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Event Report

On February 28, 2018, students from diverse disciplines and cultural backgrounds convened in three cohorts coast-to-coast for the third annual, national, live dialogue held under the auspices of the CRRF. The student cohorts convened at King's College in Halifax, Hart House at the University of Toronto, and at SFU's Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue in Vancouver. They engaged in a dialogue over the course of two hours. The topic was "Freedom of Speech on Campus: Expression or Oppression?"

Most of the students were undergraduates, and most did not have time to immerse themselves in the topic before this extra- or co-curricular program. Most were not students of the law. They included domestic and international students. Following are some of the key points expressed by students prior to, during, and following the dialogue.

- Several students emphasized the importance of building capacity for dialogue and for critical thinking about controversial and complex issues.
- Students noted that while there is a place for lectures and for debates on campuses, and while universities must be sites where freedom of thought and expression within the bounds of the law is strongly protected, there is a great need for thoughtful and critical conversation – for dialogue – about complex issues, especially about controversial issues.
- Students noted challenges in operationalizing dialogue in hierarchical institutions and communities, and between individuals. Administrative structures and classroom power asymmetry pose obvious hierarchical barriers to deep dialogue. Students also noted that conversations among peers cannot escape unconscious, implicit, or assumed biases and power asymmetry, because individuals' knowledge, perspectives, and experiences of oppression and trauma differ.
- Students spoke of the importance of having opportunities for domestic and international students from different backgrounds to share stories, including stories of experiences of oppression and discrimination. Sharing difficult stories, engaging in thoughtful dialogue, thinking critically, examining biases and assumptions, questioning what is meant by the words that others use, increase the likelihood of being able to build relationships between unfamiliar ideas and between people who hold different perspectives. These practices enable one to move beyond a superficial exchange of ideas, and to move beyond a conceptual or abstract level about concepts like "oppression," "power," "hegemony," "oppression," "emancipation," "hate," and so on, and to root these terms in the lived experiences of individuals and groups. This is vital, because these terms are meant to explain or to describe aspects of painful, lived experience of people on campuses and in communities, some of whom continue to live with the effects of trauma. Because of miscommunication,

traumatized individuals may perceive that others are intentionally or inadvertently increasing the risk of physical danger associated with members of marginalized groups, owing to their race, religion, gender or sexual identity or expression, nation of origin, etc.

- Perceptions of "fault lines" will differ; the problem is that perceptions may also differ regarding the consequences of crossing these fault lines for marginalized groups, particularly those who have experienced, /or who continue to experience oppressive and even dangerous behaviour on the part of others, or resulting from the speech of others.
- Changes in consciousness and changes in culture are very difficult, so sharing stories of lived experience of discrimination, hatred, and violence, is important. But this is very difficult to do in public and hierarchical contexts, which might exacerbate fears and other sensibilities rooted in trauma.
- Because there are no universal standards of what is right or acceptable, one person's exercise of the freedom of speech might mean another person's loss of (at least a sense of) freedom from discrimination.
- Students noted the importance of increasing knowledge on campuses and in communities about the legal framework for hate crimes, for freedom of expression, and for freedom from harassment and discrimination.
- Students noted the importance of universities having clear, comprehensive, and wisely disseminated policies and procedures regarding the protection of expression, and protection from harassment and discrimination.
- One student stated that she "would support limiting expression on campus and in other spaces in situations where one person's expression prevents another person from performing their authentic self." Naturally, this idea requires much more development.
- One student observed: "When a person talks about gender issues, the first thing listeners think about is women. When we talk about race and racial discrimination, the first thing people think about is racialized people." She added that "there needs to be inclusion in discussions on race. Not much will be achieved when racialized people talk about their experiences to themselves. There is need for the perspective of people who are not racialized -- whether they be racist or not. Invite them into these discussions. I know they (the discussions) are uncomfortable, but they are uncomfortable to me too. Including non-racialized communities in the conversation might help take away the "they" and "us" narratives, which are responsible for most of the tensions in race discussions."
- Students noted how a formulation such as "political correctness" can be deployed in different, but equally unhelpful ways, resulting in a suppression of critical inquiry about difficult and complex issues.
- There was discussion of the phenomenon of high-profile cases of controversial speakers coming to campus, often under the auspices of a highly partisan or

polemical group, accompanied by protests that sometimes featured acts of violence. These cases tend to provoke consternation and to deepen polarization of thought. They tend to take the form of a monologue by an individual, which does not invite critical inquiry by those holding other views. They foster simplistic debates about conflicts between freedom of speech and freedom from discrimination, rather than about the ideas of the speaker.

- Finally, the students at SFU in Vancouver applied a complex systems lens to this topic. Their analysis was informed by leading-edge practices in dialogue and in complex systems methods. Their conclusions were that universities are highly complex systems, in which a variable -- like the appearance of a controversial speaker on campus -- interacts with other variables, such as the sense of risk facing students from marginalized backgrounds. The variables (the subsystems) that they included in their logic map were many and varied. The general implications were that it is important to situate the debate about this important topic within the context of variables (or subsystems) affecting students and others within the complex system of a university campus. Otherwise, one cannot fully appreciate the complexity of the phenomenon. Funding mental health services, articulating clear policies on speech and harassment, providing resources to support capacity building for dialogue and critical thought, increasing knowledge about hate crime law, providing resources for thoughtful exploration of controversial ideas, and other variables, have an impact on the capacity for individuals and communities on campus and beyond to navigate constructively the tensions that arise when controversial speakers are invited to campus.