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The Virginia Bar Association

VBA at Karsh: Exploring Civility and Engagement Initiatives

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VBA at Karsh Report Synopsis

This roundtable was a series of multi-disciplinary discussions of how to build bridges and remediate the divisions enveloping our communities. A framing question was, “What can and should we do in Virginia to improve how we communicate within groups and communities to live, work and solve problems together more peaceably and productively?”

Many actions were identified as potential positive steps, some longer term in impact than others. They fall into areas of educating youth to encourage their effective civic engagement and educating/empowering adult communities to improve communications and seed better mutual understanding.

It is hoped that preliminary work will include development and implementation of some of the ideas:

1. Map or assess Virginia civics and history curriculum content to determine gaps that need filling and opportunities that can be used to supply better communication skills;
2. Based on results of said mapping, consider ways to assist teachers and to offer nonpartisan assistance in Virginia’s 2021 SOL standards reviews
3. Develop syllabus for teaching community discussion skills and processes and share the syllabus in trainings and demo events in a variety of communities in Virginia;
4. Enlist assistance of partner groups, young lawyers and college, law and graduate students to provide pilot trainings and demos;
5. Build a college/university/community-college mechanism for sharing a course and internship experience for students, that equips them with bridge building, civic- engagement skills; expand to include students in other educational paths;
6. Spread the message that we can and must do better in how we interact; share the full VBA at Karsh Report with its list (pages ___ and appendix) of action ideas, resources for further study, and volunteer opportunities to assist and galvanize others to positive engagement;
7. Elicit assistance to tackle the negative role social media plays in how we engage.

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The Virginia Bar Association

Report on Proceedings: The VBA at Karsh

Introduction

The VBA at Karsh is the name given a series of roundtable discussions held in 2020 to consider what can be done in Virginia to combat deepening divisions, weakening community trust, and even individual alienation resulting from them.

The roundtable¹ was originally envisioned as a retreat for relaxed and collegial discussion and networking to identify the issues, learn what others are doing about them, and determine fresh approaches to correct the problem. Once the pandemic struck, the format was of necessity converted to a series of Zoom conferences of both large and smaller groups of participants. The participants in this first phase of roundtable deliberations were asked from different corners of Virginia, representing educators and institutions, people who facilitate and train people in communications, leaders, museum and community foundations and scholars studying elements of the social malaise. There were between 21 and 25 participants at different points in time, a range that appeared most feasible for initial conversations.

The reason for embarking on this perhaps-unusual effort by lawyers was to see what lawyers, working alongside other professionals, could do to bridge divides and to embed civic engagement skills including concepts of civility into our daily interactions. The need to do this as well as the need for lawyers to be involved in such community leadership seemed great. Much in our Democracy is at stake.

It was not lost on us when the VSB president, Brian Buniva, opened his August 2020 President's Message with a stirring quotation from FDR written just one day before FDR's death, as WW II in Europe was coming to an end:

“Today we are faced with the preeminent fact that, if civilization is to survive, we must cultivate the science of human relationships – the ability of all peoples, of all kinds, to live together and work together, in the same world, at peace.” (Virginia Lawyer, August 2020, Vol. 69 at page 8)

Serious current events added stress compounding our conversations but also added a powerful sense of urgency. Our roundtable came to a pause this October to allow reflection on ideas generated, prioritizing and planning a few actions from among them in the near term, and drafting this report to share widely with others to inspire their actions and collaborations consistent with bridge-building efforts.

¹ The roundtable was cosponsored by the Karsh Center for Law and Democracy at the UVA School of Law and the VBA Committee on Special Issues of National and State Importance.

We begin this report with summary of the conclusions reached or confirmed that should guide any work forward:

- There is widespread recognition and concern about the divisions and enmity manifested among Virginians and other Americans. A culture of incivility and negativity hangs over us and stymies our will to move forward. There is real hunger among lawyers and non-lawyers alike to do something about this.
- Significantly, educators report that similar hunger is expressed by students; they want to be able talk with each other and to find better ways to try to do it. They want help with this.
- Educators are hungry for help meeting student needs and interests in bridging divides, understanding other perspectives, and getting past all the negativity (bullying is a component of this)
- We see at least 2 fronts in this campaign: educating youth for their future civic engagement; and, empowering communities through adult education and facilitations
- History and civics curriculum content that is accurate, fair, and that informs and equips citizens to engage and learn from each other constructively will be a vital underpinning for such educational work
- Getting started on concrete actions (pilots) may seem daunting but we are confident that good ideas emerged that may yield positive effects. Readers of this report are encouraged to consider volunteering with groups already in action or undertake building your own project around one of the ideas.
- A third front – the deleterious effects of social media on health and culture – must be confronted eventually. One concrete idea for training and deploying social media intervenors has been advanced yet a concerted plan and effort is not yet been formulated.

The work FDR intuited after a monstrous war and the work we face after a very long period of growing divisions require long term, studied efforts. Ultimately, we in Virginia may require a formal structure or entity to coordinate, motivate, and otherwise serve such efforts. But we can make a start now and invite the passion and efforts of professionals and other members of Virginia communities to engage.

Finally, there is much need to resolve social problems in Virginia be they disparities, injustices, despair, poverty and addictions, but these are also opportunities for us to grow and work together. Key to doing that will be cooperation and working together. Key to that will be the civic virtues, the civic engagement tools and skills we employ to hold discussions and listen to each other civilly and respectfully to hear, to understand, to empathize, to work at solutions arrived at from all points of view.

It is hoped that the VBA at Karsh proceedings will be seen as just a beginning of the work carried forward by lawyers, educators, peacemakers and other societal leaders. It is hoped that the fruits of the work will be foundational, enabling others to accomplish the great tasks facing Virginians in the 21st century.

To get started, this report includes:

- Description of the roundtable's origin
- Description of VBA at Karsh process
- Overview of Ideas generated
- Concluding remarks
- Appendices with
 - List of participants and contributors
 - Selected communications that led participants along the way; Small group idea lists and reports
 - The selected communications and reports mentioned above include some resource lists of books, articles, and organizations active in communications and community facilitation; it is expected that a more complete compendium of such resources will be developed in the coming months

A brief history of the roundtable

The idea for this roundtable arose in the VBA Committee on Special Issues of National and State Importance following its January 2019 General Session, “Reuniting America: Can We Be Part of The Answer?” The committee had earlier acknowledged a deep concern about America’s alienations and divisions and determined to present a program in 2019 to introduce examination of the problem and issues.²

In the ensuing Reuniting America program, panelists³ told about their unique experiences that offered insight and instruction to improve dialogue among people in strained or conflict-ridden situations. Audience response to the panel was enthusiastic. A sense among those attending was that we have quite a way to go to reverse course in the growing cultural phenomenon of dissension and incivility that erodes the social fabric.

VBA President, Richard Garriott, was determined that VBA should follow the panel with action to continue efforts in this regard. He had the panel video and handout materials posted for free to the public on the VBA’s continuing education website and he formed a committee to consider possible projects. What was learned in that small committee is that it was hard to get arms around a project that would have deeper impact than some kind of vanity project and yet be feasible by volunteer lawyers. It was ultimately decided that a carefully planned and focused consideration of ways forward was the right next step.

Throughout preparation of the 2019 panel, and the efforts leading up to and including the 2020 roundtable itself, a plethora of information and resources was accumulated as a resource for later work.

²The committee elicited co-sponsorship for the program from the VBA-VSB Joint Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee whose members are lawyers skilled in conflict resolution techniques. VBA refers to the Virginia Bar Association and VSB is the Virginia State Bar.

³ Panelists were Lt. Col Aram Donigian of the US Army, who served several tours in Afghanistan; UT Law professor Mechele Dickerson who created a law school and college course to require her students to pair and work on a controversial problem with students of opposite viewpoints; young trial lawyer, Stacey E. Lee who brought a viewpoint from the young into the discussion; and last but certainly not least, UVA President (former Dean of the Harvard School of Education) James Ryan who authored, “Wait, What? And Life’s Other Essential Questions.”

Roundtable Work Process

The roundtable was to be a facilitated retreat to encourage exchange of experiences and stimulate brainstorming. We needed an environment conducive to relaxed and productive deliberations. The Karsh Center for Law and Democracy at UVA Law, through its Executive Director, Micah Schwartzman, volunteered to provide the site and all hosting functions.⁴

Participants for the first phase of discussion were recruited, as already mentioned, for their background experience with pertinent issues. Written material was prepared to inspire and assist participant preparation (“priming”) for the brainstorming and participants were asked to present Bios beforehand that included a personal statement of their interests pertinent to the roundtable subject. Possible roundtable outcomes were identified and reiterated throughout.

Roundtable design, planning, materials development, and leadership were accomplished throughout by a small team from Special Issues, Jeanne Franklin, Richard Bonnie, and David Landin and Karsh’s Micah Schwartzman.

When the pandemic threatened to wreak havoc with the plan, we pivoted to a Zoom construct, improvising as we moved along. The first session was to be a general self-introduction by each participant. The George Floyd tragedy and protests then intervened in the week beforehand and so the first session, while still including self-introductions, became a kind of shared mourning in which members expressed grief and other deep emotion about what had happened.

With determined and resumed focus on the roundtable subject, four smaller work groups were formed, each with an assigned topic. Conveners were appointed to run smaller Zoom meetings over the summer. The subjects were: Building Social Trust in a Polarized Society, Education and Civic Engagement, Civility and Civic Discourse, and Social Media and Democracy.

Over the almost 5 months of effort, only a very small number of participants left in response to pressures of current events. The participants’ resilience, goodwill and generosity with their time have been outstanding and in retrospect quite amazing.

11 Zoom small group and general discussion sessions were held Between June 2 and October 7. Before the September general session, the small groups circulated brief reports that listed ideas they had identified to address and remediate issues within their area of concern. In the September general session, participants reacted to the reports and had free

⁴ The Karsh Center for Law and Democracy at UVA Law is a relatively new entity created to explore the intersections of law and democracy and the issues in its preservation and growth.

discussion of the ideas. In the follow-up October general session, participants were asked to prioritize ideas for ways forward.

Synthesis and action planning, based on the preferences identified, are underway. A leadership team is developed for a second roundtable phase (a next-gen of the roundtable if you will) to inspire and oversee volunteer implementation of the preferences. Seeking publicity and outreach to possible partners for collaboration and recruitment of interested persons and support is part of phase 2. We need and want to share this work and inspire others in it.

Ideas generated

The four small work groups considered their topics in light of the question, what could and should be done in Virginia to improve how we communicate in order to live, work and solve our problems together productively. Whether we call it a culture of civility or civic virtue, skills and tools are needed to further toleration, respect and cooperation within communities. Where do we start and how do we motivate efforts to achieve these goals?

Such questions are ambitious. Participants were asked to consider these long term outcomes:

1. equip citizenry with skills and methods to engage in community dialogues and problem-solving around contentious issues
2. further respectful civic engagement
3. counteract trends toward intolerance, disrespect and incivility
4. protect ourselves and communities against forces that would inflame and divide us beyond repair.

Each group approached the questions somewhat differently but they each assembled menus of possible actions for further development.

Before listing action ideas, an overview from each of the small groups may be helpful:

The Building Social Trust group (report attached) seemed to recognize that building trust is an amorphous concept that has to be carefully, patiently and doggedly pursued. Building trust is foundational to creating communities with capacity and enough cohesion to handle divides, prevent some crises, and make progress. Identifying communal activities focusing on what people tend to share in common may be preferable for trust-building in comparison with launching head on into contentious issues in a group conversation. The group

recognized that there is quite a bit of community action in this regard nationally and a reservoir of talent to be tapped in Virginia to develop skills training and process demonstrations. Community building activities sponsored by Virginia Humanities, and by interfaith-based organizations were suggested.

The Education group (reports attached) quickly agreed that encouraging youth towards civic engagement, teaching effective skills to analyze information and communicate well to learn, collaborate with others and be able to persuade, supplying youth with solid, curricular content for such purposes which must include a sense of history are vital. A wide range of activities to motivate and support student civic engagement was suggested from awards to letter-writing campaigns, to service semesters or years to a stand-alone project of student hackathons for high school and college students. Education will be building the pillars of future community. The Education group noted there are groups in Virginia like museums (The Moton Museum is one) that would be enthusiastic partners and work that builds on the roundtable should be collaborative to achieve greater results. It urged that educational efforts must be inclusive of populations that may not be college bound or that may be community-college students.

The Social Media group began with acknowledgment that social media might seem an intractable problem threatening the health and well-being of communities and their members – a genie that is out of the bottle. Efforts to address it must be, importantly, by those in positions and with sufficient knowledge to advance repairs and protections. Yet the group made oral report about an intervention that might be piloted to train and deploy social media intervenors. It might be modeled on a criminal justice intervention called, “Violence Interrupters,” (a version of which has been initiated in Washington, DC out of the DC Attorney General’s Office) that trains ex-offenders to mediate and conciliate among groups in their violence-ridden communities to prevent further crime. The results of the DC program in the first few months of summer 2020 were dramatic at the same time that other communities were reporting much higher crime rates. It could be thought of as a form of preventive medicine.

Besides the Interrupters model, one JMU professor in the roundtable is currently using and teaching social media to create online communities to help students have better communications and dialogue. Caveats to be noted (given the sometimes very serious harms caused on social media) are possible liability risks and advisability of adolescent psychology consultation to the intervenor program to make sure students are not exposed to worse than they already are.

The Civility Group (report attached) addressed 2 issues that might catch readers’ attention. Rather than consider ways to inspire civil behaviors, it addressed meanings of civility – a

question that has been studied in academia - and the controversy (from current events) whether civility is in fact just a cover or suppression – an excuse not to have deep conversation about divisive, emotional, important issues. It is important to note that civility should not target content of comments in dialogue and discussion as opposed to guide behaviors to be more conducive to hearing and thinking about other perspectives and grievances. There was some sense in the larger group that civility as behavioral guides will find its way into the curricula to facilitate better discussions in civic engagement and other settings. Presently, civil behavior is known and required by mediators as effective to elevate resolution discussions in disputes that can otherwise devolve quickly. Behavioral standards in different settings simply help people get done the work that has to be done. In legal practice it is urged not only as a form of professionalism but also, as apparently seen during the pandemic, an essential way to keep everyone functional as the judicial system and lawyers within it had to re-engineer the work and deal with great stress.

Categories

Brainstorming is a uniquely creative process that unleashes thinking in ways so that ideas continue to evolve or be added. For our purposes, it became important to try to synthesize and categorize ideas, noting where there were elements in common, in addition to preserving the larger lists for future revisiting.

1. Prepare a list (compendium) of action ideas, resources, and opportunities for volunteers and groups to engage in activity consistent with improved communications and community building
2. Use the list in a report to the VBA (#3 below) and elsewhere, and ask roundtable participants to serve as ambassadors to interested groups and institutions to share their enthusiasm and galvanize others to action.
3. Prepare final report about the roundtable and its more than 2-year history to date for the VBA and for its use to promote the message; it may be used in other ways to disseminate the core messages.
4. Engage in a curriculum-mapping exercise in Virginia history/civics to identify needs, and gaps as foundation for further efforts to enhance curricula (early 2021) and to give teachers what they need to provide robust civic engagement skills and opportunities

5. Develop community and adult education initiatives, building on what already exists in Virginia. Prepare syllabus about skills and processes that can be molded to fit different audiences. Conduct pilots and training events, e.g., a faith community and seminary in Richmond. Preview and distribute via VA Humanities among other possible avenues. Engage young lawyers and other young professionals in these activities.

6. Support state-wide plan for engagement of college students and law and other graduate students. Pilot a course that can be offered in multiple institutions. Approach college/university leadership to spread and grow the concept of embedding civic engagement education and service into the college experience

7. Support engagement of high-school students through innovative programs. For example, a “Hackathon Event” accessible to many communities, rural, disadvantaged, etc.

8. Engage social media effort that knits together high school and college initiatives throughout the Commonwealth.

9. As a final idea – create a formal coalition to succeed the roundtable:

Explore creation of a formal state-wide coalition of groups and individuals who subscribe to a vision and undertake actions in furtherance of it. The coalition would be an anchor with a recognizable identity for future activities and groups. It would require financial support to be sustained by staff and not simply by volunteers. We could brand it with a name like V Unum or Virginia Unum. (See one such proposal attached).

Over the past 2 plus years, we have been surprised to learn the variety and great number of groups at work in Virginia (and nationally) addressing the very issues the VBA at Karsh has done. What we did not find was a central connection or strategy to expand their effectiveness. It is as though we are seeking a reverse pandemic – a cultural movement that may refresh a sense of common humanity and the need we share for mutual respect so our communities and democracy can grow and prosper, deal with enormous challenges that arise, and avert needless disasters.

In conclusion

A plaque authorized by the US Congress and signed into law in 2014 will be installed at the WWII Memorial in Washington DC in 2022. It will restate verbatim the radio address (a prayer

really) given by FDR to Americans announcing the commencement of the D Day invasion. D Day historian, Alex Kershaw, is quoted in the Washington Post article covering this, saying that D Day was to his mind at least, "...America's finest hour, the peak of its moral authority, and FDR's prayer the most unifying, most moving articulation of all that the world admired and respected about the U.S.'s mission."

VBA at Karsh has been in a sense harking back to a concept of unity and determination, where common good prevails over splintered identities, and we strive to serve common goals and aspirations while respectful of individual beliefs. We need to remember when we have been at our best – together – and rebuild that ethos, providing the foundation for a future of our commonwealth and country that encourages being at our best together.

Until time when a formal coalition might be created (if that comes about), the VBA at Karsh must take to our proverbial beaches and pilot some of the ideas identified, hoping others will join in or adopt them. We can do better, overcome despair and alienation of different kinds; we shall be more than a constellation of divided communities and citizens too often at odds. Our work begins.

APPENDIX

VBA at Karsh: Roundtable Participants

* Withdrew after current events altered schedules

** Consultant advising the Education small work group

Edward L. Ayers

New American History, Executive Director
President Emeritus, University of Richmond
Professor of Humanities
Author

Melody Barnes *

Democracy initiative, UVA, Co-Director
Miller Center of Public Affairs. Dorothy Danforth Compton Professor
UVA School of Law, Distinguished Fellow

Shannon Bell

Department of Sociology, Virginia Tech
Associate Professor
The Common Ground Project

Peter Blake

State Council of Higher Education
Director

Hon. Deborah Wood Blevins

Virginia Workers Compensation Commission, Managing Deputy Commissioner of ADR
Department

Brian K. Blount

Union Presbyterian Seminary
President and Professor of New Testament in the Walter W. Moore and Charles E.S.
Kraemer Presidential Chairs

Richard J. Bonnie

UVA School of Law, Harrison Foundation Professor of Law & Medicine
Professor of Psychiatry and Neurobehavioral Science
Director, Institute of Law, Psychiatry and Public Policy
Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy

Monte F. Bourjaily, IV

Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology
US AP History, Government, Law & Society, Philosophy

Dr. Ronald A. Crutcher

President, University of Richmond
Professor of Music
Classical Musician (cello)

Nancy L. Deutsch *

UVA School of Education & Human Development
Director, Youth-NEX, The UVA Center to Promote Effective Youth Development

Beau Dickenson *

Social Studies Supervisor, Rockingham County Public Schools
Immediate Past President, Virginia Social Studies Leaders Consortium

Kara Dillard

Assistant Professor, School of Communication Studies, James Madison University
Director of Research, Institute for Constructive Advocacy and Dialogue, JMU
Research Associate, Kettering Foundation /Common Ground for Action

Jeanne F. Franklin

Virginia Certified Mediator and Mentor Mediator (Retired Attorney)
VBA Committee on Special Issues of National and State Importance

Matthew Gibson

Virginia Humanities, Executive Director

Meg Heubeck

Director for Instruction, UVA Center for Politics

David Craig Landin

Attorney, Landin Law
Chair, VBA Committee on Special Issues of National and State Importance

John Lombardini *

College of William & Mary
Professor, Department of Government

Alison McKee

President, Virginia Bar Association
Attorney, Kaufman & Canoles, PC

Jamie McReynolds

Braver Angels, Virginia State Coordinator

Cameron D. Patterson

Managing Director, Robert Russa Moton Museum

Seth Ragosta

Attorney, Flora Pettit
Chair, VBA Public Service Committee

Lawrence “Larry” Roberts

Director, Sorenson Institute for Public Leadership
Weldon Cooper Center for Public Service at UVA

Micah Schwartzman

Director, Karsh Center for Law and Democracy, UVA School of Law
UVA School of Law, Hardy Cross Dillard Professor and Marth Lubin and Bruce A Karsh
Professor of Law

Jaime Settle

College of William & Mary
Associate Professor, Government Department

Julie Silverbrook **

/ civics

Ian H. Solomon

UVA Frank Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy
Dean and Professor of Practice

Drew Stelljes

College of William & Mary
Assistant Vice President for Student Engagement and Leadership

Ken Stroupe

UVA Center for Politics, Associate Director, Chief of Staff

EVOLUTION OF VBA AT KARSH AND VBA FOCUS ON LAWYERS BRIDGING DIVIDES
ASSORTED PREPARATORY MATERIALS AND COMMENTARIES
WORK GROUP REPORTS AND SUCCEESSIVE LISTS OF IDEAS

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NEWS & PRESS: ASSOCIATION

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Follow-up - Reuniting America: Can We Be Part of The Answer?

Monday, April 22, 2019 [\(0 Comments\)](#)



Free video/podcast replay of the January 2019 program is now available!

The Virginia Bar Association has asked how we lawyers can correct the shredding of common civility and decency in our interactions in local and American communities. The animosities, divisions, disrespect and angers that seethe below the surface too often erupt in acrimonious “debate” or in violence. Progress and problem-solving are thwarted and alienation is a dangerous consequence. This situation is damaging us and we intend to do something about it. The VBA Committee on Special Issues of National & State Importance launched this program, co-sponsoring it with the Joint Alternative Dispute Resolution Committee of the VBA and the VSB; 2019 VBA President Rich Garriott Jr. has spoken and written vigorously on the point.

Last January, VBA Past President and Special Issues Committee Chair David Landin noted that its January educational programming in several instances focused on a quest and the need for moral, ethical and visionary leadership in America for the health and strength of our futures. With that, he introduced the Reuniting America panel to discuss how lawyers, educators and community members can improve discussion and dialogue so we learn from one another, grow our communities and combat the negativities and divisions foisted on us.

The program was informative and inspirational. How to engage in conflict dialogue and discussions where there is strong difference of opinion is a skill (or set of skills) that must be taught, learned and practiced. We can disagree strongly without hating or demeaning the other person. A key theme emerging from the program it is that we all have to learn the skills (and attitudes that go with them); we must teach them to our young as well. Lawyers recognize the need to see the other side of a

Print Preview

question and should be in a good position to encourage this attitude in others. Teaching empathy, expanding one's capacity for empathy, is a vital and foundational educational objective.

Because the Reuniting America program called for follow-up effort, the VBA is exploring a range of actions as part of a campaign to disseminate the message and help us all learn and embrace better skills, especially in moments of disagreement. The VBA has begun its efforts in the Richmond area with an edited, shorter replay of the audio of the January program on WCVE, heard on Sunday evening, April 14, 2019.

Now, the VBA is making available in its online store, as a public service, a free copy of the full video/audio of the Reuniting America program together with the instructive program materials.

DOWNLOAD THE VIDEO OR PODCAST

A goal is to inform and inspire, to galvanize the learning of skills that will enhance our communities from family life up through neighborhood, state and nationwide dialogues.

There may be those entities, groups and individuals who thrive on or derive power from conflict and creation of divisions, hampering progress. We must combat the effects of such efforts to divide. The VBA sees our communities' future strengths in American core values and the civil skills that can ensure their continuance.

Please view this program and stay tuned for further word on the VBA campaign for civil discourse.

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Planning Paper 2

June 2, 2020 Roundtable : “The VBA at Karsh: A Dialogue to Explore Civility and Civic Engagement Initiatives”

This is a sequel to the January 2019 Panel, “Reuniting America: Can We Be Part of the Answer?” sponsored by the Virginia Bar Association Committee on Special issues of National and State Importance and the VBA-VSB Joint ADR Committee. The 2019 RA program** asked how lawyers and educators can foster skills and motivation to communicate better and more effectively especially around contentious matters. One program outcome was inspiration to do more, to help Virginians engage civilly and productively toward mutual respect and problem solving.

1. **WHAT:** A small gathering of individuals and group representatives who have demonstrated experience and interest in (1) improving civil, civic dialogue in Virginia communities; (2) educating others in the communication/analytical skills necessary to engage civically and productively - thereby strengthening civic engagement in democratic community
2. **FRAMING QUESTIONS:** “What can and should we do in Virginia to move this educational and motivational work forward, perhaps especially among young Virginians? Who should do it and how do we begin?”
3. **HOW:** Informal discussion to exchange information, learn from each other, consider fresh ideas how to answer the framing questions, explore possibility of collaborative effort in one or another particular initiative
4. **POSSIBLE OUTCOMES:** Participants learn and are thus fortified in their own efforts; a good, new idea or two is spawned ; some ways are identified to work together or support each other’s efforts in what is likely to be a long-term initiative
5. **SUCCESS:** Any one of the above outcomes is achieved
6. **LONG TERM GOALS:** (1) equip citizenry through education to engage in community dialogues and problem-solving around contentious issues; (2) set higher standards of civil civic engagement (3) stem a tide of worsening culture of intolerance, disrespect and incivility (4) protect ourselves and communities against forces that would inflame and divide us beyond repair

WHEN and WHERE

June 2, 2020

Clarify times

UVA School of Law

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VBA at Karsh: Exploring Civility and Engagement Initiatives

UNIVERSITY OF VIRGINIA SCHOOL OF LAW
JUNE 2, 2020

Some Questions for VBA at Karsh Roundtable
Tuesday, June 2, 2020

1. What are your main thoughts about the causes of current divisions, polarization, intolerance?
2. What would you do or change if you could to improve the situation? Are there particular initiatives, programs, or projects that you think need more attention or support, especially in Virginia?
3. Has the pandemic crisis and your experience with it sharpened or altered your thoughts?
4. Do you notice anything about how people communicate and/or behave during social distancing that might be relevant to our subject?
5. Has anything been a particular source of hope or strength for you that the future can be better?
6. Any reading (article, book) that strikes you as helpful or sheds light on the subject?
7. Any ideas about how you would like to see future roundtable sessions occur?

Welcome

Welcome all to the *VBA at Karsh: Exploring Civility and Engagement Initiatives* roundtable. This is a sequel to the January 2019 panel, *Reuniting America: Can We Be Part of the Answer?*, sponsored by the Virginia Bar Association Committee on Special Issues of National and State Importance and the VBA-VSB Joint ADR Committee. One program outcome was inspiration to do more, to help Virginians engage civilly and productively toward mutual respect and problem solving.

Our program is intended as a small, informal gathering of those committed to improving the quality of civic dialogue in Virginia communities and to educating others in the communication, analytical, and other skills necessary to engage productively, thereby strengthening civic engagement in democratic governance of our communities.

The framing question is: “What can and should we do in Virginia to move this educational and motivational work forward, perhaps especially among young Virginians? Who should do it and how do we begin?” Our goal is for everyone who participates to learn from one another. We hope to strengthen each participant’s own efforts, as well as to identify ways to work together and to support efforts across participants. Long-term, we hope to:

1. equip citizenry through education to engage in community dialogues and problem-solving around contentious issues
2. set higher standards for civic engagement
3. stem a tide of a worsening culture of intolerance, disrespect, and incivility
4. protect ourselves and communities against forces that would inflame and divide us beyond repair

This program is sponsored by the Karsh Center for Law and Democracy at the UVA School of Law and the Special Issues and Public Service Committees of the VBA.

VBA at Karsh: Thoughts on Civility and Engagement

America, a “Divided Nation,” is almost a lament. Everyone knows it is a problem although important aspects and ramifications of it are multi-faceted and not fully known or understood. Different people tend to see the divisions and polarization differently. Although there is significant concern, talent, and engagement in places around Virginia and the country, what to do to correct the rifts is not sufficiently agreed upon to support more widespread, effective efforts to counter them.

The issue is often described as one of civility and incivility, i.e. people cannot agree to disagree and coexist and work together peaceably. Which comes first – the divisions or the incivility – is debatable. It might be more useful to say that they are closely related. For example, incivility clearly does not serve to reduce the problem, and civility can be a valuable tool in remediating it. There is significant study of civility and its uses and power, including a scientific study that concludes rudeness is a contagion.

Our need is to grow some level and manner of communication and to promote mutual understanding – maybe even trust – sufficient to allow communities and individuals to try to live, work and solve common problems together. Since intractable problems seem to confront our communities more regularly now, a strong communication infrastructure that undergirds a common problem-solving mindset is imperative.

The reason to try to build this infrastructure – and to motivate use of it – is to sustain and strengthen communities and the health of our democratic republic. “United we stand, divided we fall.” Great leaders have urged that message upon Americans throughout our history. But we can forget and be easily led or stray off that path. And that is where we appear to be today.

Where should we start to identify and evaluate ways to correct the situation? Where will we find inspiration and motivation to do so? The Virginia Bar Association made a unique and strong start in January 2019, when it brought together educators and lawyers to discuss what could be effective to improve communications. Under the title, “Reuniting America: Can We Be Part of The Answer?”, a combat military leader and educator, a law professor, a lawyer educator and a young lawyer discussed their experiences, what they see as working and what they are teaching others to do to elevate dialogue and shared problem solving. The Special Issues Committee of the Virginia Bar Association that sponsored the program thought it was a successful first step. In retrospect, the wisdom imparted both in the handout material and by the speakers look even better and deserve careful attention.

Since then, some of us on Special Issues have continued to study the problem, and search out thinkers and doers who are engaging it. We have been pleased and almost surprised to find how many people in various corners of our commonwealth are trying to work the problem and propose or test solutions. Understanding the issues better, diagnosing if you will, may be

important steps to designing the cures. Importing skills and techniques from the mediation field should also be useful.

To take the next step, the VBA in partnership with the Karsh Center for Law and Democracy, has invited an initial small group of leaders with different experiences and perspectives concerning issues of polarization. The idea is to participate in facilitated discussions with an eye toward learning, idea development, and possible collaborative efforts to follow.

Those who will participate in the roundtable represent (1) groups and entities that are focused on changing and expanding what is taught to younger students in civics classes; (2) people working in communities to facilitate dialogue and teach communication skills; and (3) those with broader perspectives on the sweep of the problem and the dynamics often at play in it. We have attempted diversity of region and academic institution, although with Virginia's vast educational resources, we have barely scratched that surface.

The question of what to call the problem and its cure (if there be a one-size fits all cure) remains. Civility as mentioned is commonly invoked. Another phrase often mentioned is "civic virtue." Civility is housed within that concept along with empathy, compassion, respect, and forgiveness. There are attitudes and dispositions, "civic virtues," that may support or be essential for citizens to engage each other in sustaining our democratic communities.



Our roundtable discussions will be a work in progress. We begin here to curate and preserve an eclectic list of writings and resources that participants could consult as their time and interest allow. These are a mix of media and materials and the list is far from exhaustive. Some are more scholarly and academic studies, including history, political science sociology, and philosophy . Others include discussions of current events, society, and civics education and the skills and habits of mind it should include. Finally, some projects and groups participating in and facilitating community dialogues are listed.

We know that participants will have and suggest other material and sources. That is welcome and encouraged.

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James E. Ryan, *Wait, What? And Life’s Other Essential Questions* (Harper One 2017)

Adam Serwer, “Civility Is Overrated,” *The Atlantic* (December 2019)

3. Active groups and entities

[iCivics](#): fostering state by state adoption of renewed civics education in schools

[Braver Angels](#): facilitating civil political dialogue amidst breaking of bread between “Red/Blue” participants

[Urban Rural Action](#): training and facilitation of community dialogue to empower persons and groups to engage in vital problem solving; “Democracy Renewal” initiatives

[United States DOJ Community Resource Service](#) (CRS): conciliators and facilitators deployed to communities following “hate” incidents to prevent violence, calm communities and foster dialogue to establish community trust

[Divided Community Project](#), Ohio State University St. Moritz School of Law: staffed in part by alumni of CRS (above), facilitates and trains communities to engage in better dialogue

[Dispute Resolution Institute](#), Mitchel Hamline School of Law

[Johns Hopkins Civility Initiative](#)

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Building Social Trust in a Polarized Society

September 2020 Report

Subcommittee: Debbie Blevins, Jamie McReynolds, Seth Ragosta, Meg Heubeck, Larry Roberts, Shannon Bell, Drew Stelljes (Jeanne Franklin and Richard Bonnie sitting in)

Themes:

1. Build relationships of trust if possible before conflict begins or a crisis occurs
2. Building trust takes time, involvement, and awareness of vulnerability
3. Start to communicate to build trust around things held in common: goals, interests, common themes, small things - stay away at first from politics, or deeply controversial subjects
4. Words matter. Examples: "Community Building" vs. "Networking"; avoiding pejorative words to describe "other"
5. Building trust has an intergenerational component
6. Trust depends on the perspective of the person defining it. For some trust it is more of a passive process that is based on faith. For others, it's much more of an active process of engagement and building a sense of trust and confidence based on developed personal agency.
7. Need for skills, processes with which to develop trust
8. Motivation to try to build stronger, less fractured communities

Proposals:

1. Public Education and training on multiple fronts
 - a. Encourage participation in virtual skill workshops on active and reflective listening and other relationship skills
 - b. Examine record of other groups working in this space. Create compendium of currently available tools/workshops/resources on trust- building skills (i.e. Braver Angels, Urban Rural Action, YLI, CFP, DCP, CRS, Sorensen Institute, W & M Courageous Leadership Institute)
 - c. Offer facilitative skills training to local government officials (together with #3 below?)
2. Train young people to engage in activities in their own communities that have the result of building trust. On a statewide basis this can mobilize a generation. Give it a catchy, recognizable name such as the Our Community initiative or Working Together for Our Community.
3. Offer table top exercise community workshops as a way to build relationships of trust (i.e. the Charette procedure - <https://www.designorate.com/brainstorming-using-charette-procedure/>) For example, considering a simulated natural disaster has occurred and asking important stakeholders to work together to address it. This is useful for re-imagining a community, and the CHALLENGE is to work together to solve a problem. Importance of framing the right opening question.

4.. Pivot conversations from specific disagreements toward common values and new approaches. For example, offer a series of dialogues on “What is a fair election?” or “How would an ideal legislature behave?”

5. Create structured opportunities for dialogue between people with different perspectives.

6. Seek sponsor organizations, e.g., use the Virginia Bar Association or its contacts as an entrée to gain access and to provide a non-political “umbrella” for initiatives.

The American Bar Association Dispute Resolution Section sponsored a Zoom program on June 24, put together by the Ohio State St. Moritz School of Law Divided Community Project, (DCP), directed by Bill Froelich. The DCP, among other activities, runs an academy to train communities looking for ways to grow and handle divisions. In this program, Mr Froelich, joined by Carl Smallwood of DCP, past president of the National Council of Bar Presidents and Greater Columbus (Ohio) Community Trust, and Carrie Knell, Ombudsmen at Kenyon College , presented examples of use of DCP “best practices” and lessons for building collaborative, resilient communities capable of addressing deep division. The presenters are attorney-mediators.

First, a principle stated by Bill Froelich is that building relationships of trust is foundational for collaborative community work. It takes a long time to build a trust foundation and communities that rest on it. To be collaborative and resilient, communities need a *plan – a capacity* – to prevent, and to manage crises and divisions going forward. <http://go.osu.edu/dcpcri> <http://osu.edu/dcptoolkit>.

I have framed some lessons from them in terms of what a community needs:

Response Plan/Capacity that includes these pieces:

- Timely and appropriate messaging (acknowledgement, remorse as appropriate, commitment to fix a situation)
- Agreement to search for more information
- Provision for listening opportunities
- Clarity as to process that will be used
- Methods for access to process
- Use of process as promised
- Reporting on use of process/messaging
- Capacity to provide emotional care and support
- Skilled human resources for
 - Implementation
 - Leadership
 - Facilitation
 - Deep listening
 - Collaborative follow up work

Education and Civic Engagement

Peter Blake, Convener (SCHEV); Richard Bonnie (UVA Law); Cameron Patterson (Motson Museum); Ed Ayres (U of R, UVA, New American History, author); Monte Bourjaily, IV (Government, civics teacher Thomas Jefferson High School, Fairfax); Julie Silverbrook (consultant from *icivics*); and Jeanne Franklin (sitting in).

Some Discussion Themes

The team acknowledged the moment of crises and how people are handling or overwhelmed by them = fresh opportunity. "Engagement" quickly emerged as a central theme.

First, we want students to learn how to engage authentically and to develop confidence doing so. Second, we want to help students and teachers act within their schools and communities and reach across communities to get out of their community comfort zones to understand perspectives beyond their own.

We can support and spawn a variety of initiatives at the community level that **invite and support young people to engage in various civic activities in their own communities** that facilitate civic engagement, teach communication, listening and advocacy skills, nurture trust, and educate about citizenship and democracy. The ambition is to spawn a statewide network of local activities and a **coalition that can mobilize a generation**.

We also believe we should seek ways to enhance education curricula in Virginia to merge handling historical conflict and tensions with the role of civics and civic engagement in the evolution of history. Civics is not the preserve of those with access to formal power but the battleground for everyone, even those without power.

Mindful of 2021 SOL review process (which kicks off in spring 2021)

Mindful of recent Governor's Report on African American History Curricula

In conjunction with substantive education, we should seek to teach engagement skills to young people in multiple settings -- sports, the arts, vocation programs -- to expand and improve manner of communication so there is better dialogue, learning and progress. Further, we should capture student passion and energies by promoting, as part of curricula, student engagement in public square in effective ways.

Through these efforts, we will empower students to lead into the future.

We also should seek opportunities to build on what other organizations are doing in Virginia to move these matters forward. Every member of the group described efforts that we should support. Some of those initiatives are included in the "resources" section of this document.

(See Goggle Docs for additional commentary and resources)

Ideas to Consider

- Establish an overarching entity with a vision to educate and mobilize youth for civic engagement.
- Create high school/ college-level “hackathons” on curated topics. What if we pose the questions to high school and college students in a hackathon format? Individuals and teams are to come up with solutions. We recruit students from high schools and colleges around the Commonwealth. This breaks young people out of their community bubbles and gets them communicating and thinking of ideas together.
- Have students write letters to their legislators, op-eds to their local papers, or blog posts. We could accomplish several purposes at once: showing the immediate value and importance of engagement, training students in the language of civic discourse, thinking about how to persuade people who disagree with them, and mastering the particularities of laws, elections, or issues.
- Establish a prize or a program to promote and recognize efforts to increase student engagement in substantive civic thought and action.
- Establish a voluntary “gap year” program, let’s call it Service Virginia, modeled on something like the Civilian Conservation Corps. The program would be offered to 18- to 20-year-old Virginians who agree to work in some sort of group public service capacity that they choose for one year. Perhaps offer it in conjunction with college or university to gain academic credit.
- Import civic communication skills into law student StreetLaw programs (see link below).
- Create (or cooperate with existing) opportunities for students to work with museum programs, such as those of the Moton museum, to participate in programs and events about current events (perhaps even past history); examine how communities handle them or could approach them more effectively to reach outcomes that resolve the issues in ways that strengthen community cohesion and brighter futures.
- Be alert for opportunity to participate as neutral advisers in review and enhancement of Civics curricula and SOLs.

Resources

Hackathon models:

https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1yu1Tb0S06WRIZXDwL_ZueKuxlxSi9Xm5SGiSp_S5A4/edit#slide=id.p.

National coalition to improve civic education (led by iCivics): <https://civxnow.org/>

Includes a state policy information and suggestions: <https://civxnow.org/policy>

Model for using law students to promote civic learning: Street Law:

<https://www.streetlaw.org/programs/law-school-programs>

The [VA Board of Education's Excellence in Civics Education Seal](#)

Article in Forbes co-written by JMU president Jon Alger:

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/civcnation/2020/08/19/democracy-is-under-duress/#2004f8792a71>

Massachusetts Civic Learning Coalition:

<https://www.macivicsforall.org/whoweare>

“Made by Us”

<https://historymadebyus.com/>

Citizen University

<https://citizenuniversity.us/>

Education and Civic Engagement

Our assignment was to think about how to educate and how to engage, thus we have focused on schools, on communities, and on the intersections between them

In the schools, there will be opportunities to influence the SOLs, starting in the spring. Those changes, of the sort we're seeing unfold in the AA History Ed commission, offer a unique chance to shape what is taught every year in classes across the Commonwealth. We agree that civics should not be confined within social studies but appear throughout.

We should seek to integrate engagement skills in young people in multiple settings -- sports, the arts, vocation programs -- to expand and improve manner of communication.

In the intersection of the schools with the larger communities, we see a range of ways to act, some of which can be enacted relatively quickly and some of which will require longer planning.

In the shorter term, and bridging with the schools, we can have students write letters to their legislators, op-eds to their local papers, or social media posts. That could help train students in the language of civic discourse, think about how to persuade people who disagree with them, and master the particularities of laws, elections, or issues.

More ambitiously, we could host hackathons on curated topics, recruiting students from around the state to break them out of their local bubbles to develop ideas to improve civic engagement and connectivity among young people across Virginia. We can see models at Stanford on Covid, W&M on global innovation, and MIT for inclusion.

We could create opportunities for students to work with museum programs to help bridge the past and present, grounding national and virtual networks such as iCivics, Made by Us, and New American History. The Moton Museum already has partnerships and programs in place as models.

Even more ambitiously, we could establish a voluntary gap year that would give students a chance to work in some sort of group public service capacity.

[from the discussion session:

People not in the ed system after high school; certificates; good for gap year

Social media probably better than letters to the editor

VBA as sponsors for much of what we suggest]

Civility and Civil Discourse

September 2020

Small Working Group: Brian Blount, Alison McKee, David Landin, and Micah Schwartzman

The VBA and the Karsh Center have both emphasized the value of civility and civil discourse in our political and legal communities. As a virtue of citizens, civility marks the dispositions and social practices that allow us to show respect for others even as we disagree with them. There is a widespread sense that a loss of this civic virtue has contributed to political polarization, increased mistrust among citizens, and breakdowns in our ability to communicate effectively with each other. But in the midst of recent demonstrations, the ideas of civility and civil discourse have also been criticized as norms that can be used to suppress social and political protest, especially against racial injustices. Any discussion of civility must be sensitive to this set of moral and political concerns.

This tension – between civility as civic virtue and civility a way of stifling public dissent—raises some important questions:

- 1. What is the meaning of civility and what are the norms of civil discourse?** Maybe proponents and critics of civility and civil discourse are working with different understandings of what these concepts mean. Is it possible to identify meanings of civility that express its value, without also stifling important forms of dissent?
- 2. How is civility related to increasing polarization and loss of social and political trust?** Is a loss of civility a cause of polarization and mistrust, or is it the result of those phenomena, or perhaps both?
- 3. Is there less civility now (or more incivility) than in the past?** In every era, there are calls for more civility. But perhaps the rise of new technologies, especially social media, have exacerbated social tensions and worsened our relations? Are there other cultural, social, and political sources for diminished civil discourse?
- 4. How can we repair our culture of political and legal argumentation?** Are there cultural or political changes that might lead to better or more productive forms of civil discourse? How we can encourage argumentative practices that show respect for others, while allowing those with sharp criticisms of existing policies to voice them?
- 5. What can the legal profession do to help other professional and educational communities to promote civil discourse, civic engagement, and mutual respect for citizens, even as they strongly disagree with one another?**
- 6. Given these questions, what role should the concepts of civility and civil discourse play in framing our larger themes for the Roundtable?**

The questions above are meant to be helpful in framing issues for our Roundtable, and they may cut across discussions in some of the other small groups.

Lastly, there has been a lot of commentary and discussion about the concepts of civility and civil discourse in recent years. We want to take note of some recent and influential studies, including the following titles:

1. Scott F. Aiken and Robert B. Talisse, *Political Argument in a Polarized Age: Reason and Democratic Life* (Polity Press, 2020)
2. Lilliana Mason, *Uncivil Agreement: How Politics Became Our Identity* (University of Chicago Press, 2018)
3. Teresa M. Bejan, *Mere Civility: Disagreement and the Limits of Toleration* (Harvard University Press, 2017)
4. Keith J. Bybee, *How Civility Works* (Stanford University Press, 2016)
5. Austin Sarat, ed., *Civility, Legality, and Justice in America* (Cambridge University Press, 2014)
6. Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (Basic Books, 1998)

VBA Board Members' Thoughts on the Meaning of Civility (Summer 2020)

R. Fessier

You asked about our thoughts on civility. The attached case from the 6th Circuit came across my desk which seemed quite relevant. [See attachment] If you haven't seen it yet, it is short and well worth the read. The written insults issued by plaintiffs' counsel were both colorful and many. The court commented on the duties of civility and the disservice to the client when lawyers violate that duty under the guise of zealous advocacy.

As our court has previously explained, there are good reasons not to disparage your opponent, especially in court filings. "The reasons include civility; the near-certainty that overstatement will only push the reader away . . . ; and that, even where the record supports an extreme modifier, the better practice is usually to lay out the facts and let the court reach its own conclusions." Bennett v. State Farm Mut. Auto. Ins. Co., 731 F.3d 584, 585 (6th Cir. 2013) (cleaned up). The most important reason here is that counsel's colorful insults do nothing to show that his clients have standing to bring this lawsuit. We affirm the district court's dismissal for lack of jurisdiction.

The case concludes with:

One last note. Like the district court, we take a moment to remind plaintiffs' counsel that, as an officer of the court, he is expected to treat other parties in the case (as well as their counsel) with courtesy and professionalism. "Careful research and cogent reasoning, not aspersions, are the proper tools of our trade." U.S.I. Props. Corp. v. M.D. Constr. Co., 860 F.2d 1, 6 n.2 (1st Cir. 1988). That is of course not to say that legal documents must be written in dry legalese. Nor is it to criticize passionate and forceful advocacy in aid of a client's cause—a lawyerly virtue that counsel has displayed at points in this litigation. But just as one cannot "equate contempt with courage or insults with independence," we cannot dismiss the disparaging statements in this case as mere stylistic flourishes or vigorous advocacy. Sacher v. United States, 343 U.S. 1, 14 (1952). Counsel will best serve his clients if he remembers this going forward.

R. Garr'ott

The term civility comes from the root Latin word civis, meaning citizen which later evolved to civitas. Civility is the rights and more importantly the responsibilities of citizens, to not only advocate for their personal freedoms and rights, but also for the greater commonweal. In other words, civility is the obligation of each individual to protect the rights and freedoms of others, regardless of whether we agree with their personal views and political identity.

R. Holland

Civility is an action that shows courtesy and respect of others despite their difference with you in race, gender, religion and opinion.

R. Scully

When asked to explain what I mean by civility, I usually say it is “The Spirit of Liberty” as described by Learned Hand in his famous speech so titled. Here is a copy. [See attachment] It is brief but very powerful.

I also think of civility as a process- the process of seeking agreement or consensus in a democratic society through public inquiry, debate and discourse. Professor Sophia Rosenfeld’s recent book: “Democracy and Truth: A Short History ” argues that society collapses when it stops caring about and contesting what is good or true, because it has become indifferent to whether anything can be found to be true. She points to Weimar Germany and Eastern Europe under Communism as obvious examples. Thus she argues that the biggest danger to civil society is not angry, partisan, disrespectful discourse but rather the apathetic retreat of citizens into a purely private life because they no longer believe public life – civic life - matters. That makes shoring up institutions – like Bar Associations, Universities, Churches, and the press that traditionally were where people developed and committed themselves to “shared norms of truth” - crucial to fostering “civility.”

Yuval Levin makes a similar Burkean Conservative argument in “A Time to Build: From Family and Community to Congress and the Campus, How Recommitting to Our Institutions Can Revive the American Dream.” He argues civility is declining because our formative institutions are no longer committed to teaching us how to live in, and humbly contribute to, civil society as members. Those institutions instead have become stages for performative virtue signaling by professors, preachers, and government leaders.

There will never be agreement on what is true, good or beautiful - much less what is required to create a truly “civilized society.” But we need to keep trying to persuade each other about it. When we give up on that public process, retreat to our private lives, and talk only to those who agree with us, while hating and demonizing those who disagree – that is the real “incivility.”

R. Snow

I've just finished my tenure as president of the l'Anson-Hoffman Inn of Court, so I might be biased toward the Inn view these days. To me, civility is the golden rule of law practice: Treat your opposition like you want to be treated, recognizing that you both have to diligently represent your clients. I suppose you could phrase it in terms of mutual respect and arrive at the same concept. I would also extend it to treatment of legal staff, court personnel, judges, and others in our legal system. You can tell a lot about a lawyer's civility by the way he or she interacts with staff.

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Additional material and groups to consult about communication for better understanding of other perspectives and experiences:

- **Braver Angels** (Jamie McReynolds, a VBA at Karsh participant, is the Virginia Coordinator)

Offers excellent online programs, conversations, and training to expand ability to converse respectfully to learn, grasp different ideas and points of view, and empathize; based on “red/blue” differences but expanding concept of humanity beyond one’s political affiliation

Braver Angels welcomes membership (for minimal donation) and volunteers to host BA conversations and trainings

- **Listen First Project**
- **National Conversation Project**
- **Weave: Social Fabric Project**

These are groups, sharing a common connection via The Aspen Institute, that sponsor activities to expand our listening skills, and foster storytelling, in order to see the humanity in those of different opinions and backgrounds. Please note that VBA at Karsh participant, Kara Dillard, is a Senior Adviser to Weave.

- **Citizen Academy**, Eric Liu

Writings, online sessions, inspiration to communicate better to be better citizens and build stronger democratic community

- **Innumerable local projects setting up opportunities to tell and listen to stories to get to know others – online; in schools; in libraries**
- **See additional groups listed in the Resource Section of the June 2 Meeting packet, excerpted in this appendix**

Articles:

“Can We Ever Be One Country Again?” Gene Weingarten, The Washington Post Magazine, November 1, 2020. An example of storytelling to illustrate author’s point.

“Zoom truce drives drop in gun violence,” Peter Hermann, The Washington Post, 8/19/20
This article reports on the Violence Interrupters program piloted in Washington, DC.

Additional Book:

“The Upswing,” Putnam and Garrett (2020, Simon & Shuster). Robert Putnam authored “Bowling Alone” but returns 20 years later with an optimistic message about people coming together and rebuilding social trust

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Possible Projects

- Reinvigorate social trust and build capacity to communicate better with each other in spite of strong differences

A compendium of (1) skills training curricula for different audiences and settings and
(2) processes like charettes and table top exercises for demos
(3) possible collaborators or sponsors

Train the trainers

Motivate use of them

Pilot in and across different settings

- Build education along age and grade continuum to strengthen learning from history and about history to strength civic engagement and the will to work together democratically

Engage SOL and other curricula reviews in non-partisan ways

Use schools as platforms to build out effective democratic, civic engagement

Architecture - umbrella entity to act as clearinghouse, facilitator, other function

Engage and motivate the young* - equip with civic engagement skills

Gap service year – skills and process demos

Gap year civic engagement fellowships

*Accessible to various social communities – not just college bound

- Promote/Market/Incent initiatives

Vocabulary**

Collaborate across regions and educational and social communities

Make it Cool

- In it to win it : long term - also, how measure impact?
- Use Social Media

Detoxify via bully/violence interrupters program

In course of that subtly introduce skills

- Civility ** will follow via these initiatives/culture upgrade

- Engage in nonpartisan manner in reviews of educational curricula content – history and civics, urging expansion and updates of content geared to achieve vision
- Umbrella entity/office for youth civic engagement that acts as clearinghouse, coordinator, facilitator/networker for groups, museums, associations, educational institutions to promote youth engagement and civic skills
- Assist and encourage teachers to build civics and civic skills education throughout curricula and along grade/age continuum and encourage student civic activity (letters to editor, op eds, social media posts, hackathons)
- Virginia Youth Corps
- Gap service year for community engagement – promoting civic skills and processes
- Gap year civic engagement fellowship(s)
- In all of above, be mindful and inclusive of those who are not college bound or who are in less privileged educational settings
- Develop civic engagement/communication skills syllabus that is malleable – can be adapted for use in various settings by various groups and audiences;
- Promulgate syllabus (make available) widely; train the trainers
- Identify and develop demonstrations and training around various processes (e.g., charettes and table top exercises) useful in community gatherings – pilot them
- Identify and recruit groups and locales for such trainings and demos
- Collaborate with other groups for various activities and as sites to train and demo and promote; build on who is already engaged in education and related community activity (e.g. Rule of Law project, Virginia Braver Angels, Street Law; UVA YLI)
- Encourage exploration of social media pilot to train and deploy online intervenors to promote better communications and civic engagement: i.e. train facilitators to interrupt violent/aggressive, bullying behaviors around hot topics in online communities
- Identify possible partners in Virginia for such purposes

- Embed and model civil behavior and communication best practices in syllabi, curricula, social media training without calling attention to word “civility” as it can have unintended negative consequences; be aware of not condoning “civility” misused to quash lawful protest and peaceful demonstrations and calls for reforms.
- Who/how pull together a menu of chosen initiatives? A broad umbrella entity or coalition? Look to models like the Greater Columbus Community Trust?

VBA Special issues and Karsh identify these next steps for ourselves:

- Begin to flesh out prioritized ideas

Reach out to – possibly recruit - some identified groups to help or run such formative efforts

- Confer individually with roundtable members as we do this – perhaps convene a new small group
- Report to VBA
- Develop January 23, 2020 virtual Panel
- Communicate with roundtable as we engage in above steps, encourage you to communicate with each other and us (hoping to “keep the meeting going” in a way)
- Report back to roundtable post January 23, 2020 panel.

Now, besides ideas listed above, please have a look at the trends or themes on next sheet, and think about a name or a vision (third sheet). Is having one a good idea? Is a visual of any use?

Given interest in implementing specific ideas by a variety of persons/entities, is something more needed to anchor or hold such efforts together – to strengthen and sustain them—a shared concept, an association or coalition of sorts serving a shared vision?

If so, what might such entity or coalition look like?

Answer: Here is one idea:

Virginia Unum (*V unum*)

Statewide coalition or loose association of entities in Virginia that subscribe to a common vision. They coordinate with each other to guide and show support for others in Virginia engaging in activities identified by V Unum as possibly serving the V Unum vision. Perhaps acting as clearinghouse of resources and repository of information, and as facilitator of networking, V Unum can signal a more unified strategy by those who are now and who will in the future individually undertake projects to elevate the culture of communication and civic engagement in Virginia.

Broad Areas of V Unum vision and engagement might include the following categories (ideas put forth to date that fall within these categories are listed in other VBA at Karsh documents):

- Community convenings and interactions designed to build and support community trust (or social capital as it is sometimes called)
- Enhancement of education initiatives, adaptable to multiple settings and audiences, to equip students and adults to communicate better, to sow seeds of trust and understanding and eventually more effective community problem solving
- Advising and consulting regarding Virginia education policy relating to civics and civic engagement
- Innovative programs and activities to encourage youth civic engagement thereby training future leaders and enhancing community initiatives as well as participants in community
- Leadership pipelines in multiple sectors to equip leaders to support V Unum vision
- Consideration of online and social media platforms to offer and promote such efforts