



# DEEPER *DIALOGUES*

Final Program Report  
Theological Horizons  
Spring | 2022



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THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS

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## BACKGROUND

In the era of Covid, physical distancing radically changed the way we live. At the University of Virginia, the pandemic and the widespread racial unrest that coincided with it especially heightened levels of personal stress across the community, deepened conflicts around the University of Virginia's contested historical legacy, and centered urgent questions of what it means to be human.

Theological Horizons is a ministry based at UVA that seeks to support Christians and seekers in academia by providing a welcoming community for engaging faith, thought, and life, and during this time it was interested to lean into deeper questions of the university experience such as:

*How do we stop social distancing from becoming social isolation? How do we maintain a sense of community and resilience while we are apart? How will we negotiate a fraught and uncertain future?*

To pursue these questions, Theological Horizons, in partnership with the Boston-based civic consulting group, Essential Partners, developed Deeper Dialogues, a series of carefully structured and facilitated small-group conversations around essential qualities of human flourishing for members of UVA and broader university community.

Initially awarded a subgrant as part of the John Templeton Foundation's "Higher Pursuits Project: Exploring Spirituality & Purpose in the Contemporary University" through Upper House at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, and with additional support from the UVA Parents Fund and Ms. Cindy Brinker Simmons, the series invited students, staff and faculty to navigate challenging moments together and foster a university culture of thoughtful compassion and respectful care.

## PROGRAM SUMMARY

Between February 2021 and 2022 Deeper Dialogues hosted five community conversations. Each one featured a 15-minute reflection by a senior member of the University's faculty or administration on a theme or quality of being that is central to the flourishing of individual and communal life: Resilience, Inspiration, Hope, Forgiveness, and Healing.

This brief presentation by a "spark speaker" was followed by a carefully scripted and closely facilitated conversation between small groups following the Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) model developed by Essential Partners. Participants included UVA students, faculty and staff members, administration officials, and community members. All presentations may be viewed on the Theological Horizons website at <https://www.theologicalhorizons.org/dialogues>.

Deeper Dialogues hosted two conversations virtually in the Spring of 2021, moving to an in-person dialogue model in the Fall of 2021-Spring 2022.

Below is a summary of the complete Deeper Dialogues series:



Virtual Dialogue | March 16, 2021  
**RESILIENCE: Flourishing Amidst Uncertainty**  
Matt Weber, Senior Assistant to the President

In-Person Dialogue | September 30, 2021  
**HOPE: Forging the Future Together**  
Shaka Sydnor, Assistant Dean of Students

In-Person Dialogue | February 24, 2022  
**HEALING: Framing Wellness in New Ways**  
Ian Solomon, Dean of the Batten School of Leadership and Public Policy

Beginning in January 2021, Theological Horizons (TH) convened a 10-member student leadership team, led by then-rising 3rd-year student Mary-Dryden Maio. Together, under the guidance of TH Executive Director, Karen Marsh, this team created the original project brand and logo, promotional material, and a robust social media strategy. Additionally, these student leaders liaised with Essential Partners' staff to curate and write the custom facilitator script for each dialogue, led training for new student facilitators, coordinated event logistics, and facilitated small group dialogues during the event.

Through the Deeper Dialogues model, 18 UVA students and 5 others were trained as community facilitators in the Reflective Structured Dialogue model and 14 individual faculty members participated or engaged directly with the program content. An average of 45 participants attended each Deeper Dialogue, approximately 25% of whom were members of the faculty or administration. Overall the program engaged a total of 215 original contacts from across the university, 43% of whom had no prior relationship to Theological Horizons.

## Project Goals

The Deeper Dialogues project was created and designed to accomplish the following three goals:

- Convene a variety of stakeholders from across the university community (at least 30% faculty and administrators) to improve understanding and connection around common challenges and goals;
- Leverage the unique resources of the university context to facilitate honest exchange and promote greater collaboration between and among various members of the university community;
- Give community members an experience of Reflective-Structured Dialogue (RSD) to foster a university culture of greater compassion and care and introduce dialogic communication tools for transferability to other spaces.

Virtual Dialogue | April 13, 2021  
**INSPIRATION: Following People of Courage**  
Rev. Carolyn Mitchell Dillard, University-Community Liaison, DEI Office

In-Person Dialogue | November 11, 2021  
**FORGIVENESS: Finding Grace Beyond Harm**  
Dr. Amrisha Vaish, Associate Professor of Psychology





## INITIAL OUTCOMES

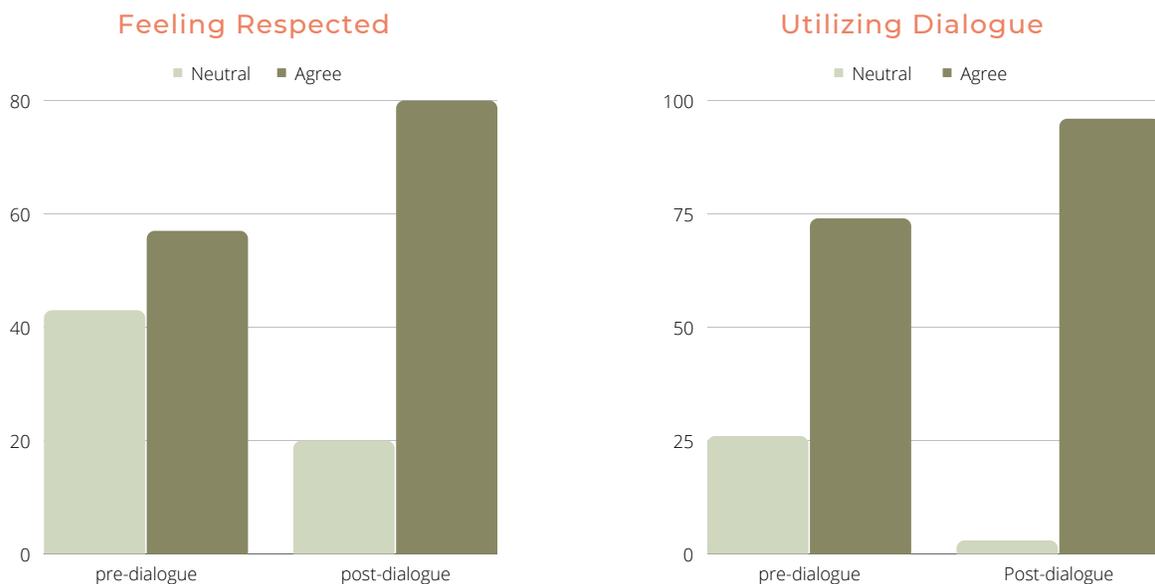
Overall, participants who took part in Deeper Dialogues reported very positive results:

**3.9** Average rating participants gave the dialogues (out of 4 possible points)

**7%** Of students who participated in one of the dialogues went on to become trained as a facilitator for other dialogues.

**97%** Of participants agreed or strongly agreed that the dialogues helped them feel more connected to other members of the university community.

Additionally, Deeper Dialogues participants reported significant shifts in how understood they felt and how cohesive their community felt to them, before and after the dialogue.



Prior to the dialogue, 57% of respondents reported they strongly agree that they feel respected in their community. After the dialogue with us, this number rose to 80%.

Similarly, prior to the dialogue, 26% of people reported that they were only mildly committed to using dialogue as an effective tool for engaging conflict. After the dialogue with us, only 3% still had a mild commitment, while 93% agreed or strongly agreed that dialogue was a tool they were committed to utilize in conflict situations in the future.



## IMPACT

As a result of its collaborative effort with Essential Partners, Theological Horizons was able to accomplish the goals of this project in the following ways:

### **Goal #1: Convene a variety of stakeholders from across the university community (at least 30% faculty and administrators) to improve understanding and connection around common challenges and goals.**

#### By the Numbers:

- 4 of the 5 dialogues included at least 25% participation by university staff and administration and overall each dialogue maintained a balance between diverse communities from across the community.
- Overall, students constituted the majority of participants representing approximately 55-60% of registrants; university staff members (e.g. Grounds workers) were least represented at less than 5% participation.
- Community members (such as Charlottesville locals, alumni, and parents) comprised approximately 8-11% of all dialogue participants.

#### From Participants:

"It was an incredibly moving and meaningful experience, from the phenomenal speaker to the intimate and powerful small group discussion. I'm very grateful to have attended."  
(UVA Faculty)

"I really appreciated people's openness and honesty. I was surprised how quickly people can bond together."  
(UVA Student)

"I immediately felt such a sense of welcome and belonging. It brought me a profound peace and purpose to be in a conversation with others who were listening with care."  
(UVA Staff Member)

### **Goal #2: Leverage the unique resources of the university context to facilitate honest exchange and promote greater collaboration between and among various members of the university community.**

#### By the Numbers:

- 14 faculty members engaged directly with students, other faculty, and community members around original research and ideas.
- Two faculty members shared "spark talks" featuring their own original research and three others shared from personal experiences that related to their roles within the university.

#### From Participants:

"I was really surprised by people's openness and by their shared experience. It helped me think about my own experiences in a new light and to entertain the possibility that maybe more people understand what I'm going through than I realize, even people much older than me."  
(UVA student).



- On average 25% of each dialogue was comprised of members from the faculty or administration.
- 96% of participants either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that “This dialogue helped me grow in my understanding about the issues or challenges my community faces.”

“My group was really diverse in all kinds of ways so I was nervous how it would work, but it was amazing! I wouldn’t have guessed how quickly people would be willing to share and how eager people were to ask and answer questions, even vulnerable and personal questions.”

(UVA community member)

### **Goal #3: Give community members an experience of Reflective-Structured Dialogue (RSD) to foster a university culture of greater compassion and care and introduce dialogic communication tools for transferability to other spaces.**

#### By the Numbers:

- Participants were 23% more likely to indicate they were committed to using dialogue opportunities after one dialogue.
- After experiencing two or more dialogues 100% of all participants indicated they either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they were committed to utilizing this approach to engage across lines of difference in the future.
- Nearly 8% of all students who participated in the dialogue went on to receive formal training as a facilitator.

#### From Participants:

“I’ve been fearful to step out of my comfort zone and speak to people who need compassion. This helped me remember how important it is to try. ”

(UVA student)

“The structure of the facilitation is helpful; I appreciated how those boundaries opened up space for better quality engagement.”

(UVA faculty member).

“I am eager to tell my neighbors about this experience. I see so many ways this could be helpful in my life.”

(UVA community member)

#### Other Key Themes and Takeaways

Based on feedback, participants consistently indicated feeling a high degree of trust with fellow participants within a very short period of time. There was also a sense that this effort was both timely and appreciated as well as the desire to provide similar kinds of experiences in the future that would allow students to “talk more,” “keep the conversation going” and to “go deeper.”

Student participants, in particular, expressed a desire to apply the Reflective Structured Dialogue approach to other, more controversial or complex, community issues. Additionally, student leaders expressed particular concern that members of the university staff community (e.g. Grounds workers, dining hall workers, administrative support staff, etc) were persistently under-represented in each dialogue though it was difficult to ascertain if this was due to scheduling and/or locations of the dialogues, lack of interest, or failure to effectively publicize and reach those community members. Engaging this constituency is a high priority for future iterations of this program.

## NEXT STEPS

Based on the initial success of the Deeper Dialogues and key feedback from facilitators and participants, Theological Horizons is planning to revise and continue the Deeper Dialogues program model to provide additional opportunities for deeper community engagement over the next two academic years (Fall 2022 through Spring 2024)

### Key Feedback:

In their planning meetings and training assessments, student facilitators expressed interest in having further opportunities to practice facilitation, and the desire to gain more practice structuring and scripting dialogues with more complex content. In their post-dialogue assessments, student participants expressed interest in pursuing topics and conversation that are more controversial or complex. They also expressed the desire to “keep the conversation going” and “to go deeper” with additional engagement. Likewise faculty and staff participants expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to engage and hear from students outside the classroom.



Because of the initial Deeper Dialogues engagement Theological Horizons already has:

- 20 trained facilitators (some of whom will be graduating but may still be available for virtual facilitation);
- A 10-member student planning team prepared to support and guide the dialogue process and program planning as well as templates and graphic elements to support future dialogues;
- 24+ administration and faculty members who have been directly engaged in or exposed to the Deeper Dialogues program model actively planning four dialogue projects to take place this semester
- Ongoing support from Essential Partners in the form of: regular support emails, summer training opportunities for new facilitators, periodic alumni-only webinars, annual alumni-only gatherings, and monthly open office hours.

The revised Deeper Dialogues model will provide training for up to 12 new facilitators to gain skills in the Reflective Structured Dialogue model through a summer intensive with Essential Partners. Existing facilitators will receive further training as well. Additionally, Theological Horizons plans to host one 2-part dialogue sequence each semester consisting of:

- A large public virtual dialogue around a key topic of human or community flourishing rooted in a particular piece of contemporary research, media, or news to provide more accessible and flexible engagement for a wide range of participants from across the university community as well as the opportunity to engage more complex or controversial content to fully utilize the RSD model, and;
- A smaller, select in-person dinner discussion on the same topic for a representative group of 12-15 members who participated in the larger virtual dialogue to engage in a 1:1 setting with others from across the university. Each dinner will feature a member of the faculty or administration with expertise in the topic or research area to be discussed and 1-2 facilitators who will shepherd the conversation in an intentional but less structured format to allow for deeper engagement.

Theological Horizons is seeking \$50,000 to support this programming over the next two years.

## **THEOLOGICAL HORIZONS | THEOLOGICALHORIZONS.ORG**

Theological Horizons supports Christians and seekers by providing a welcoming community for engaging faith, thought and life. It is centered at the Bonhoeffer House on the UVA Grounds in Charlottesville, VA.

## **ESSENTIAL PARTNERS | WHAT IS ESSENTIAL.ORG**

Essential Partners is a Boston-based consultancy that joins with communities and organizations around the globe, equipping them to navigate the values, beliefs, and identities that are essential to them.

### **What Is Reflective Structured Dialogue?**

Each set of dialogues follows the Reflective Structured Dialogue (RSD) model developed by Essential Partners. It is designed to foster listening and genuine curiosity amongst participants. Features of this distinctive model include:

- A 15-minute introductory reflection by a senior member of the university community sharing personal experience and/or relevant research related to the theme of the dialogue;
- Small groups of 6-8 people and a trained facilitator. These groups include a mix of students, faculty, administration, staff and members of the larger community, offering a unique forum for individuals across different experiences to convene;
- A trained facilitator from the UVA community guides members through a series of questions, listening, and reflective/note-taking periods;
- Responses are given in a “go-round” fashion with everyone sharing for an equal amount of time and questioning with an attitude of open inquiry;
- Multiple 6-8 member dialogue groups are convened at once to accommodate as many community members who want to participate;
- The dialogue portion of these events are closely timed to last no more than 75 minutes.



### **Questions? Want to Learn More?**

Contact Karen Marsh, Theological Horizons Executive Director, at [karen@theologicalhorizons.org](mailto:karen@theologicalhorizons.org)