

Call for Participation in a Discussion Group on
DISCUSSING POLARIZING TOPICS IN A POLARIZING TIME:
WHY CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Abstracts due Monday, September 11, 2023

Introduction

The following is a Call for Participation in a Discussion Group on *Discussing Polarizing Topics in a Polarizing Time: Why Can't We Just All Get Along?* to be held during the in-person AALS Annual Meeting from January 3-6, 2024, in Washington, DC. Discussion groups allow a small group of interested people to engage in a sustained conversation about a topic of interest. This Discussion Group's participants will introduce themselves and give a short introduction to their views on the topic. The rest of the session will feature a lively and engaging (hopefully!) discussion among all the participants and the audience. The participants in this Discussion Group will be the individuals identified in the original proposal submitted to the Program Committee, plus additional individuals selected from this "call for participation." There will be limited audience seating for other folks who are interested in the topic.

Description

Defending democracy requires the open exchange of ideas. And yet, our country appears to be at an apex of polarization. Talking across ideological chasms appears so challenging that it can feel safer and easier to refrain from discussing polarizing topics in the classroom. But our students and our institutions are demanding that we engage with pressing issues, cases, and movements. It feels timely and necessary to ask ourselves how we, as educators, mentors, and role models, should address the many newsworthy, unsettling, and emotionally challenging events and legal decisions of our times. Do we have an obligation to create space in our classrooms? And space for what exactly- for discussion, venting, and the exchange of ideas? Does this obligation arise only when the issue is related to our particular course, or are there other occasions where we should be taking this on as well?

This Discussion Group will include both short presentations and moderated discussion; it will engage the questions raised above as well as on the following issues:

1. Do we have an obligation to open space and time for discussion of topics of national importance and/or attention in our classrooms or at our law schools generally?
2. Where does that obligation arise from?
3. How do we situate or frame these discussions particularly where some students are unaware of the issues while others may feel the issues in deeply personal ways? How can our conversations be both an energizing wake-up call, while also being a balm to those in whom it provokes many feelings?

4. To the extent we do open space for such discussions, where is the best place for those conversations to happen? In open fora? In sections or other small affinity group settings? In classrooms in which the course subject area is related to the issue? In all classrooms?
5. In discussing potentially polarizing and/or emotional topics, what are best practices for such discussions?
6. What is the role of the faculty member in those discussions?
7. How best can faculty participate in such discussions given well-founded concerns about recordings, blunders, mistakes, and potentially upsetting or offensive comments on the part of the faculty?
8. How best can we as faculty and administrators set up such conversations for success? What kinds of warnings, ground rules, principles should we provide – if any?
9. What if such topics are emotional ones for faculty? Should that affect our decision to pursue such a discussion?
10. What if things go badly?

Call for Abstracts

The Annual Meeting Program Committee invites folks who would like to join this Discussion Group to submit a three-page abstract that addresses any of the questions or a combination of the questions listed above by August 31. Current organizers and confirmed discussion participants include Bradford Colbert, Professor of Law, Mitchell Hamline School of Law; Claire Donohue, Assistant Clinical Professor, Boston College Law School; Laurie S. Kohn, Jacob Burns Foundation Associate Dean for Clinical Affairs, Associate Professor, George Washington Law School; Sherley Cruz, Assistant Professor, the University of Tennessee College of Law; Iselin Gambert, Professor of Legal Research and Writing, George Washington University Law School; Vanessa Hernandez, Practitioner in Residence, Suffolk University Law School; David Santacroce, Clinical Professor of Law, Michigan University Law School; Rodger D. Citron, Associate Dean for Research and Scholarship & Professor of Law, Touro Law School; Christine E. Cerniglia, Assistant Professor of Law, Director of Clinical and Experiential Education, Stetson University College of Law; Kia H. Vernon, Associate Dean of Academic Success & Professor of Law, North Carolina Central University; Natalie Netzel, Assistant Professor Law, Education and Advocacy Director, Institute to Transform Child Protection, Clinical Co-Director, Mitchell Hamline Law School; Stephen Chien, Assistant Professor of Law, Cleveland-Marshall College of Law; Erin Lain, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, Drake University.

Space in this Discussion Group is limited; the Committee, along with the faculty organizer who proposed this Discussion, will select the remaining discussion participants from the abstracts submitted. At the AALS Annual Meeting in January, all participants will make a very short (2-3 minutes) presentation during the Discussion Group. The remaining time will be devoted to a moderated, roundtable group discussion.

Each submission for this Discussion Group should include:

- The title of the submitted presentation;
- The name, school and email of the applying participant;
- A three-page, double-spaced abstract that addresses select questions raised above; and
- The curriculum vitae of the applying participant.

In reviewing the submitted abstracts, the Discussion Group organizers and selection committee will consider the following:

- The fit and overall quality of the abstract for the Discussion Group; and
- The diversity that the applying participant may bring in terms of a variety of factors including viewpoint diversity, institutional affiliation and status (tenure-track, non-tenure track, tenured).

Abstracts are due by **Monday, September 11, 2023** and should be submitted using the online submission form <https://aalsweb.wufoo.com/forms/sja3po01qn0yl9/>