Greetings, friends. The Program for Public Discourse (PPD) is proud to report one of its most productive years to date, working with partners inside the classroom, on campus, and across the state to help mitigate political polarization and promote democratic participation by fostering spaces for robust public discourse.

Over 1,100 people attended the Abbey Speaker Series this year, and more than 600 students received Campus Life Experience credits for attending PPD events. (broadens focus beyond Abbey). There were more than 8,000 impressions on our YouTube Channel and over 2,500 subscribers to the PPD newsletter.

Abbey Speaker Series events for 2023-2024 included *A Conversation with Irshad Manji, Regulating Big Tech & the First Amendment*, co-sponsored by the UNC Center for Media Law and Policy, *Frank Bruni and Bari Weiss in Conversation*, co-sponsored by Carolina Alumni, *The Politics of Israel-Palestine*, co-sponsored by the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies; the UNC Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies; and the Curriculum in Peace, War, and Defense.

**Overview**

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The first Abbey Speaker Series event of the academic year featured a conversation between Leah Cox and Irshad Manji. Manji is the author of *Don’t Label Me* and is known for her criticism of many conventional DEI training programs. Leah Cox is the Vice Provost for Equity and Inclusion and the Chief Diversity Officer at UNC. The conversation touched on numerous issues, including the best ways to pursue social justice, strategies for engaging with political opponents, and the appropriateness of using group identity to label ourselves and others. When engaging with political opponents, Manji encouraged the audience to ask themselves, “Am I in this to move the needle, or am I in this to feel superior?”

UNC’s 2023 celebration of First Amendment Day culminated with the Abbey Speaker Series event on *Regulating Big Tech and the First Amendment*. Professor Mary-Rose Papandrea of the UNC School of Law moderated a discussion between Professor Eugene Volokh from the UCLA School of Law, and Carrie Goldberg, founder of the Victims’ Rights Law Firm C.A. Goldberg, PLCC. Speaking to a packed auditorium, the panel debated whether social media companies should be held liable for harmful content and the extent to which the government should regulate online content.
Veteran journalists and former colleagues Frank Bruni and Bari Weiss reunited for a discussion of the future of journalism and objectivism in journalism. Weiss is the founder and editor of The Free Press and host of the podcast Honestly. Bruni ’86 has been a journalist for more than three decades, including more than twenty-five years at The New York Times. The conversation began with Bruni asking Weiss, a staunch defender of Israel, for her opinions on the current war in Gaza. The bulk of the conversation, however, focused on how to ensure future in journalism and how to maintain intellectual humility despite pressure to view contentious political issues in black and white. “I want to popularize the phrase, I don’t know or, I’m still figuring it out,” Bruni remarked.

The final Abbey Speaker Series of the academic year explored one of the most contentious issues on colleges campuses today: the politics of Israel-Palestine. In a conversation moderated by PPD Faculty Director Sarah Treul Roberts, UNC political science professors Navin Bapat and Jeff Spinner-Halev continued the conversation they began during a previous PPD event that was focused on the ethics of war and strategy of combatants in the Gaza War (see page 8). For this Abbey event, Bapat and Spinner-Halev offered a broader perspective, discussing the political situation in both Gaza and Israel, while also considering how the war might impact politics in the United States and throughout the Middle East. This event was part of the College of Arts and Sciences, “Dialogue for Understanding: College Conversations in Difficult Times” series.
A Year in the Agora

This past year, the Agora welcomed its second cohort of Agora Fellows, who led the student body in tackling some of the most timely and challenging issues facing UNC and the broader American public. The Agora held three Tar Heel Town Halls addressing affirmative action, student protest, and young people’s role in the upcoming presidential election, respectively. Alongside public forums, the fellows convened weekly to deliberate topical and perennial issues, including democratic fragility, Middle East tensions, America’s role in the global community, and the tradeoffs between civil and unruly discourse in a democratic society. Other highlights include participating in a Braver Angels forum on gun control and conversing with notable guest speakers, such as Cornel West and Jonathan Haidt, during their visits to UNC.

The Agora is proud to report charter member, Kochoe Nikoi, who graduated last year, recently accepted a position with the Aspen Institute in Washington D.C., where she will be working on public discourse initiatives. Another fellow, Nigel Parker, recently presented his thesis, “The Telos of Civil Discourse,” as part of the philosophy department’s Philosophy Reimagined series. Next year, the Agora will welcome its third and largest cohort to date, who will, among other initiatives, collaborate with the UNC’s Dialogue for Change Program to continue fostering civil discourse across the student body. PPD Executive Director Kevin Marinelli will partner with UNC leaders to facilitate an intergroup dialogue across Jewish and Muslim student groups on campus.
Promoting Public Discourse in the Classroom

Kevin Marinelli remains actively engaged with educators across the university and state in the effort to promote speech communication pedagogy. To that end, Marinelli led a cohort of six faculty across the university to analyze best practices for teaching Communication Beyond Carolina. He hopes to expand the pilot program next year for incoming and returning faculty teaching communication-intensive (CBC) courses. Most recently, Marinelli led a workshop on classroom deliberation for the UNC Worldview Teacher-Student Collaboration Celebration. Inspired by his work in this area, his book chapter, “American Paideia: Reclaiming the Rhetorical Tradition in Civic Pedagogy,” will soon appear in the edited volume, *Civic Pedagogies: Teaching Civic Engagement in an Era of Divisive Politics*, released in July.

Debating Public Policy Series

In addition to the Abbey Speakers Series, the PPD hosted its annual Debating Public Policy Series last fall, in collaboration with the Steamboat Institute. This year’s debate asked: Is ‘Net Zero by 2050’ Achievable? The debate featured former Undersecretary for Science at the U.S. Dept. of Energy, Steven Koonin, and notable climate scientist, Roger Pielke, of the University of Colorado. Provost Christopher Clemens moderated the debate. Relatedly, Executive Director Kevin Marinelli continued his work preparing Kenan Scholars for their annual debate, which this year addressed the question of data ownership and transparency.
Best Practices for College Events on January 12

At the request of the Dean of the College, Faculty Director Sarah Treul Roberts gave a presentation on best practices for event planning to the College's chairs and managers. The goal of the presentation was to offer tips and strategies for planning events or bringing in outside speakers. Since January, many departments and other units across the University have reached out asking for our expertise in this area.

Fostering Civil Discourse Across North Carolina

Executive Director Kevin Marinelli spent the year building networks across the state of North Carolina. This past spring, Marinelli hosted the inaugural North Carolina Campus Discourse Leaders Conference, which assembled faculty and staff at institutions across the state to strategize opportunities for making North Carolina a national leader of collegiate public discourse. The North Carolina Campus Discourse Leaders presented their work at the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation Conference last fall in Atlanta.
War in Gaza: A Discussion of the Origins, Strategy, and Ethics

On November 6, PPD convened a panel of experts from the political science department. Navin Bapat, an expert in terrorism and insurgency, and Jeff Spinner-Halev, who regularly teaches a course on the “Ethics of Peace, War, and Defense” gave a packed room a quick overview of the historical roots of the conflict. They also explained how research into both the ethics of war and the causes of terrorism might help students better understand the conflict. In an op-ed in the Charlotte Observer, Eric Johnson wrote that this event served as a model of “public rhetoric that aims to persuade and educate, not flame opponents and flatter allies.”

“We need to do what academics are supposed to do—have discussions and explain the long history that goes beyond today’s events,” Bapat later told the Carolina Alumni.

This event was co-sponsored by the UNC Center for Middle East and Islamic Studies and the Carolina Center for Jewish Studies.