

C&S

Motivation Matters:

From student interest
to civic action



cands.org

C&S is working to spark 20 million young people to step up as civic problem-solvers by 2029.

College Presidents for Civic Preparedness

is C&S's flagship higher education coalition, bringing together 135+ college presidents across institution type, geography, and political context to strengthen civic culture on campus. Coalition members share a commitment to ensuring students—not just those who opt in—graduate prepared not only for careers, but for participation in civic life.

Campuswide Immersion is the coalition's intensive implementation offering. It supports college presidents in working alongside trusted campus leaders to build campuswide plans that embed civic preparation across academics, student life, and campus leadership—and measure how students are developing three essential civic skills: having respectful discussions, using reliable information, and collaborating across differences.

The Power of &

CAMPUSWIDE IMMERSION CAMPUSES

- Benedict College
 - Claremont McKenna College
 - Colorado College
 - Dartmouth College
 - DePauw University
 - Duke University
 - Howard University
 - James Madison University
 - Montclair State University
 - Rollins College
 - Skidmore College
 - University of Denver
 - University of Pittsburgh
 - Wellesley College
 - American University
 - Denison University
 - Fordham University
 - Macalester College
 - Ohio Wesleyan University
 - Otterbein University
 - Towson University
 - University of Nebraska at Omaha
 - University of Richmond
 - Wesleyan University
 - Augsburg University
 - Cornell University
 - Davidson College
 - Fairmont State University
 - Franklin & Marshall College
 - Hudson County Community College
 - La Salle University
 - Mount St. Joseph University
 - Salem State University
 - University of Dayton
 - University of North Texas
 - University of Wisconsin–Madison
 - Wake Forest University
 - Washington and Lee University
 - Weber State University
- [See all College Presidents for Civic Preparedness campuses](#)

C&S BY THE NUMBERS

20M young people
by 2029

135+ College Presidents
for Civic Preparedness members

39 Campuswide Immersion
campuses



Adiba Rupa, in green, volunteers at the Greater Newark Conservatory with the Bonner Leader Program.

For Adiba Rupa,

a rising sophomore studying accounting and pre-law at Montclair State University in New Jersey, an average day begins in the car. Rupa leaves her house as early as 7 a.m. to start her 15-minute commute to school and find parking near campus. She spends the next six to eight hours rushing to classes, attending extracurricular meetings, and squeezing in study time. At the end of the academic day, she heads to her part-time job as an assistant teacher at a preschool program. Then, it's home to get a little rest before doing it all again.

Even with a packed schedule, Rupa still makes time to show up for her campus, her community, and the issues she cares about. She's part of the [Bonner Leader](#)

[Program](#), which helps students foster a passion for service, and is working to re-launch Montclair's debate club to give students a healthy outlet to express their opinions.

The desire for open and honest conversation is a motivating force for Rupa. **"It's super important to me that I mark my place here," she says, and that "I make my voice heard."**

Rupa's internal pull is bolstered by intentional support from Montclair, building a campus where students learn how to talk across differences, ask hard questions, and solve problems together.

That commitment led Montclair's president Jonathan Koppell to join C&S's [College Presidents for Civic Preparedness](#), a coalition of more than 135 campus leaders from diverse ideologies, backgrounds, and institutions. They are united by a desire to build campuswide civic cultures where every student—not just the already engaged—can practice essential civic skills, including having productive conversation, using credible information, and collaborating to create solutions. Thirty-nine campuses in the coalition, including Montclair, [participate in Campuswide Immersion](#), an offering of the coalition that supports campus leaders in creating plans to reach as many students as possible and measure how students are developing essential civic skills.

“It’s super
important
to me that
**I mark
my place
here.**”

— ADIBA RUPA

montclair.edu

Across the coalition, campuses are experimenting with different ways to spark student motivation, and keep them engaged.

Motivating students to participate in productive conversation, and sustaining that drive, is an important element of Campuswide Immersion work—and an outcome participating campuses are working toward in different ways. **Dartmouth** is making dialogue-focused programming feel like a special occasion. **The University of Pittsburgh** invites students to take center stage in event planning and production. **Wellesley College** is pairing dialogue with career readiness training, capitalizing on its students' drive to prepare for the future. **Benedict College** leans on its faculty to model what lifelong civic engagement looks like. **James Madison University** turns to peer role-modeling, inviting small groups of students to participate in conversation-focused events and then spread the enthusiasm. **Claremont McKenna College** is creating a campus where conversation is woven into the school's cultural fabric, a guiding force throughout its students' education and beyond.

The work isn't always easy at Montclair, a school where an on-the-go schedule is a way of life. Seventy percent of Montclair's 24,000 enrolled students are commuters, many with demanding jobs and caretaking responsibilities in addition to their academic loads. More than half of the student body is eligible for Pell Grants and 60% are people of color. "

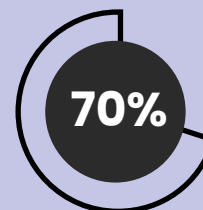
MONTCLAIR STATS



24,000 enrolled students



More than half are eligible for
Pell Grants



are commuters



are students of color



BEST PRACTICE #1: **Know your students.**

Looking for practical strategies?

[*Download the checklist.*](#)

“Let the students be the driver of the initiative. Listen to them. They will tell you what they’re interested in. They will tell you their passions and they’ll tell you what they want to talk about. **And when you listen to them and run a program that they designed, you will pack the house.**”

— MARK ALLMAN

We have a really diverse, mobile population,” says Mark Allman, Montclair’s managing director of university initiatives and innovations and lead for Campuswide Immersion.

Programming that might work beautifully on a primarily residential campus tends to be a harder sell at Montclair, where students are already juggling so much. “When you do an event at 7 o’clock at night, it’s really hard,” Allman says. “It’s a big ask.”

Rather than giving up, Montclair is adapting. Together, and with support from C&S, the school’s leadership and students aim to co-create a culture where everyone feels welcome, getting involved is easy, and students want to be part of something larger than themselves. By tearing down logistical blocks and finding creative ways to invite all students to the table, Montclair is becoming a campus where even the busiest students can make their voices heard—and modeling one successful approach to inspiring students.

FROM STUDENT INTEREST TO CIVIC ACTION



Letting students lead

MEET MARK ALLMAN

He listens to students’ ideas—not assumptions about what they need.

C&S | The Power of &

Conversation



can shape

the world

“Our democracy needs people who are prepared not just to go to the polling place and vote, but to **engage the issues, to ask questions, to have meaningful conversations.**”

— JONATHAN KOPPELL

At Montclair, “promoting civic preparedness, in some ways, is in the DNA of this school,” President Koppell says. The college was founded in 1908 to train teachers at a time when more Americans were pursuing education and getting involved in the democratic process. More than a century later, Koppell still believes colleges, including Montclair, have a responsibility to guide students toward becoming active members of their communities, ready to work with others and find solutions to problems together. Part of that work, he says, is inviting students to practice having productive conversations about big issues, even—and especially—when they are uncomfortable.

“Our democracy needs people who are prepared not just to go to the polling place and vote, but to engage the issues, to ask questions, to have meaningful conversations about what direction they want for their community, for their state, for their country,” Koppell says.

FROM STUDENT INTEREST TO CIVIC ACTION



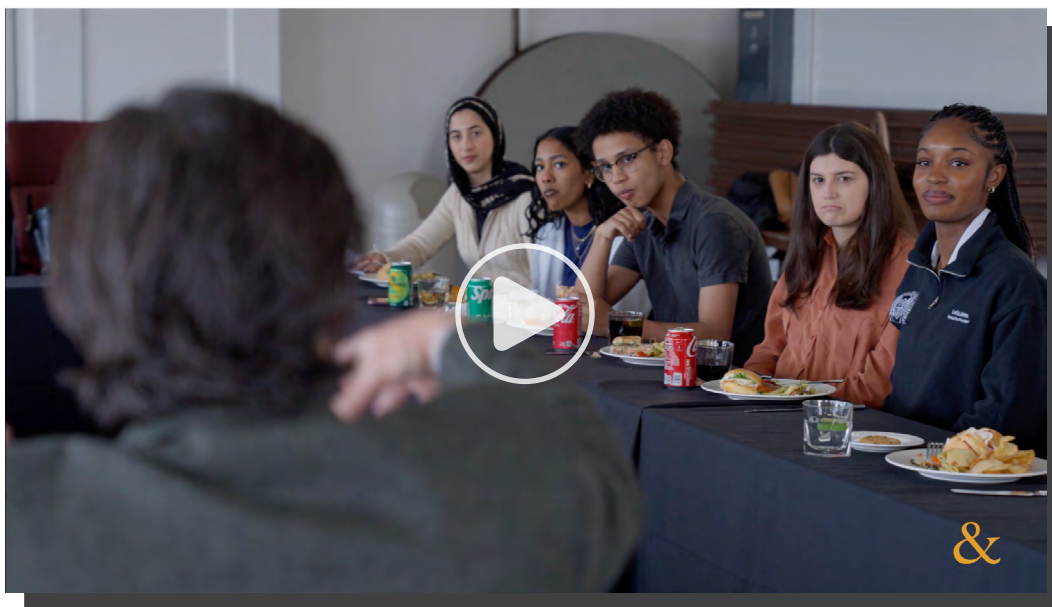
Seeing possibility in politics

MEET PRESIDENT JONATHAN KOPPELL

He's helping students recognize their role in shaping civic life.

C&S | The Power of &

Join the growing coalition of college presidents committed to preparing students for civic life.
[Become a member.](#)



[Through Campuswide Immersion work, Montclair is taking civic participation from optional to universal.](#)

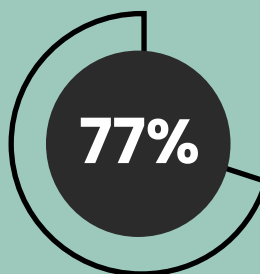
To get there, young people need to learn core communication skills, such as listening deeply, asking thoughtful questions, disagreeing respectfully, and navigating tension productively. Just as important as skill-building is **sparkling lasting motivation** among students. To create campuses where all students engage in productive dialogue, schools must foster genuine interest, communicate the value of getting involved, and create environments where students feel safe and supported enough to broach sensitive topics.

The coalition's Campuswide Immersion offering supports colleges in achieving those goals. Through Campuswide Immersion work, campuses are equipping students with both conversational skills and the motivation—and social permission—they need to wield them.

Building motivation is an area of both huge opportunity and significant headwinds. [A recent C&S poll finds](#) that 77% of young people are likely to get civically involved through face-to-face conversations with friends, family, and peers. At the same time, though, students on every



BEST PRACTICE #2: Action flows from motivation.



of young people are likely to get civically involved through face-to-face conversations with friends, family, and peers.

Confident & Cautious

Students Amari & Samuel share why speaking up—even among friends—is worth the risk, even when you're not sure how they'll take your perspective.

[See more from Gen Z Civic Vibe Check](#)

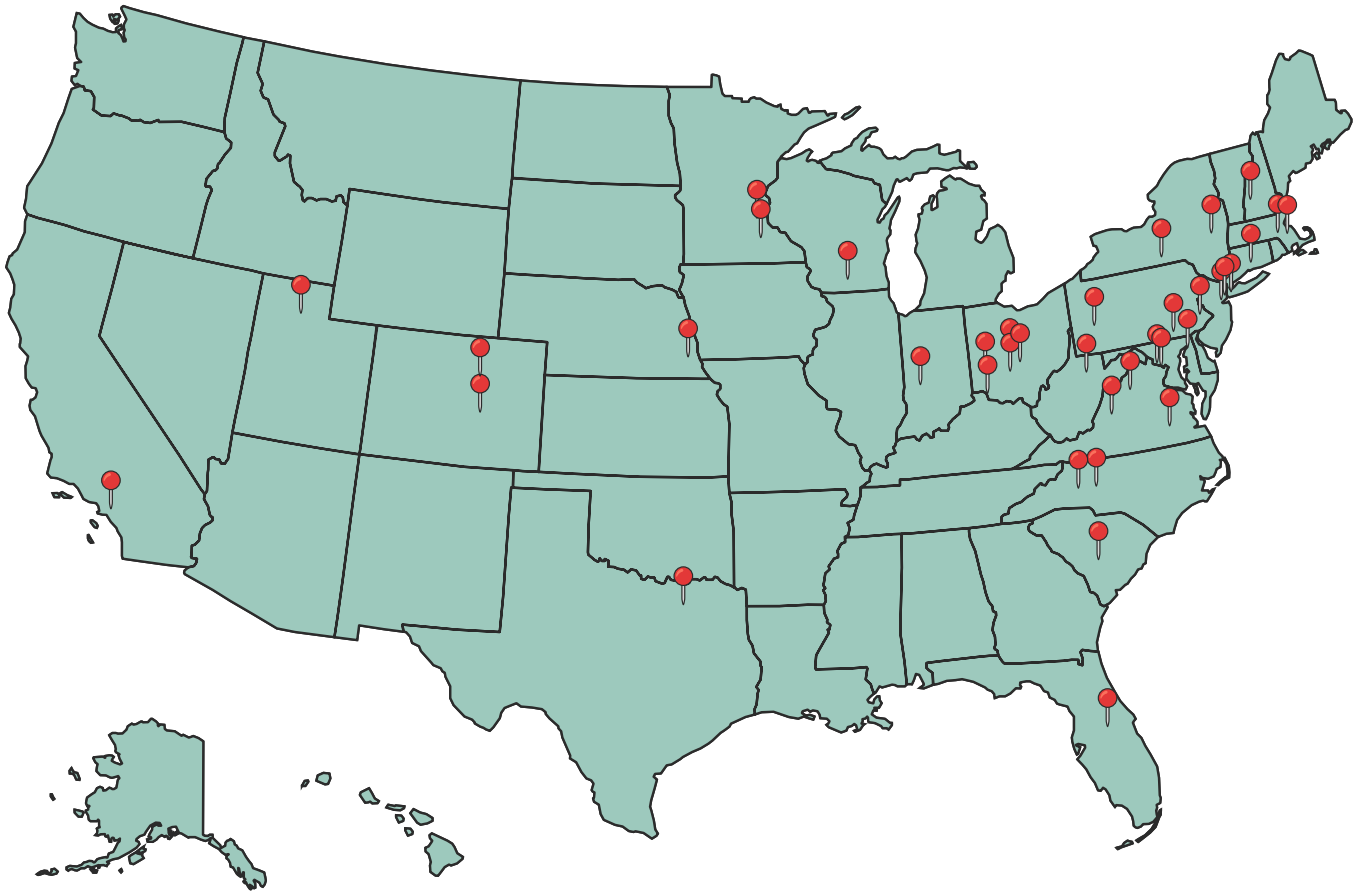


[See the full video](#)

college campus—not just Montclair’s—are busy and tend to channel their energy toward activities they feel will “pay off” in the form of academic credit, internships, or job prospects. It can be particularly challenging to engage students who don’t see themselves as campus leaders or civic participants. Furthermore, students may hesitate to engage in difficult conversations because they’re afraid of saying the wrong thing or facing social repercussions.

There is no single formula for motivation. What works depends on who students are, what pressures they face, and what their campus culture rewards. With support from C&S, Campuswide Immersion schools employ a variety of approaches to sparking and sustaining motivation, as diverse as they are effective. Montclair is just one example of what can happen when a school understands its unique culture and challenges, then meets students where they are.

Ready to bring this to your campus?
[Join us.](#)



Thirty-nine schools from across the country participate in Campuswide Immersion, creating campuses where every student can get involved.

Partner with C&S to bring this free offering to even more campuses.

Start a conversation.



BEST PRACTICE #3: Personalize your approach.



**Meeting
motivated
students
where
they
are**

For many Montclair students,

talking about the state of the world isn't an academic exercise—it's personal. That's true for Rupa, a first-generation immigrant who moved to New Jersey from her native Bangladesh as a 4-year-old. For her, headline-dominating subjects, such as immigration policy, are not abstract concepts, but daily lived realities that demand discussion. The skills she's learned at Montclair, and as part of the Bonner Leader Program, make her feel confident having those conversations.

"When people aren't given the opportunity to get an understanding of a different perspective, that's just the way things stay," Rupa says. "You have to go in with an open mind and not really expect anything from it, but with the idea that you're just telling your story."

Rupa isn't alone. Montclair's leadership recognizes that many students are hungry for opportunities to discuss big issues and welcomes them into spaces to do just that. With financial support from C&S, Montclair recently ran programming that taught students to reflect on how their backgrounds inform their values, practice active listening, create spaces where students feel supported enough to engage honestly, even when conversations become uncomfortable.

The school has also taken part in programs like [Unify America](#), which brings together students for respectful conversation.



Mark Allman helps Montclair students practice the art of productive conversation.



BEST PRACTICE #4:
Internal motivation
is a powerful force.



BEST PRACTICE #5: Approach hard topics head-on.

Societally, **“we’re taught to avoid [hard conversations] as much as possible,”** says Emily Hubbard, a Montclair graduate student majoring in sustainability sciences who took part in the C&S-supported workshop. For Montclair to proactively invite students to have them, she says, is “really an enlightened thought.”

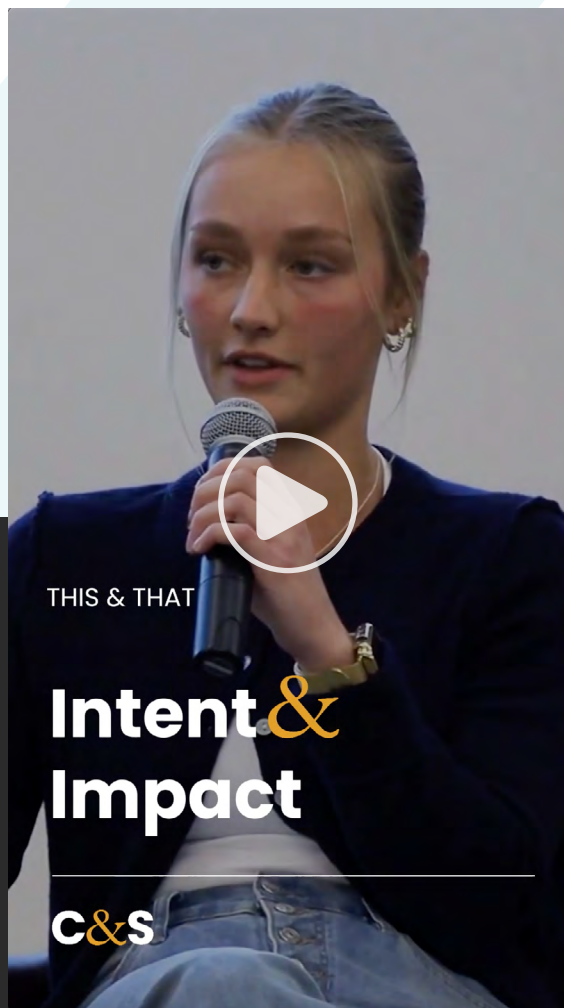
Other Campuswide Immersion colleges tap into that same powerful desire for connection. At Claremont McKenna College, for example, administrators and students are creating a culture where open dialogue is seen as safe and important, such that students came to administrators after the 2025 assassination of Charlie Kirk, proactively asking for a place to talk about what had happened. At the University of Pittsburgh, students are instrumental in shaping and running the [All Angles](#) program, a by-students, for-students event series that brings together experts of different

political persuasions to discuss hot-button issues. It all begins with a university-wide survey gathering student input on social, economic, and political priorities. The survey ensures that all students get to speak up and see their interests reflected in campus programming.

Intent & Impact

Student panelists at All Angles respectfully confront differing ideas on divisive topics like trans issues. Here, Julia Cassidy, president of Pitt’s Student Republicans, participates in an October 2025 All Angles session.

[See what this looks like](#) / [See the full discussion](#).



Still—especially at a school like Montclair—even students who want to participate in programs may not be able to, given their need to prioritize financial stability, career preparation, and responsibilities like caregiving. Understanding that reality, Montclair looks for creative ways to make participation seamless. When the school hosted an expert panel to discuss the American presidency, administrators strategically

scheduled the event at a time when many political science students would be able to attend, recognizing that they would be among the most motivated to go. Montclair's administration also encouraged educators to offer extra credit to students who went to the event—simultaneously making attendance convenient for students naturally inclined to go, and offering an incentive for those who otherwise would have been less likely to opt in.

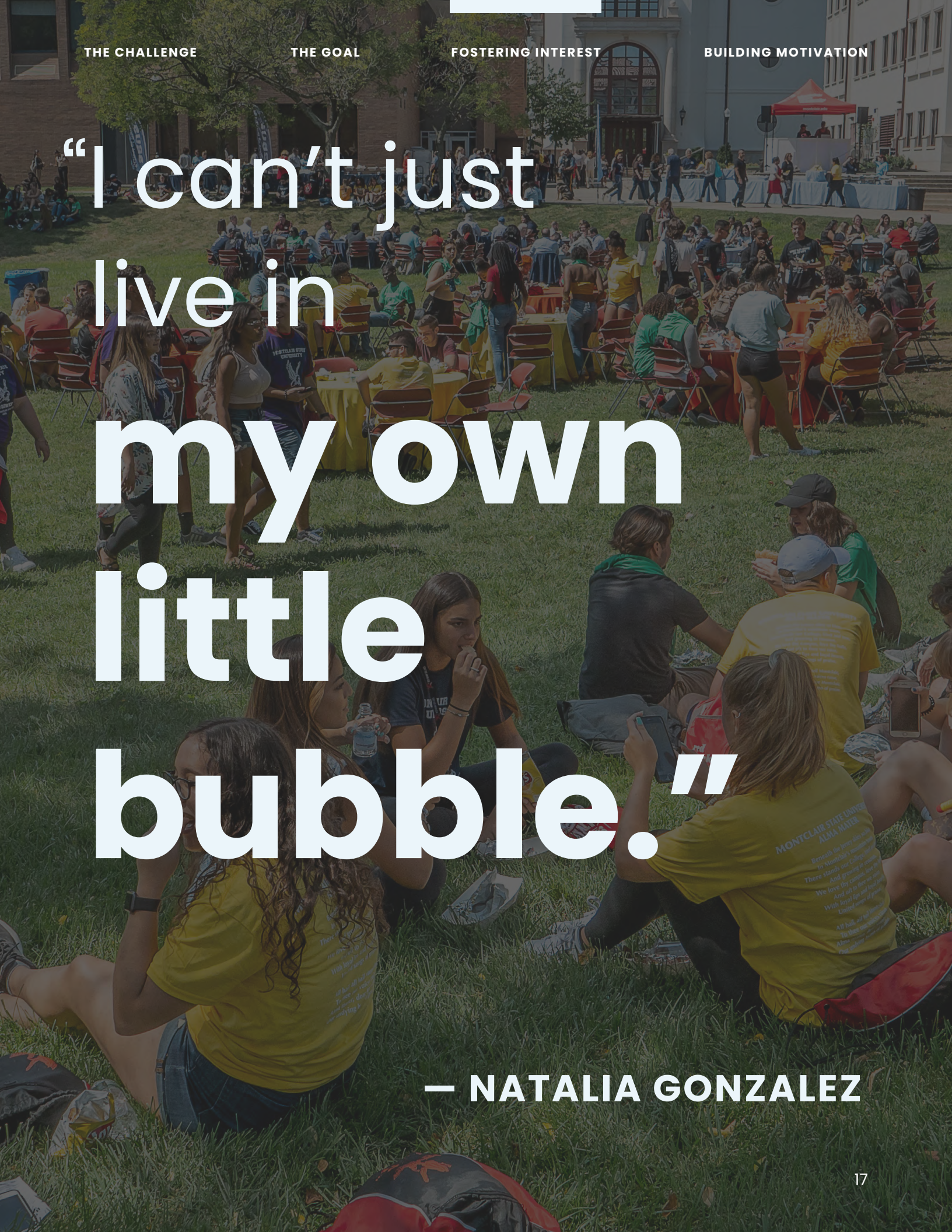


Montclair reduces friction by advertising in parking garages, aligning events with class schedules, and even offering Lyft and Uber vouchers to help students get to polling places on election day. Even offering free pizza at an event can be a make-or-break factor for students who are constantly on the move and may have limited time to stop for a meal.

Natalia Gonzalez, a Montclair sophomore studying psychology, sometimes gets overwhelmed by all the tasks on her plate, between her commuting schedule, extracurricular commitments, and course load. When it all starts to feel like too much, she taps back into what drives her: **"I can't just live in my own little bubble,"** she says. Montclair creates a culture where it's easy to get outside it.



BEST PRACTICE #6:
Don't let logistics stand in the way of motivation.



“I can’t just
live in
my own
little
bubble.”

— NATALIA GONZALEZ



Creating a Culture of Conversation



Claremont McKenna College

From their very first semester on campus, students at Claremont McKenna College are immersed in a culture of “self-authorship,” where all students are encouraged to define their own narratives. Across departments, students are taught skills like active listening, self-reflection, thoughtful questioning, conflict resolution, and how to differentiate between dialogue and debate, with the hope that they will wield these skills for life.

With 97% of students living on the school’s California campus, CMC emphasizes the importance of creating a place where everyone belongs and contributes. The school’s Fireside Chats program is one way of driving home that message. These relaxed, intimate events bring together groups of 15 students, plus a student facilitator, to have complex conversations over s’mores and by firelight. Student facilitators set the agenda, selecting topics that are campus-specific or socio-political enough to invite some challenge and smoothing potential tension with simple approaches to keep the mood inviting, like offering snacks.

By weaving the value of productive conversation into the school’s cultural fabric from day one, CMC and its student body have co-created a culture where young people actually want to talk about the tough stuff. When Charlie Kirk was assassinated in 2025, students proactively requested opportunities to talk it through—a powerful example of internal motivation to participate in dialogue, and a signal that purposeful programming leads to sustained investment. CMC rose to the occasion, with multiple on-campus programs coming together to create spaces for students of all backgrounds at a time when national tensions were high.

Turning Interest



Into

Habit

Serving students who are already motivated is, of course, only one part of the puzzle.

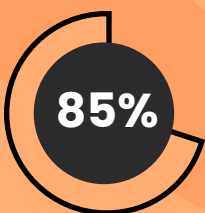
Inspiring students who aren't the "usual suspects" naturally drawn to participate in dialogue-focused events is a shared challenge across Campuswide Immersion schools. So too is coaxing an ember of motivation into becoming a full-fledged flame.

Montclair treats students as trusted messengers. When students model participation, motivation spreads faster than any campus email campaign ever could. Rupa happily takes on that role. She frequently sends friends social media posts about current events, signaling that she is open to talking about weighty subjects and encouraging them to do the same. "If I'm advocating for more civic participation, or if I'm engaging in clubs that help other individuals, then people around me might also be inspired to do the same," she says. **"The difference starts with a few people."**



BEST PRACTICE #7: Role models can spark motivation.

DARTMOUTH DIALOGUES ASSESSMENT



85%
of Dartmouth students
express confidence in their
ability to engage respectfully
with differing viewpoints



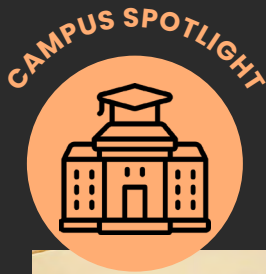
Over 90% of students
believe that engaging with
challenging perspectives is
essential to their education

[Read the full assessment](#)

Administrators also formally encourage peer-to-peer modeling, including leaders from student government and on-campus clubs in important conversations and offering them training about how to foster productive debate and dialogue on campus. These motivated students, who have self-selected into leadership roles, can then spread the message to their friends, classmates, and fellow club members. “They all have underneath them 10 to 200 students in their organization,” whether in a fraternity or a knitting club, Allman says.

Aided by Campuswide Immersion work, other colleges are taking similar steps. At Benedict College, faculty members intentionally sit alongside students in classrooms and stand with them during campus protests, sending the clear message that speaking up is welcome on campus—and that productive conversation is a lifelong skill, worthwhile long after graduation. At schools including James Madison University and Dartmouth, meanwhile, administrators invite student leaders to participate in dialogue-focused programming, counting on their enthusiasm to radiate outward to friends, teammates, and classmates.

Role modeling is incredibly powerful—but some students still need an extra nudge. Perks like free food, giveaways, and swag can bring students in the door at events like election watch parties, Allman says. After they arrive, conversation often happens organically. Ben Coulson, a rising Montclair senior and the school’s incoming student government president, says the 2024 election watch party turned into a “town square for students to come together and talk about their beliefs and compare and contrast and learn from each other.” Students didn’t need direction; they just needed a venue.



Modeling Motivation



Benedict College

True engagement is possible only when students feel safe and encouraged to speak up. Benedict College takes that responsibility seriously, creating a culture where students feel empowered to participate because the authority figures in their lives do, too.

Benedict, a small campus with fewer than 1,000 students per class, intentionally cultivates a “family” feel, where faculty members are seen as equals who sit alongside students in class and actively participate in campus protests and sit-ins. When faculty model what healthy, lifelong civic participation looks like, students feel empowered to follow suit.

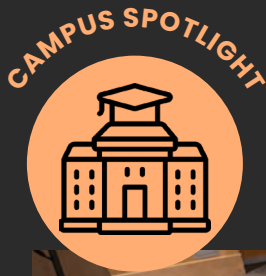
Tools like “class agreements,” where students shape the norms and expectations of their classroom culture, further reinforce that students

and faculty are working together to create a culture of participation, conversation, and acceptance. A healthy dose of humor helps, too. One Benedict professor, also the school’s Campuswide Immersion lead, uses events like “Improv Wednesdays”—during which students discuss complex topics in the style of improv comedy—and “Failure Fridays”—opportunities to dissect democratic systems that have failed—to send the message that speaking up is fun, not scary. Once that message lands, it stays ingrained for years to come.

A photograph of four students walking on a paved path outdoors. From left to right: a young woman with glasses and a black top, a young man in a black t-shirt with a circular logo and a backpack, a young man in a black t-shirt with 'MONTANA STATE' text and a backpack, and a young woman in a red 'MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY' t-shirt and a grey skirt. They are all smiling and appear to be in conversation. The background shows a building with large windows and some greenery.

**“The
difference starts
with
a few
people.”**

— ADIBA RUPA



Peers as Student Role Models



James Madison University

For a long time, there was an elephant in the room at James Madison University: Conservative students were hesitant to speak up on campus because they felt like part of an ideological minority. Instead of letting the situation fester, administrators are addressing it proactively.

Now, at first-year orientation, facilitators lead new students in a session called Better Conversations Together. After a 90-minute discussion session, students are invited to reveal a sticky note on which they've written their political identity. Students are often nervous to share, fearing that they'll be judged for their affiliation. Facilitators emphasize that there are no "wrong" or "bad" answers, challenging the stigma head-on and sending a message that everyone's voice is meant to be heard at JMU. That simple action creates a welcoming environment from the very beginning, where students see and appreciate their peers' bravery

and candor. That's a message that serves JMU graduates well after they leave campus.

Positive role modeling doesn't stop at orientation. JMU regularly brings together groups of prominent students—such as athletes and social media influencers—to share a meal and discuss difficult issues with campus leadership. Students are encouraged to disagree and challenge leaders, making the conversations as honest as possible. The experience plants seeds of lasting change, with students going back to their peer groups ready to demonstrate the power of productive dialogue.



BEST PRACTICE #8: Incentives invite more students in.

Incentives may get students in the door, but what keeps them coming back is belonging, confidence, and the feeling that their participation matters. It doesn't matter what gets someone through the door. Encouraging students to take that first step can set them on a lifelong path toward productive conversation and collaborative problem-solving, Allman says. "The habit of attending several of these events actually changes your character," he says. The result? Over time, "you become more civically oriented."



Campuswide Immersion schools make a point to sustain that momentum. Wellesley strategically embeds conversation-focused programming in its career training office, capitalizing on students' strong motivation for work advancement while sending the message that productive conversation is a skill that's valuable for life. Initiatives like the [Clinton Fellows Program](#), which teaches constructive dialogue skills, also entice students with perks including

early housing selection and experiential learning credits—and keep them engaged with meaningful programming that aligns constructive conversation with their identity and values.

Motivation begins with an invitation. When colleges listen to students and make participation easy to see, easy to access, and meaningful, more students take the first step—and that first step shapes how they show up for the rest of their lives.



BEST PRACTICE #9: Small steps build momentum.



Tapping Into Incentives



Wellesley College

Some students feel naturally pulled to participate in dialogue-focused programming, while others need a gentle push. Wellesley's leadership found a unique way to provide that extra motivation.

Wellesley students tend to be highly driven by securing internships, fellowships, and post-graduate work. For that reason, campus leaders made a deliberate structural choice: integrating community involvement training into the career education department. This shift meets students where they are by recognizing what motivates them, and helps them see productive conversation as a lifelong tool that can help them become who they want to be in the future, in the workplace and beyond.

To reinforce that messaging, Wellesley also offers special programming—like nature retreats in partnership with Outward Bound, community service projects, and off-campus immersion days—meant to draw students in with novelty, and keep them engaged with substance. Through these unique experiences, students are empowered to get vulnerable, speak up, and use their voices to influence their communities, now and in post-graduate life.

Ready to build a campus culture that prepares students for civic life? **We're here to help.**

- Join College Presidents for Civic Preparedness.
- Join the next Campuswide Immersion cohort.





cands.org