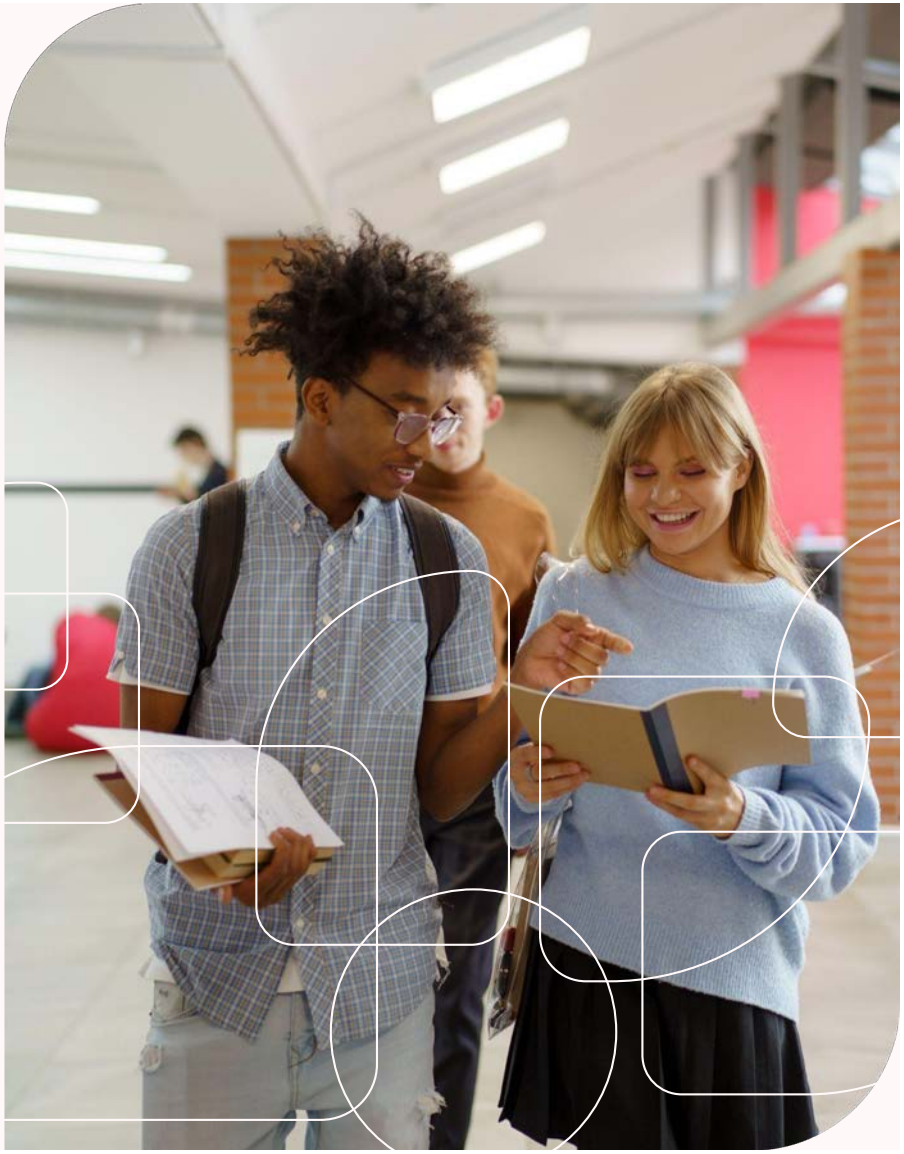
Constructive Dialogue Institute

Navigating political polarization in higher ed

April 2025



Constructive Dialogue Institute

About CDI

The Constructive Dialogue Institute (CDI) is a national nonprofit that helps colleges and universities transform their campuses into inclusive learning environments that support dialogue across differences.





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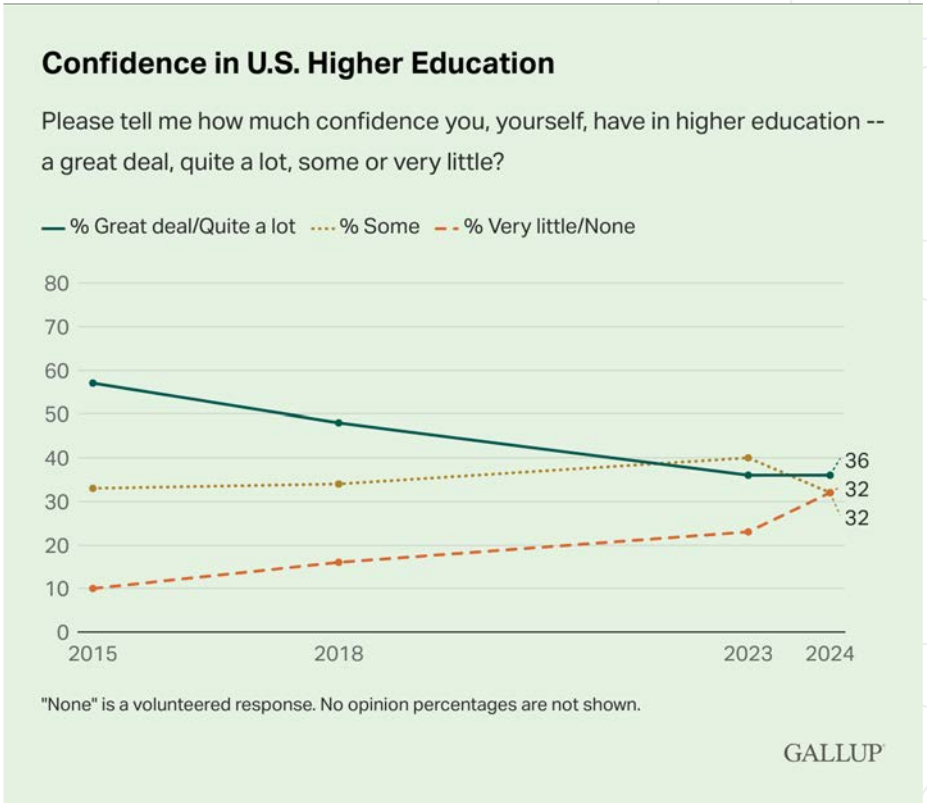
The Problem

1. Most people's opinions are moderate and nuanced. This is true of college students too.
2. Societal conditions elevate extreme voices and open conflict, and suppress constructive dialogue.
3. Perceived partisanship and internal conflict among institutions erodes public trust.
4. Because of declining trust, stakeholders increasingly try to influence institutional decisions, making the job of leading organizations more difficult.
5. Still, functioning organizations are needed to solve (very) big societal and global problems.

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Internal division undermines public trust

- 36% have confidence in higher education
- Down from 48% in 2018 and 57% in 2015
- Marked decrease in confidence between 2023 and 2024
- All major subgroups less confident, with Republicans dropping the most



Source: Gallup, 2024



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Poor public perception sets the stage for legislative intervention

- DEI bans
- Post-tenure reviews
- Budget cuts
- Vaccine mandate prohibition

Source: Chronicle of Higher Ed, 2024; Inside Higher Ed, 2024

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Leaders face cross-pressures from all sides—often with conflicting expectations

Why is the school allowing protests that tarnish its reputation?
–Alumni



Where is my tuition money being invested?
–Student



Are public funds being used to bias students?
–Legislator



Is my student being silenced for their views?
–Parents

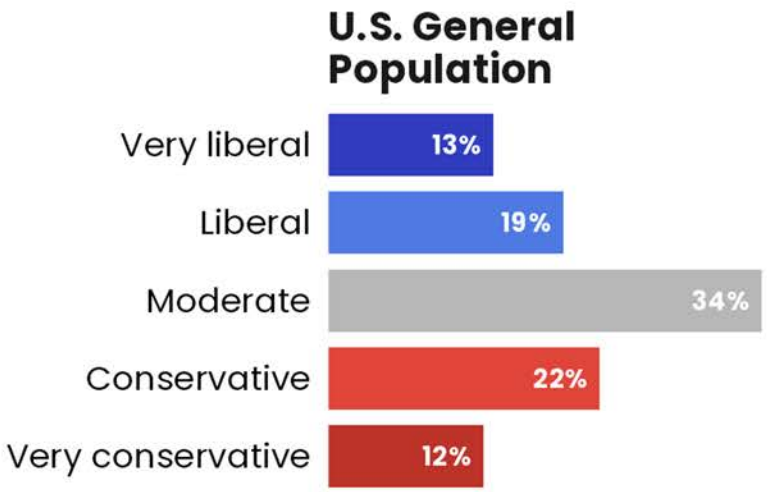


Are my donations funding programs I disagree with?
–Donor



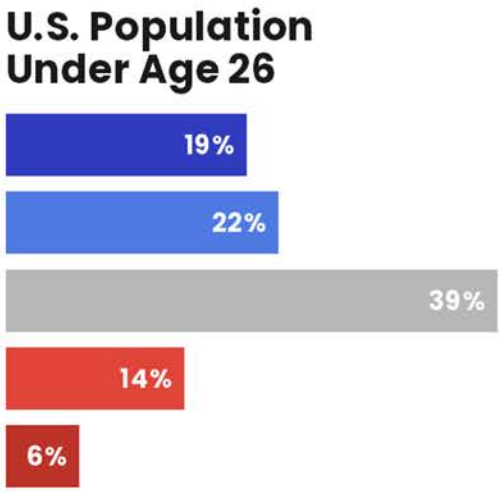
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Most people's opinions are moderate and nuanced.



Source: Political Pulse, 2024

This is also true of college students.



Source: Constructive Dialogue Institute, 2023

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Fear and self-censorship

- 48% of students afraid to share their views
- 50% of faculty afraid to “express statements they, as scholars, believe to be true”



Source: Constructive Dialogue Institute, 2023; AAC&U, 2024

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Gen Z “Surprisingly Mainstream”

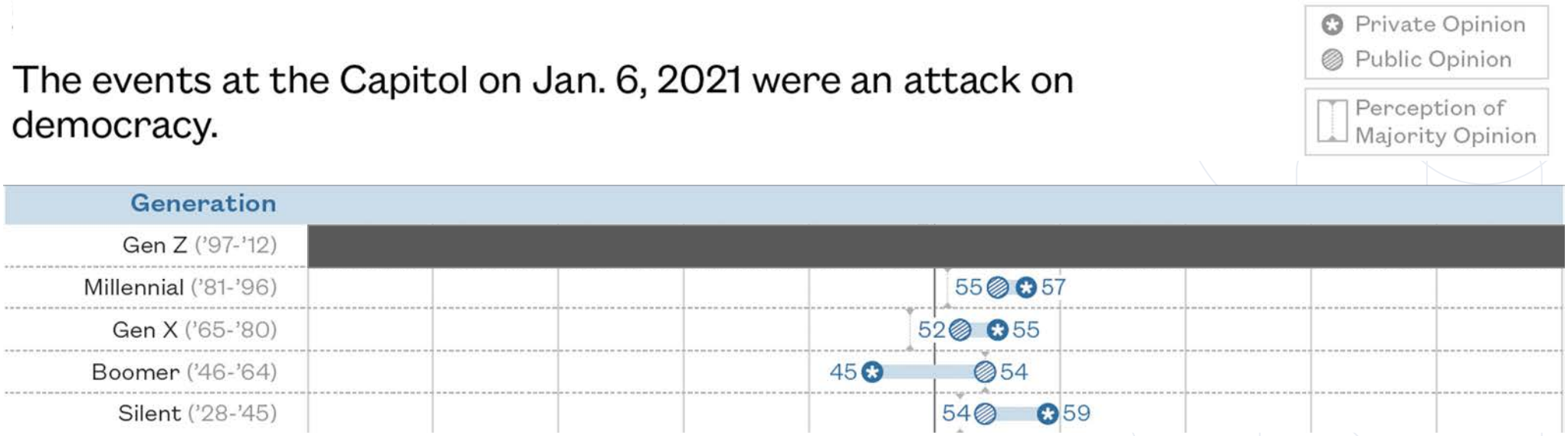
- A majority of Gen Z are on the same side as the general public on 57 out of the 64 sensitive issues in this study.
- The issues where they diverge from the rest of the general public are climate change and immigration.



Source: Populace, 2024

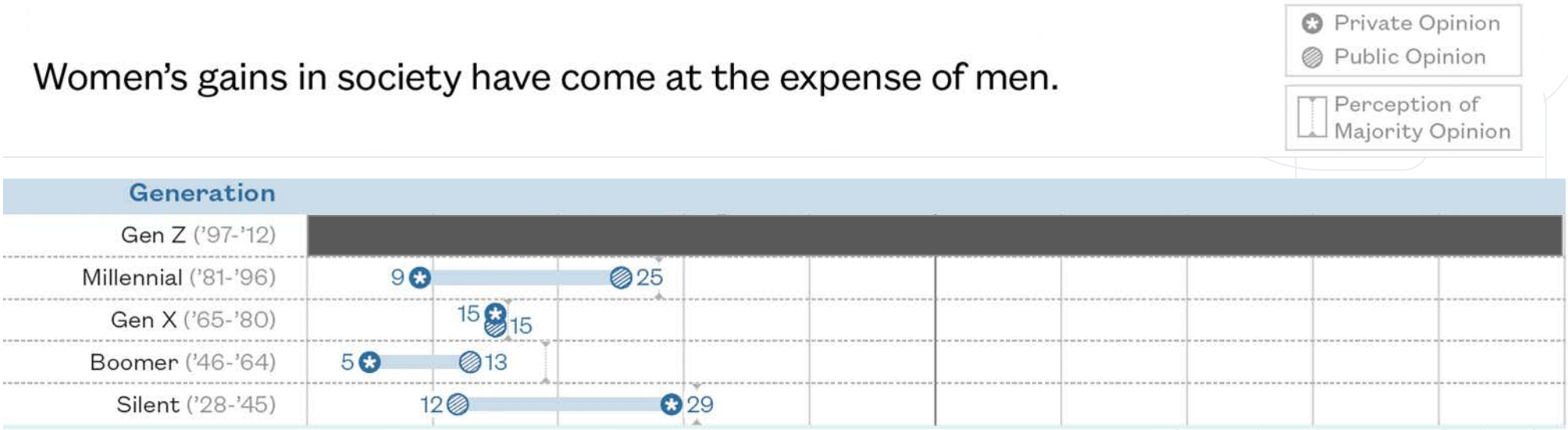
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Gen Z "Surprisingly Mainstream"



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Gen Z "Surprisingly Mainstream"

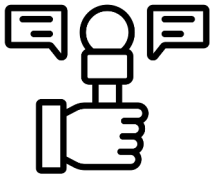


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Societal conditions elevate extreme voices



Two party system



Media

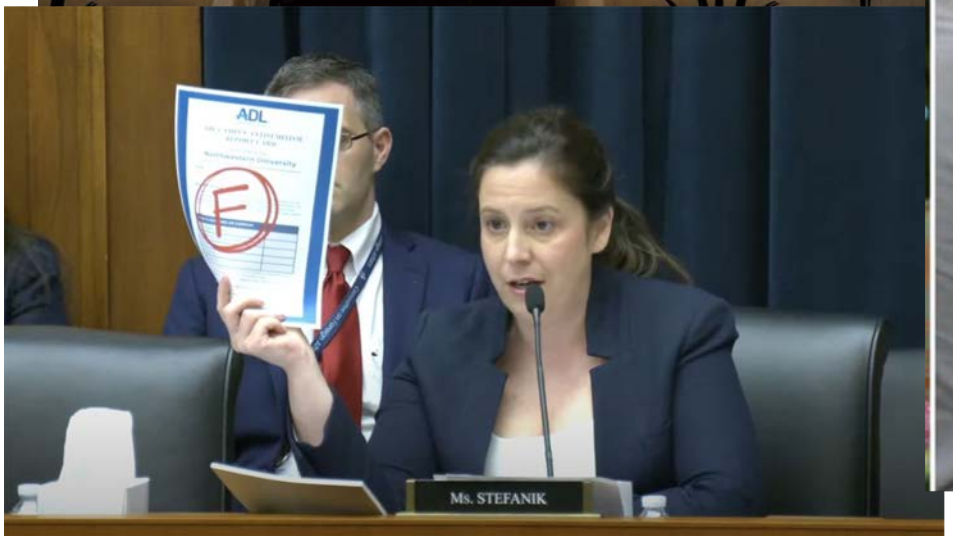


Social media


HINDS
HALL


WELCOME TO THE
PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY
FOR PALESTINE


FROM
THE
RIVER
TO THE
SEA


ADL
Ms. STEFANIK




RELEASE MAHMOUD KHALIL
HANDS OFF OUR STUDENTS
ICE OFF OUR CAMPUSES
SHUT IT DOWN 4 PALESTINE

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Individuals increasingly support hostility as a means for change

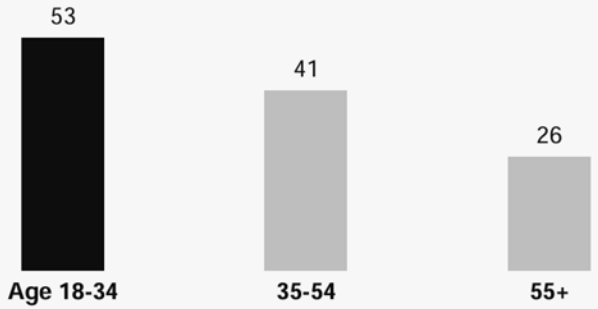
GLOBAL 28

I approve of hostile activism
to drive change:

- *Attack people online (27%)*
- *Intentionally spread disinformation (25%)*
- *Threaten or commit violence (23%)*
- *Damage public or private property (23%)*

40% (net)

Over 1 in 2 young adults approve of hostile activism



Source: Edelman Trust Barometer, 2023

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Recap

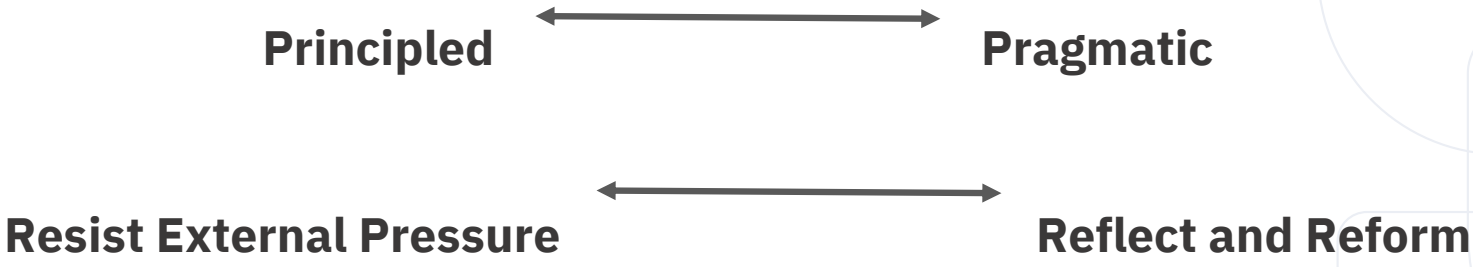
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What kind of leadership does this moment call for?

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Balancing the tensions



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Group Intentions

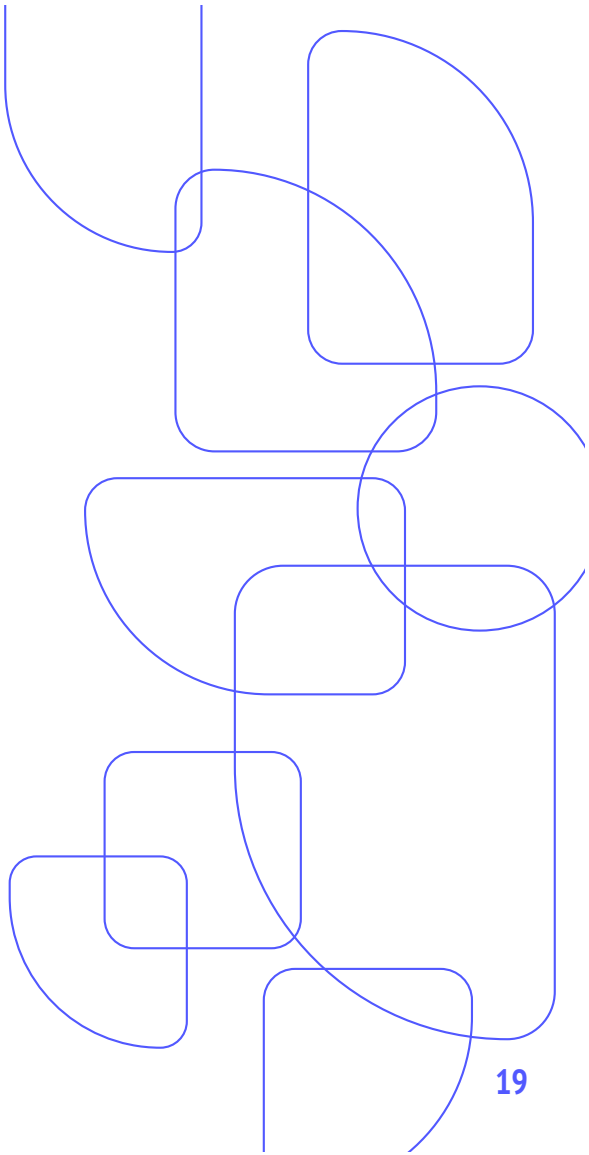
1. Confidentiality
2. Seek to understand
3. Share vulnerably
4. Participation is voluntary

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Sharing Challenges

In groups of 3-4, for 10 mins

1. What pressures or tensions are you feeling most acutely right now? What do you feel pulled between?



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Comparing Notes

In groups of 3-4, for 15 minutes

1. What is one tactic you've found has "worked" in navigating this moment?

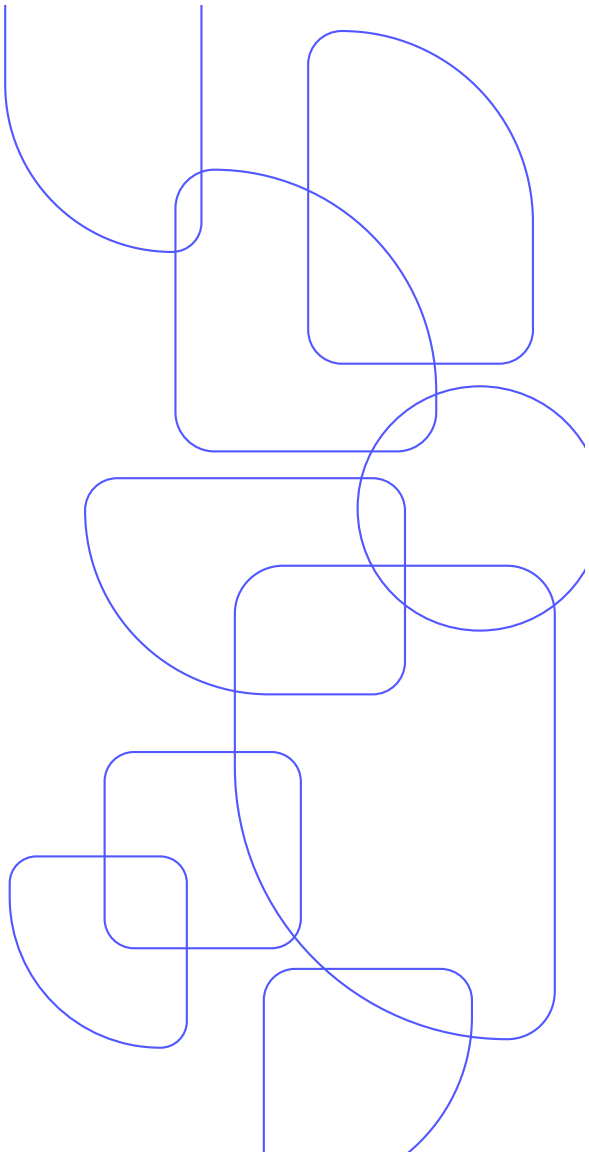
a. What was the situation?
b. What did you/your team/your college do?
c. What were the results?
d. Has there been any downsides?

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Sharing Wisdom

Silent written reflection, 3 minutes

What's one sentence of advice or encouragement you'd offer to another leader navigating today's pressures?



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Contact Us

About this presentation

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Explore working with CDI

growth@constructivedialogue.org

