

Our students in Boston and Montana speak to one another and learn how to disagree

BY JULIAN K. BRAXTON AND BRAD FAULHABER

‘Stand up if you have fired a gun.”
“Stand up if there is an AR-15 in your home or you have fired one.”
All the students from a class at Sidney High School in Montana stood up in response to one or both of these prompts.

The students at Winsor School in Boston who had posed the prompts were surprised or even shocked.

This exchange took place during the first of what will be many Zoom meetings between seniors at these two schools this year. Such discussions, which are in their seventh year now, are meant to help students in each place better understand our nation’s cultural, political, and social divides.

The Winsor students, who are all in a senior elective called Politics of Identity, weren’t asking their counterparts in Sidney about their guns in a judgmental way. They were curious about the differences in the values of their respective communities.

Indeed, guns are part of the culture in Sidney, and every student in the honors government class — taught by one of the authors of this article, Brad Faulhaber — has fired a gun. Most hunt, and many own or have fired AR-15s. This is not the case for the students in the Politics of Identity class at Winsor, taught by the other author of this article, Julian K. Braxton. The Sidney students generally reacted to the questions good-naturedly, with smiling bemusement — and later, almost all of them wrote about it as the part of the conversation that most surprised *them*.

Our responsibility as civics teachers

“If I insist on giving you my truth, and if I never stop to receive your truth in return, then there can be no truth between us.” This observation from theologian Thomas Merton has guided the regular meetings between students at Sidney High and the Winsor School over the years.

At a time when political hostility among Americans has reached its highest level in decades, we believe that as civics teachers, it’s our responsibility



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The authors at the National Archives in Washington in July 2023 for the Sphere Summit, a summer program for educators.

ty to expose students to ideas they may disagree with or find uncomfortable — and ways of being that may not align with their values and ideas.

This is not an easy task in an age of callout culture on the left and dog-whistle politics on the right. We hope the Sidney/Winsor partnership models what dialogue, collaboration, and even depolarization can look like.

Julian is an African American native New Yorker who has lived in Boston for over 25 years. Brad is a white Montanan, born and raised in the Treasure State. Despite living in different regions and holding starkly different political views, we met because of our shared passion for teaching history. We became good friends in 2009, when we both attended the Global Lincoln Symposium at Oxford University, which brought together educators and historians from around the world to examine Lincoln’s legacy.

We don’t avoid discussing our political views; we often engage in thoughtful conversation because we know that doing so will strengthen our personal beliefs and opinions on the issues that matter most. We work hard to hear each other. In many ways, our work embodies the sentiment former president Barack Obama shared at the Democratic National Convention in August: “To make progress on the things we care about, the things that really affect people’s lives, we need to remember that we’ve all got our blind spots and contradictions and prejudices; and that if we want to win over those who aren’t yet ready to support our candidate, we need to listen to their concerns — and maybe learn something in the process. Our fellow citizens deserve the same grace we hope they’ll extend to us.”

Winsor is an all-girls, racially diverse private school for students in grades 5-12, located near the hub of Boston’s education, research, health care, and biotechnology industries. Boston, as readers of this paper know, is in a metropolitan area of 5 million people, and the median home price in the area is nearly \$1 million. Sidney High has a more homogeneous student body. It’s located in rural northeast Montana, in a town with a population of about 6,100 residents, where the median home price is \$251,700. Sidney is the wellspring of Montana’s oil and gas industries. In the last presidential election, residents in Sidney High’s ZIP code voted 80 percent for Donald Trump and 18 percent for Joe Biden, while residents in Winsor’s ZIP code voted 91 percent for Biden and 7 percent for Trump.

You will find differences of opinion and a range of ideologies among students in each of our schools. Our hometowns, however, mirror the large American divide. And over the years we have found that conversations about such subjects as abortion rights, affirmative action, and the death penalty require grace.

The students learn how to disagree — we actually “practice” disagreeing — and understand those with different opinions. The goal is not to convince, persuade, or “own” the other side but to understand them as fellow Americans, teenagers, and human beings. We aim to unite around our common humanity rather than see each other as

enemies to be vanquished.

Before meeting, students at Winsor and Sidney often hold stereotypical views of one another: conservative Christians in Montana and the liberal elite in Boston. But by getting to know one another, students find many similarities — like a love for Taylor Swift, Drake, Kendrick Lamar, and “The Hunger Games.” This helps them eventually understand they share concerns but differ on the appropriate way of arriving at solutions. Many of our students also indicate they would likely be friends with one another if they lived in the same community or attended the same school.

Issues like abortion rights and gun control have always been divisive topics in our classes. For example, most Winsor students who have participated in the Zoom dialogues favor some form of gun control, while nearly all the Sidney students oppose any restrictions. As one Sidney student mentioned during a class discussion, “Guns are a fundamental part of life in Montana. We use them for hunting. If guns were restricted, that would be a significant problem in Montana.”

During another session, Winsor students expressed their passion for environmental justice, but they also gained important insights as Sidney students shared stories about parents whose livelihood depends on fracking. This is a perspective students don’t encounter in the Boston bubble. Similarly, when Winsor students discussed the challenges of losing green spaces, Sidney students had “light bulb” moments, realizing the significance of issues they had read about but never directly experienced.

As one Winsor student observed about last year’s collaboration, “Our exchange showed me what good civil discourse looks like. We never dehumanized [each other] or looked down on each other’s views. We learned to listen, truly listen, not to convince but to understand. This collaboration was also important because it reminded me that political affiliation is merely one aspect of a person’s identity.”

This year, we’re trying something new in our collaboration: our first election night Zoom session, when we will be processing results that may be out of our comfort zones.

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