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Civil Leadership for Vibrant Communities: Building Bridges through Deliberative Dialogue

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Cover Page Footnote

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Civil Leadership for Vibrant Communities: Building Bridges through Deliberative Dialogue

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Abstract. Polarization is increasingly impacting Extension’s work in communities. Extension has untapped potential to address division and lack of civility by building civic infrastructure and skills for constructive dialogue. We describe a pilot program that began as a one-off event and grew into a series organized by University of Wisconsin-Madison Division of Extension in partnership with Braver Angels, a national organization applying research-based skills to building bridges. We report on the series structure and content, its goals, and the impacts on participants. We suggest that Extension has the mission, capacity, opportunity, and responsibility to engage in skill-building for Public Issues Education.

INTRODUCTION

Political polarization and lack of civility in American public life are a growing concern. The viability of American democracy has entered public discourse in relation to these and other concerns, with many people making the judgment that democracy is under attack (Galston & Kamarck, 2022). Although historians remind us that these phenomena have deep roots in American political life (Han & Brady, 2007; Herbst 2010), current levels of discord, distrust, and division have reached heights not experienced in the memories of most Americans. The Pew Research Center, which tracks trust in institutions, concludes that “Americans have rarely been as polarized as they are today” (Dimock & Wike, 2020; Pew Research Center, 2023).

Political disagreement, difference, and division can be signs of a healthy democracy. In Federalist Paper No. 10, Madison (1787) praised the democratic benefits of what he called “variety”: With “a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.” Some scholars, as discussed in Mason (2018, p. 6), have argued more pointedly that political polarization itself enables democracy insofar as it has in some ways “simplified our electoral choices and increased political engagement.”

Other social science research has underscored the extent to which a traditional knowledge deficit model of education can fail to account for important contextual influences on learning or how facts are ultimately perceived, assimilated, and related to behavioral responses (Simis et al., 2016; Sturgis & Allum, 2004). In view of concerns about polarization, such factors as group identity, values, and cultural cognition have been used to explain how motivated reasoning and similar mechanisms can lead to disagreement about the facts that is even greater among those who are skilled in using quantitative data than among those not as skilled in using quantitative data (Kahan et al., 2017). Understanding of critical scientific and social issues ranging from climate change to COVID has been drawn into this vortex of politicized knowledge.

Extension educators working under the rubric of community development will be keenly attuned to the role of trust and other aspects of social capital in enabling communities and society to work toward common ends. Leading social capital scholars contend that mutual trust, reciprocity, collective identity, sense of a shared future, and working together are foundational to the effective mobilization of resources in pursuit of community goals (Agnitsch et al., 2006). Although homogeneity of thinking may enhance limited forms of bonding or in-group social capital, polarization and incivility within community discourse are intuitively antithetical to building social

capital as it is more comprehensively conceived, although research on the precise relationship between incivility and social capital is surprisingly thin (Jawahar et al., 2021).

These considerations raise essential challenges for Extension's efforts to "provide trusted, practical education, to help people, businesses, and communities solve problems, develop skills, and build a better future" and to "respond to local needs, build trust, and engage effectively with citizens" (Cooperative Extension Section, n.d.). Like every other evolving public institution, Extension has to evaluate its role and fate in a sea of civic discontent, political polarization, and politically inflected mistrust of institutions, not excluding higher education itself (Parker, 2019). Our contention is that Extension has strong traditions that can help us rise to these challenges while fulfilling the organization's basic mission.

We suggest that Extension's long-standing work in public issues education (aka public policy education), which draws on the theories and practices of public participation, conflict management, and deliberative dialogue, provides the Extension system with frameworks, tools, and a potent if largely latent capacity to make important contributions to current challenges to civil discourse at the community level. Several recent *Journal of Extension* articles have made a similar case (McCann et al., 2021; Walcott & Triesenberg, 2021). In this article, we describe a pilot collaboration between the Wisconsin Extension system and a national grassroots organization devoted to depolarizing America. We propose that Extension can and should build on this and similar partnerships to assist communities in building a better future.

PROGRAMMING

In a pilot program designed to respond to the evident deterioration of civil discourse, University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison) Division of Extension partnered with a nationally recognized nonprofit organization, Braver Angels, to build an educational program focused on civil leadership. The focus on the intersection of civil discourse and leadership provided an opportunity to reframe the skill-building Braver Angels brings to the community leadership programming that Extension develops and delivers. It was also an opportunity to recognize deliberative dialogue as an essential leadership development skill.

Braver Angels' stated mission is "to bring Americans together to bridge the partisan divide and strengthen our democratic republic." Its approach is research-based, designed around inclusion and recruitment of people from different political perspectives, is replicable, and has a strong commitment to evaluation. The primary Braver Angels workshop designer is Bill Doherty, professor and director of the Minnesota Couples on the Brink Project in the Department of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota.

Programming began with a pilot partnership with Braver Angels, a one-session workshop titled "Skills for Bridging the Divide." This workshop introduced participants to skills for engaging in conversations that clarify differences, search for common ground, and affirm the importance of the relationship. Extension recruited through community leadership programs and networks. There were 52 participants from communities across Wisconsin, representing urban and rural regions and spanning political leanings.

Designing the program as a partnership between Extension and Braver Angels enhanced program efficiencies and replicability. Extension drew upon its skills as a trusted local, community-based institution to bring people with diverse backgrounds and geographies to the table. Extension educators connected the skill-building in the workshops to applications for local community issues, tying deliberative dialogue themes to local action. Braver Angels applied its research-based workshop design, rooted in skills taught in couple's therapy. Finally, Extension educators employed engagement strategies for reflection and evaluation.

Based on evaluation responses from pre- and post-session surveys from the stand-alone "Skills for Bridging the Divide" session showing enhanced learning, UW-Madison Division of Extension continued the partnership with Braver Angels to create a multi-session virtual program on "Civil Leadership for Vibrant Communities." This program ran from September 2021 through May 2022. Fall sessions focused on understanding issues and concerns regarding lack of civil leadership and deliberative dialogue. The winter and spring sessions focused on applying those skills.

The program was fully virtual, with sessions of 1.5–3 hours in length, depending on the content. Extension facilitators were intentional about ensuring that the sessions were engaging. This goal included the use of Zoom polls, reaction buttons, and Google Documents, Miro, Padlet, and Slido.

Civil Leadership

Figure 1. “Civil Leadership for Vibrant Communities” workshop series.

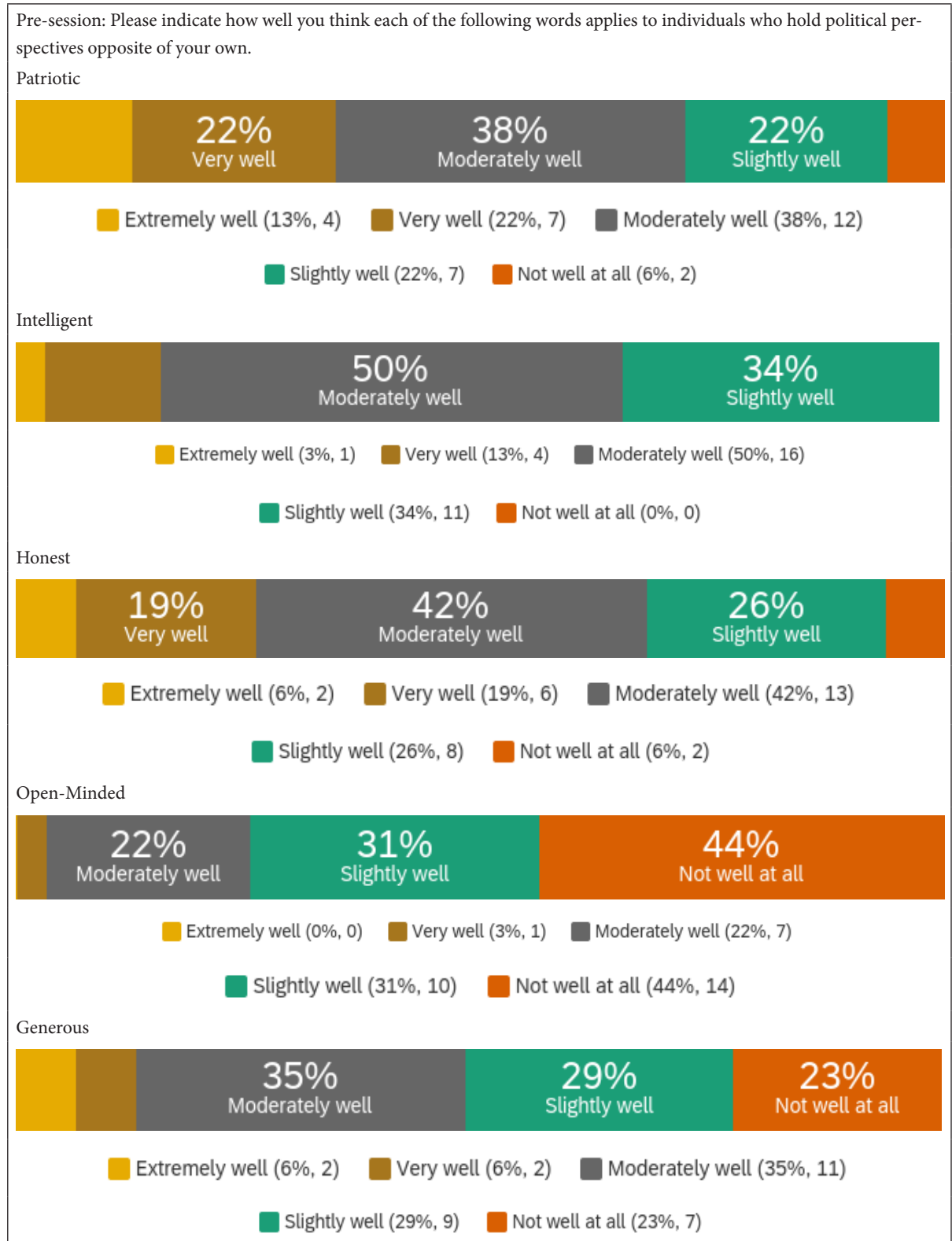
September: Civil Leadership in Today’s Divided World: An Introduction
This first step on the journey explores the forces of polarization in our nation and how we can counteract them in our local communities. We will discuss the challenges to working together across differences and learn about proven strategies for communicating and working productively with people who see the world differently. Local leaders can show the way for their communities and the nation.
October: Skills for Bridging the Divide
Learn about the perspectives, feelings, and experiences of someone you care about who differs from you politically; have a sense of satisfaction about how you conveyed your own perspective, feelings, and experiences; and discover common ground, if it is there.
November: Growing Your Inner Bridge Builder
Much of today’s polarization is driven by how we talk with like-minded people about those we disagree with on the other side. Community leaders can learn to expand spheres of empathy and regard a wider range of people as potential partners, including when talking to like-minded peers, creating more durable solutions benefiting a wider range of people.
December: Families and Politics Workshop
“Families and Politics” shows you how to talk about politics with your loved ones in a way that brings you closer together—not farther apart. You’ll discuss why family political discussions can be uniquely challenging and how to handle the unique roles that family members often play in those conversations.
January: Common Ground Workshops
While the training workshops focus on skills for better interactions, “Common Ground” lets you put these into practice in real discussions around a single issue with those with opposing views, showing us how productive conversations about beliefs and policies can look. Participants will identify points of agreement that can lead to action on that issue.
February: One-to-One Conversations
To continue your dialogues and go deeper on issues that are important to you and the life experiences that have formed your views, Braver Angels will match you with a member of a group with whom you may have differences for one-to-one conversations about these differences in experiences and beliefs, helping you develop ideas for community action.
March and April: Civil Leadership in Action (Optional)
You will be trained to run these sessions within your communities and organizations. Prior to the orientation event, you will complete a self-paced training comprising videos and written guides and have access to personal coaching. You will also be eligible for additional training to run online events.
May: Looking Forward and Graduation Celebration!
You will reflect on what you have learned during this shared journey and what next steps, as an individual and as a community member, you may wish to take.

OUTCOMES

PILOT PARTNERSHIP: “SKILLS FOR BRIDGING THE DIVIDE” STAND-ALONE WORKSHOP

The pre- and post-session evaluations indicated that the session increased participants’ confidence when engaging in conversations with someone who holds the opposite political perspective and increased hope in their community’s ability to hold difficult conversations. Figures 2 and 3 show that as a result of the session, participants’ negative stereotypes of people with different political perspectives from their own changed. Some participants viewed people with opposite political perspectives as less hypocritical (40% of participants), selfish (44%), and mean (51%) and as more open-minded (33%), honest (26%), and intelligent (26%) than before the session (see Figure 3). This change in attitude is noteworthy, given that this workshop was a single session, indicating the possibility for deeper changes that could occur with additional programming.

Figure 2. “Skills for Bridging the Divide” workshop pre-session evaluation data.



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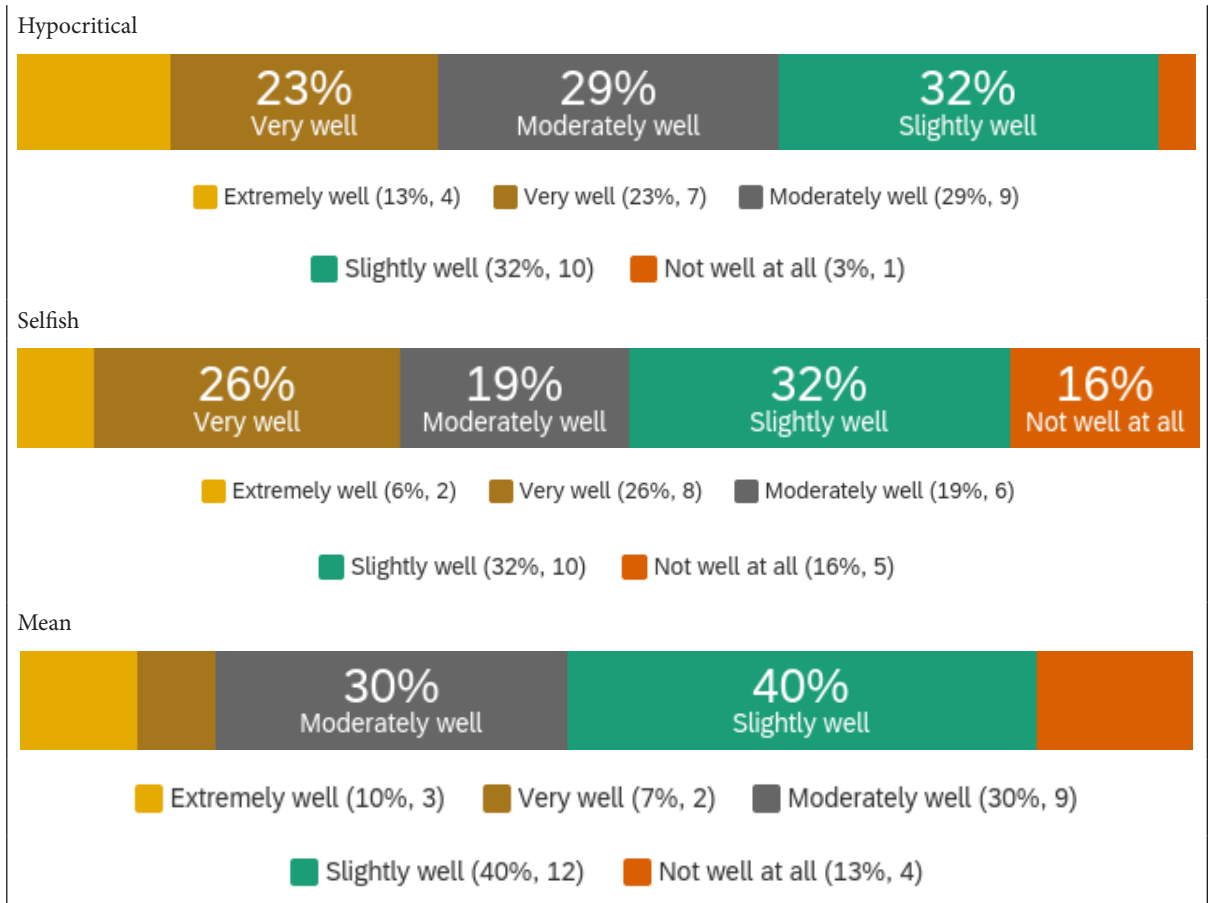
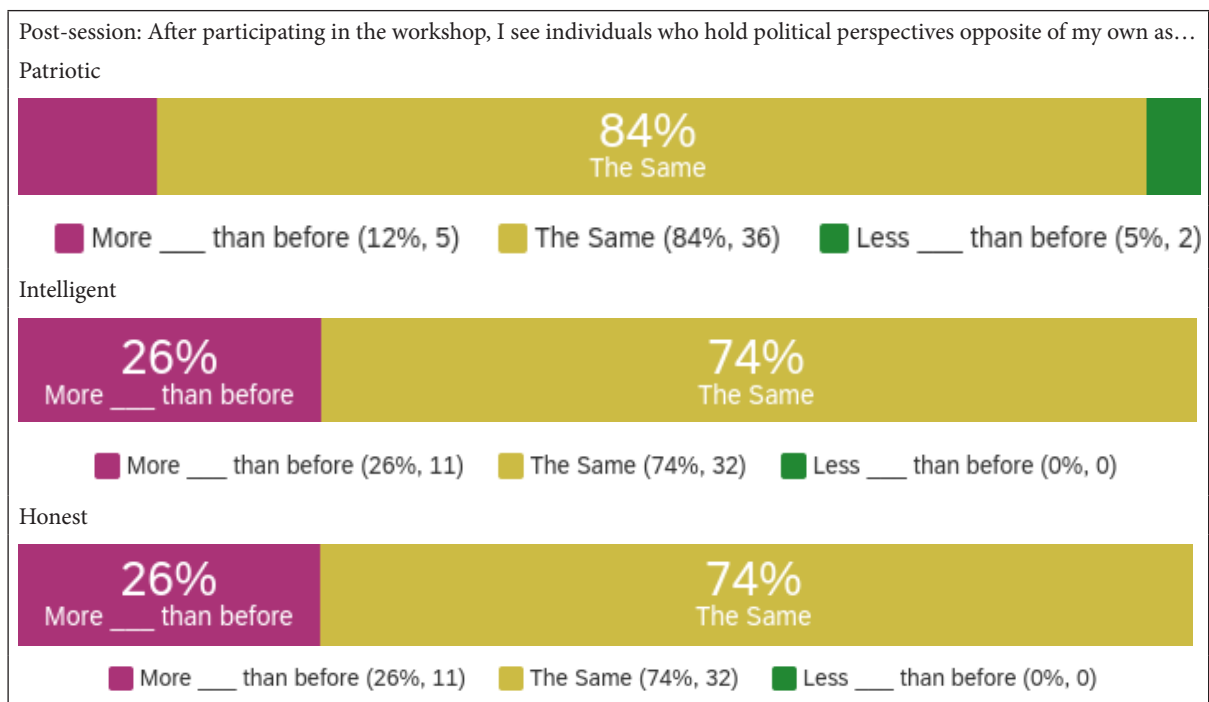
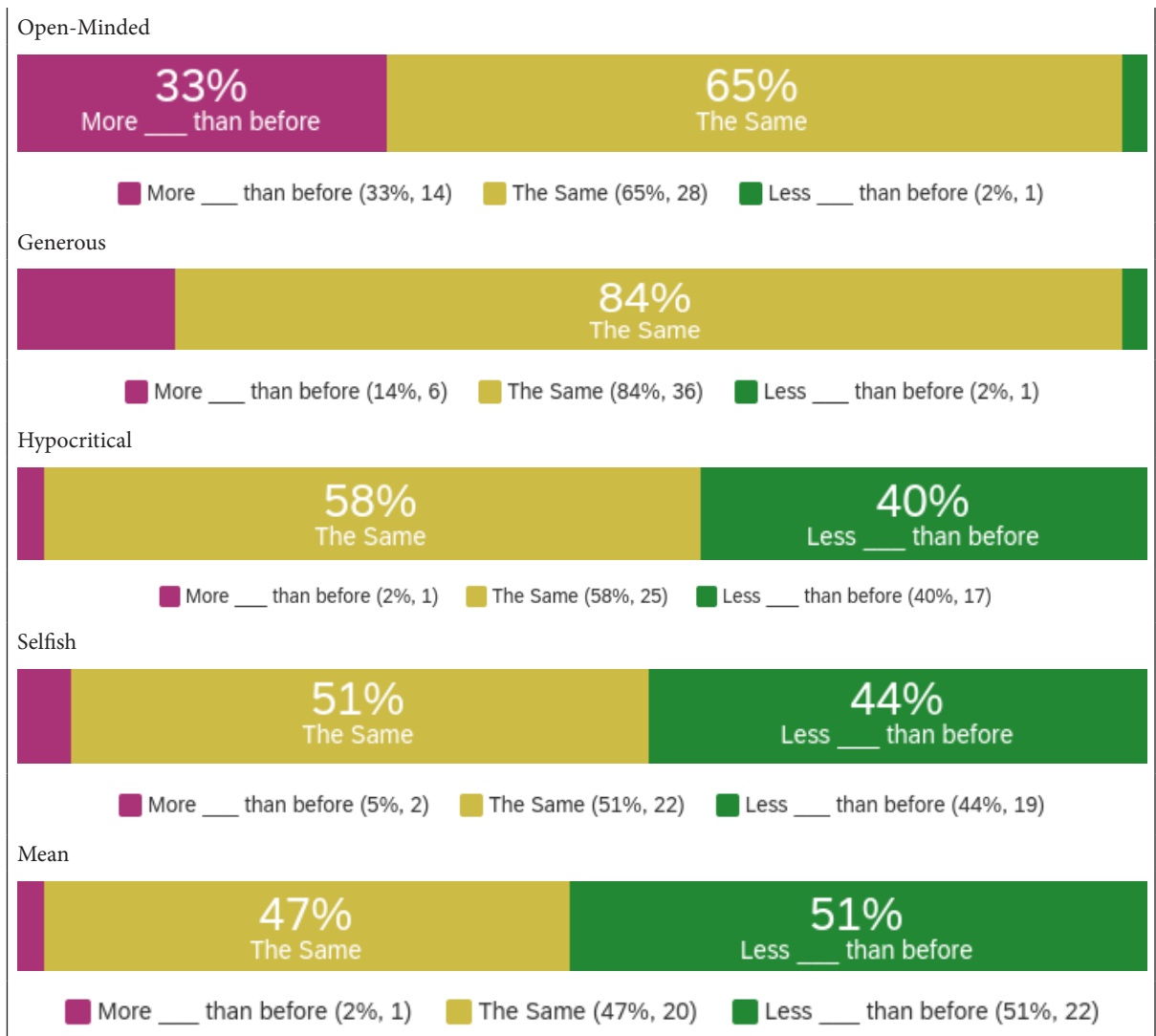


Figure 3. “Skills for Bridging the Divide” workshop post-session evaluation data.





Participants were also asked to self-identify their personal political leanings. Despite the attempts of all program partners, we were unable to obtain parity in political leanings. After the workshop, 92% of those who identified as Red and 100% of those who identified as Blue rated themselves as being more comfortable having conversations with people who hold political perspectives opposite of their own, as shown in Figure 4. Additionally, 70% of those who identified as Red and 72% of those who identified as Blue were more hopeful in their community's ability to have difficult conversations about community issues (see Figure 5). The program partners considered any answer that was at least "slightly more comfortable" to be successful.

SERIES PARTNERSHIP: "CIVIL LEADERSHIP FOR VIBRANT COMMUNITIES" PROGRAM

An important consideration is that this 9-month program attracted 110 registrants from 32 of Wisconsin's 72 counties and through the course of the program lost 57%, to end with 47 participants. The high registrations, despite the longer duration of the program, could be an indication of the felt need for this type of programming. The loss of so many participants raises questions about what participants struggled with during the program. Anecdotally, when program partners reached out to investigate why a participant left, the most common explanation was a discomfort with political conversations.

Additionally, during registration, participants were asked to self-identify their political leanings. The political makeup of the participants was 64% Blue (left-leaning, Democrat) and 10% Red (right-leaning, Republican), while 12% identified as Other, and 14% chose not to identify their leanings. At the end of the program, the political makeup was 66% Blue and 17% Red, with 14% identifying as Other, and 3% choosing not to share their leanings.

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Figure 4. Participants' comfort level in having conversations with people with different political perspectives.

After participating in the workshop, how comfortable are you having conversations with people who hold political perspectives opposite of your own?		More Comfortable, Somewhat More Comfortable, or Slightly More Comfortable	Still Not Comfortable
For the purposes of the workshop, did you participate as a Red or a Blue?	Red	92% (12)	8% (1)
	Blue	100% (32)	0% (0)
Total		98% (44)	2% (1)

Figure 5. Participants' measures of hopefulness regarding community's ability to have difficult conversations.

After participating in the workshop, how, if at all, have your feelings changed in regards to your community's ability to have difficult conversations about community issues?		More Hopeful or Somewhat More Hopeful	No Change	Not Sure
For the purposes of the workshop, did you participate as a Red or a Blue?	Red	70% (9)	.15% (2)	.15% (2)
	Blue	72% (23)	9% (3)	19% (6)
Total		71% (32)	11% (5)	18% (8)

Again, despite the attempts of all program partners, we were unable to obtain parity in political leanings. This issue deserves more study and attention for future research.

When it came to putting the skills into action, participants shared that they saw the "Common Ground" sessions in the spring (see Figure 1) as an opportunity to see the skills they learned earlier in the fall applied to important topics. The "Common Ground" sessions are designed to include people who self-identify as having different political leanings, discuss a topic of their choosing, and identify shared values, concerns, and solutions or policies both can agree upon. The topics participants identified for these discussions included:

- Addressing COVID and Public Health Precautions
- Addressing Poverty
- Addressing Climate Change
- Teaching Public School Students about Race and Racism

All participants and observers in the "Common Ground" sessions reported feeling "somewhat" or "very" hopeful that people with different perspectives could come together and find agreement over issues "based on this session."

At the end of the series, 100% of participants reported increased confidence in setting a constructive tone with someone who holds political perspectives opposite of their own, with the majority (58%) reporting feeling Fairly or Completely Confident. Figure 6 also illustrates an overall increased ability to find common ground, individually and in community, as well as to search for solutions. The ability to trust the people in our lives and experience reciprocity, collective identity, the sense of a shared future, and working together contribute to our ability to take action together to address community issues (Agnitsch et al., 2006).

Figure 6. Post-series evaluation responses.

Because of your participation in the program, to what extent...			
	Not at All	Somewhat	A Great Deal
Do you feel able to find common ground with people who have different perspectives from your own?	3% (1)	69% (20)	28% (8)
Are you confident that you can search for solutions with people who have different perspectives from your own?	3% (1)	55% (16)	41% (12)
Do you feel your community is able to find common ground with people with different perspectives?	14% (4)	83% (24)	3% (1)

FURTHER EXPLORATION

An interesting development that this paper did not explore adequately is the drop-off of attendance during the series. Those who dropped off did so for a variety of reasons, but the most common reason was that they were uncomfortable discussing politics. This issue speaks to the importance and relevance of building deliberative dialogue skills. Deeper understanding of who is coming to the table and why, their expectations, and what are they willing to tolerate and why would be useful for future study.

Another area for further exploration would be long-term evaluation or ripple effects mapping. It can be difficult to measure the larger impacts of this type of program, as it takes time for the practices to take hold and start having on-the-ground impacts. By the time impacts occur, the participants may not associate them with their deliberative dialogue training or practice.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Extension's relationships and embeddedness in communities uniquely position us to bring people with different perspectives and experiences together. The "Civil Leadership for Vibrant Communities" programming helped community members learn and apply civil leadership skills for deliberative dialogue on key issues. Wisconsin Extension was able to successfully incorporate Braver Angels's depolarization approaches into an existing leadership training framework.

Pre- and post-intervention indicators of the extent of polarization and stereotyping showed noteworthy changes. Large proportions of participants modified their views, coming to see their political opposites as having fewer negative and more positive attributes. Perhaps most important for democratic community life, nearly all responding participants increased their comfort level in engaging with people from the opposite political persuasion, while more than eight out of 10 participants were more hopeful about their community's ability to have difficult conversations about community issues.

Extension has undertaken other initiatives related to building skills for civil dialogue to bridge differences. One example is Extension's national "Coming Together for Racial Understanding" programming (Coming Together for Racial Understanding, n.d.). Supported by the Extension Committee on Organization and Policy, "Coming Together" was developed as a partnership with Everyday Democracy, a national organization. Another public issues education initiative similarly attracted participation and support from Extension educators around the country (Lachapelle, n.d.). Extension can do more to build and capitalize on its strengths in facilitation, trusted information provision, relationship maintenance, network building, community development, leadership development and community-based education to advance this work.

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