational lectures and performances as part of its Humanities to Go program. In the past year, they have experienced repeated disruptive and antagonistic behavior during some of their programming, particularly the educational seminars about religion. A code of conduct policy for these events would ideally guide audience members in maintaining certain standard of respect and civility while providing justification for any action taken against hostile audience members.

It was the intent of NH Humanities to develop a code consistent with national or state nonprofit standards, building off any precedent set by larger nonprofits. However, there has been almost no work done in terms of official policy for conduct or behavior in public events. Some organizations have developed specific guidelines or statements for conferences, which could be modified and scaled up to apply to the entire organization. Therefore, we designed a policy specific for NH Humanities. Additionally, facilitators for these events are volunteers, not staff members of NH Humanities; thus, they do not receive any sort of official training prior to hosting these events. Therefore, we collected a series of facilitator training materials that could benefit these volunteers in managing disruptive audiences. This two-pronged approach would ideally help both the audience and the facilitators foster a more civil and informative event.

2. PURPOSE STATEMENT

The aim of our project is to create a code of conduct to help limit the disruptions during the events of New Hampshire Humanities. However, we realized that a code could not

alone fix their problems and that a facilitator training is needed to correctly implement and reinforce the code. Adapting the facilitator training materials from national nonprofits will also benefit the Humanities to Go programming by better equipping volunteers to handle audience situations. It is not the goal of NH Humanities to restrict the content or opinions of any audience members, but rather to create events conducive to respectful debate that is productive for all audience members. It is our hope that our code of conduct for NH Humanities may be adopted by other nonprofits and institutions who are facing similar problems and who are looking to maintain peaceful and informative discussions.

3. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Founded over 40 years ago, New Hampshire Humanities is a statewide nonprofit that offers free educational and cultural programming. In 2016, NH Humanities provided 438 public programs across the state. The organization manages adult literacy and public-school courses as well as the Humanities to Go speaker series. Humanities to Go events are topics suggested and executed by volunteer facilitators and speakers. Anyone can apply for a grant to bring a speaker to their town forum or propose a new topic. These topics range from Shakespeare to gender roles to the history of the French language in New Hampshire. Presenters are often professors, scholars, or living history performers. So far, Humanities to Go events have been hosted in 165 settings across the state. NH Humanities provides the funding for events and seeks to arrange for a staff member to be present at each talk; however, each Humanities to Go event is independently arranged by the facilitator and speaker.[1]

Nonprofits do not have a legal obligation to uphold the First Amendment, the right to free speech, in the way that state entities do. Private organizations have the ability to regulate the conduct of participants and audience members. However, it is not the goal of NH Humanities to restrict the content of these conversations, but to regulate the conduct of audience members and the way people express this disagreement, so that it is productive and informative for all parties.

4. METHODOLOGY

Our initial strategy involved researching national nonprofit organizations, namely Independent Sector and the National Council for Nonprofits as well as the New Hampshire Council for Nonprofits, to find pre-existing code of conducts. It became apparent that none of these large-scale groups had institutional guidelines, which led us to shift efforts to contacts with smaller nonprofit organizations. Contacts with nonprofits such as Civic

Nation, EvDem, and Future500, while not providing any precedent for controversial speaker policies, gave us with great materials related to facilitator training and effective discussion management. In total, we contacted twelve different nonprofits with missions similar to the goals of New Hampshire Humanities.

We changed the action plan for formulating our final written policies once we realized that no national organizations seemed to have any standards or guidelines in place. Research institutions such as the National Institute for Civil Discourse at the University of Arizona[2] gave us a starting point, from which we extrapolated our own set of procedures. The policies of the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) also gave us a sense of similar codes used in the public sector, and these materials were far more thorough than anything we found from nonprofits.[3] Finally, we looked at specific codes of conduct for conferences, rather than an entire nonprofit entity, and we modeled part of our code off of the framework from the American Institute for Graphic Arts (AIGA) Design Conference.[4]

Using suggestions from these and similar groups focusing on civil discourse, we drafted a code that emphasizes respect and productive communication. It is the result of combining conference codes, resources for controversial speech, and information from calls with the numerous nonprofits we reached out to. To ensure it was legally sound, we contacted current Dartmouth professors with past law experience.

5. FINAL PRODUCT

5.1 Code of Conduct

In drafting the code of conduct, we focused on securing both **decorum**, the polite and respectful exchange of ideas, and **safety**, both physical and emotional. Any effective forum requires these for productive discourse, particularly when the topic or speaker is deemed controversial. The San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District (BART) Police Citizen Review Board highlights these pillars in their own guidelines for public meetings, which promote "an atmosphere of fairness, courtesy, and respect for differing points of view."[5]

As discussed in the Methodology section, we looked specifically at the National Institute for Civil Discourse, an organization seeking to "revive civility" in the exchange of controversial ideas.[6] The Institute published "Standards of Conduct" for civil discourse, a short list of principles emphasizing personal responsibility and respect in group settings.

Combining these and smaller elements from other groups, we developed the following code of conduct:

By attending hosted events, attendees agree to adhere to the principles outlined below. Failure to abide by these rules may result in removal from the event and/or exclusion from future New Hampshire Humanities programs.

1) Engage in the learning experience through active listening
2) Recognize that weapons or other dangerous objects that could threaten the safety of other attendees are prohibited
3) Refrain from displaying posters, signs, or other paraphernalia that could distract or impede the view of the speaker and other attendees
4) Respect the speaker, host, and other attendees by only speaking when called upon
5) Keep all questions and comments civil and substantive, and avoid personal attacks
6) Allow everyone the opportunity to speak by being conscious of time and keeping questions or comments concise
7) Express your own opinion, but do so in a respectful manner
8) Accept that other people can and will have different views
9) Understand that interruptions, harassment, or other disruptive behavior will not be tolerated
10) Foster a productive discussion for all parties involved

In its entirety, this code of conduct serves as a bridge to effective programs, through NH Humanities or through similar nonprofit organizations. It aims to clarify what is required of attendees to ensure events run smoothly, while protecting the right of people to *respectfully* disagree. The addition of facilitator training will further this goal, giving moderators the skills required to defuse potentially confrontational interactions at controversial sessions.

5.2 Facilitator Training

By contacting organizations directly and searching for resources, we found a variety of different facilitator materials aimed at nonprofits that handle controversial topics. Here, we have outlined those most applicable to the work and experiences of New Hampshire Humanities. These materials were either given to us directly by the organization or are available online. While these are by no means comprehensive, these guides should be able to better prepare facilitators of NH Humanities.

5.2.1 Future 500

Future 500 is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit that works on organizing different stakeholders to design solutions for global problems. Their mission, according to the website, is to find "common ground between uncommon allies." Therefore, this organization has a variety of resources specifically designed to foster civil discussion between people with different opinions.[7] After contacting the organization, they sent us three materials for facilitators (described below), which we forwarded to NH Humanities.

- Engaging Outraged Stakeholders
    - This is a 100-page manual for facilitators to manage hostile participants. While not all of the chapters are relevant to NH Humanities, Chapter 5 is particularly relevant because it outlines "Ten Steps for Successful Stakeholder Engagement."
- Facilitator Code of Ethics
    - This is a three-page code for facilitators that could be modified to serve as a helpful guideline for volunteers of NH Humanities. This is more geared to facilitators that work with clients, but the principles behind the code, specifically points 2, 3, 5, and 8, apply to NH Humanities. Below, we have included the short version of these four principles, which are further elaborated in the handout. Trainings could be centered around these principles, or NH Humanities could develop specific strategies aimed at upholding certain principles.

      2. *We openly acknowledge any potential conflict of interest.*

      3. *We respect the culture, rights, and autonomy of the group.*

      5. *We strive to engender an environment of respect and safety where all participants trust that they can speak freely and where individual boundaries are honored. We use our skills, knowledge, tools, and wisdom to elicit and honor the perspectives of all.*

      8. *We are responsible for the continuous improvement of our facilitation skills and knowledge.*[8]
- Core Facilitator Competencies
    - This is the most relevant document for NH Humanities, as it clearly outlines what facilitators should keep in mind at any event. Sections C and E are most applicable to NH Humanities, and we have included the main bullets below. These are expanded in the document. Again, these are principles, rather than educational strategies for facilitators, but they still provide a solid framework for NH Humanities to model unique material.

      C. *Create and sustain a participatory environment.*

> *C1) Demonstrate effective participatory and interpersonal communication skills.*
> *C2) Honor and recognize diversity, ensuring inclusiveness*
> *C3) Manage group conflict*
> *C4) Evoke group creativity*
>
> *E. Build and maintain professional knowledge*
> *E1) Maintain a base of knowledge*
> *E2) Know a range of facilitation methods*
> *E3) Maintain professional standing[9]*

While we understand these facilitators are volunteers, not professionals, such resources could still better prepare them for dealing with a disruptive audience.

5.2.2 Build the Wheel

Build the Wheel is an initiative that brings together diverse interests through a series of workshops that enable different organizations to learn from and build off each other. They have a series of facilitator resources that are available with a free login.[10] Therefore, NH Humanities could register online for these resources if interested. Below, we have listed two we believe would be especially helpful for volunteers of NH Humanities.

- Planning and Facilitation
- Introduction to Public Speaking and Facilitation

Both of these materials can be accessed on the Build the Wheel website resources.

5.2.3 Bring It to the Table

Bring It to the Table is a documentary and corresponding campaign that aims to foster productive and civil conversation about controversial political topics. The entire philosophy of this project is to help people "stop bickering about politics, examine their own assumptions, and truly engage in civil discourse."[11] Bring It to the Table will also host screenings of the documentary in communities, along with a following workshop, to help organizations realize the goals of the film.[12] Requesting a viewing of this documentary or simply watching the web series are viable options for NH Humanities in the development of facilitator trainings.

5.2.4 Everyday Democracy (EvDem)

EvDem similarly runs workshops for public and private organizations; it is a private foundation aimed at creating "equitable and inclusive public dialogue"[13] in communities

across the country. The organization focuses on enabling respectful and civil discourse, making it a great fit for this project. We spoke with a staff member at EvDem, who agreed to send us their "Dialogue to Change" packet, which we unfortunately never received despite follow up. However, we also learned that EvDem would be willing to come to a location in New Hampshire to teach a workshop on productive dialogue, which is an option NH Humanities may consider. This could be conducted on a community scale, such as the town where the protesting group is based, or presented for NH Humanities staff, who could then use the skills from the workshop to train facilitators or develop facilitator materials.

Surprisingly, there were few materials about managing disruptive audiences written by public organizations, even from ones that would likely encounter this issue. Such an absence of materials means that there is rarely a formalized policy or guidelines for dealing with these situations. Instead, facilitators often must act based on their opinions and the context of the situation, rather than a formalized code. Another option is that these materials are not open to the public. Nevertheless, many of the organizations we contacted stated they did not have such materials. Therefore, NH Humanities could look to develop unique facilitator training handbooks or workshops as another project or as a continuation of this partnership.

5.3 Implementation

We believe that in order to implement our code of conduct effectively, it needs to be available to the public in multiple ways. First, prominent display of the code on the website of New Hampshire Humanities would allow site visitors to become aware of the guidelines prior to attending any event sponsored by NH Humanities. During any speaker event, copies of the code of conduct can be posted at the venue entry point and distributed throughout the venue to inform audience members. Finally, the facilitator may wish to read the code aloud before the event commences. Therefore, by attending and remaining at an event, an audience member is giving his or her consent to the code of conduct. This gives the facilitator grounds to remove any disruptive party if they break their agreement to the code. Coupled with the facilitator materials, which would ideally be part of a training program, event hosts will be better equipped to handle antagonistic or hostile audience members. Even if facilitator training is not possible, NH Humanities may still distribute these facilitator resources to volunteers prior to events, giving them more strategies for managing audiences.

6. CONCLUSION

Promoting civil discourse in both public and private programming is a hot-button issue. Therefore, the concerns of New Hampshire Humanities are representative of a greater problem across the United States. Establishing clear codes of conduct for controversial speakers is imperative. It is important to note that public events will have to operate under different protocols due to the protections of free speech from the government under the First Amendment. Some public entities, such as the San Francisco Bay Area Rapid Transit District, have implemented regulations and procedures similar to those offered here. Numerous nonprofit organizations we contacted throughout our research expressed interest in taking a look at our final product upon completion. It is our hope that these procedures may be applied on a broad scale in order to foster effective communication in controversial programs, allowing individuals with different viewpoints to engage in respectful intellectual discussions.

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