



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Divided Community Project Academy Initiative

Case Study #1
Kenyon College

2021

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Acknowledgements

The Divided Community Project (DCP) housed at The Ohio State University Moritz College of Law – in partnership with the American Bar Association Section of Dispute Resolution – hosted DCP's inaugural [Academy Initiative](#) in Chicago from March 3-5, 2019.

DCP sought to work with communities seeking to design processes which identify and address divisive issues tearing at the fabric of participant communities. The project convened “core leadership groups” composed of approximately eight stakeholders from four communities:

- Charlottesville, Virginia
- Memphis, Tennessee
- Kenyon College, Ohio
- The state of Oregon, with an emphasis on Portland

The Academy provided a program for participants to be in conversation with similarly situated colleagues from diverse communities, dispute systems design experts from DCP, and individuals experienced in responding to community unrest and hate incidents (including a police chief, city manager, and a senior advisor to a mayor) from jurisdictions that confronted volatile conflict that made national headlines. The participants engaged in various activities, such as the Midland Simulation, and facilitated community conversations regarding efforts to address unrest and community tension, in order to:

- Strengthen skills for dealing with community unrest and its underlying causes,
- Strengthen collaboration among a community's core leaders, and
- Develop public engagement processes to identify and address community division.

Following the Academy program, DCP hosted two follow-up conversations intentionally designed for Academy participants and continued to work with many of the participant communities. This report details a case study of Kenyon College's experience with the Academy Initiative.

INITIATE

A small private liberal arts college situated in central Ohio, Kenyon College is home to about 1,700 undergraduate students and roughly 600 employees.

In 2018, the Kenyon community was introduced to the work of the Divided Community Project (DCP) through an alum of the college. Upon learning more about DCP and talking to the staff, members of the Kenyon community were encouraged to apply for the first iteration of the Academy Initiative (hereinafter referred to as “the Academy”). While Kenyon’s team did not attend the Academy in order to address a specific, ongoing incident, a divisive campus incident framed the thinking of Kenyon’s core team and heightened the desire for the type of training the Academy proposed to offer.

In early 2018, a playwright-in-residence wrote a controversial script which polarized the community and offended many students, particularly those in the Latinx community. Inspired by a true story about cultural insensitivity, the play was criticized for the racist portrayal of a Guatemalan character. The playwright ultimately cancelled the play, “out of respect for the concerns of students and members of the faculty,”^[1] yet many in the community felt “alienated and unheard.”^[2]

Campus administrators offered direct support to affected students and Kenyon’s President urged the community to engage in respectful dialogue. Many in the campus community participated in dialogue designed to address insensitivities raised by the play, but the playwright did not. Moreover, there were several limitations in the dialogue’s implementation: many members of the community chose not to participate and many small group discussions were facilitated by faculty who lacked facilitation training.

According to members of Kenyon’s Academy core leadership team, the community was not prepared to navigate this controversy and the subsequent community conversations. As one core leadership team member remarked, to facilitate effective community dialogue, one has to think about who’s present and who’s not, who gets to be heard and who doesn’t. Initiating a campus-wide dialogue without thinking through these elements indicated that the Kenyon community as a whole lacked the skill-set for challenging campus-wide dialogue.

The controversial play brought greater awareness to the ways in which Kenyon’s underserved and underrepresented populations might not feel welcomed on campus.

[1] Birnbaum, Emily. “MacLeod cancels ‘The Good Samaritan.’” *The Kenyon Collegian*, February 1, 2018. <<https://kenyoncollegian.com/news/2018/02/macleod-cancels-good-samaritan/>>.

[2] Birnbaum, Emily and Gabrielle Healy. “Group charts a way forward after ‘The Good Samaritan.’” *The Kenyon Collegian*, March 1, 2018. <<https://kenyoncollegian.com/news/2018/03/group-charts-way-forward-good-samaritan/>>.

The administration looked for ways to recalibrate the community to make it more conducive for less satisfied segments to voice their concerns. The Associate Provost for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion noted that, “People on various sides of the disagreement... felt that, one, they were not being heard or heard correctly, and two, they did not feel as though they had been given the opportunity to speak.”[3]

To meet these needs, Kenyon’s leadership team sought to learn how to anticipate major issues and put in place plans and strategies to best address concerns when they arose.

Members of the Kenyon community have described Kenyon as a “blue bubble” surrounded by a sea of more conservative communities in Mt. Vernon, Ohio. In the context of growing unrest and social challenges nationally, the Academy’s curriculum seemed appealing and particularly timely for Kenyon.

Upon being selected for participation, Kenyon representatives followed the guidance of the DCP staff and identified eight community leaders that would comprise the core leadership group to participate in the Academy.

The intention was for the leadership group to have the representation of the students, faculty, and staff. The team included the Ombudsperson of the college, a Senior Advisor for Community Relations, the Dean of Students, the Vice President for Student Affairs, an English professor, an Associate Provost/ Senior Advisor to the President, an Episcopal priest and staff at the Office of Spiritual and Religious Life, and the Student Council Vice President of Academic Affairs.

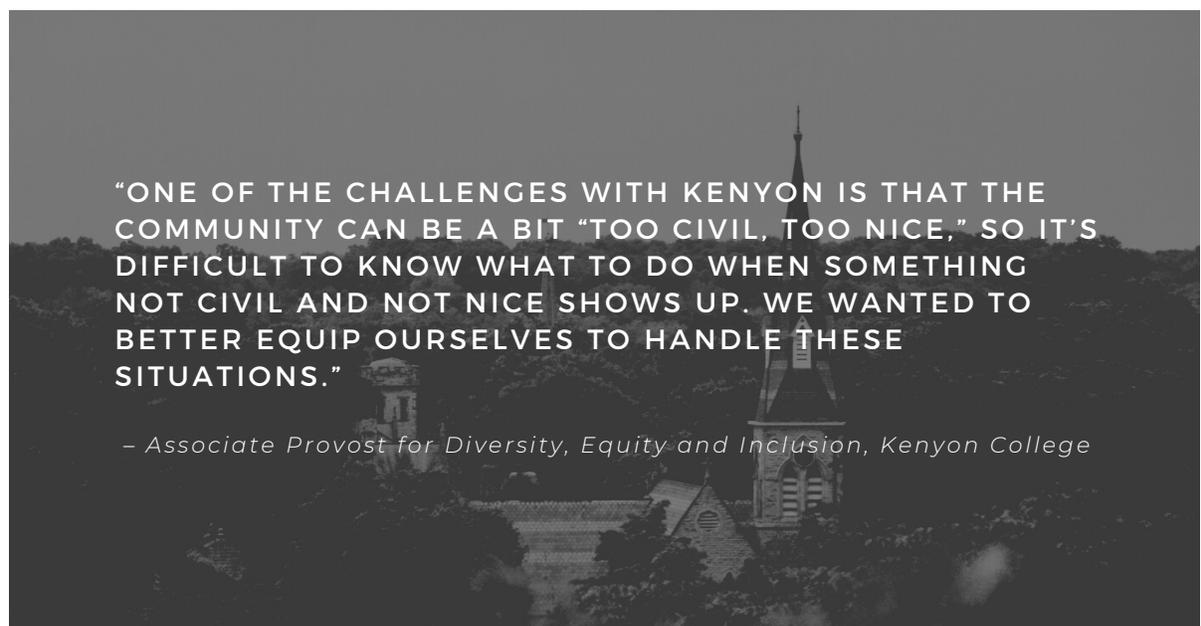


Photo credit: Tim Homes, Overlooking Kenyon College, Gambier, Ohio. Flickr (2018).

[3] Birnbaum and Healy.

IMMERSE

When Kenyon's core leadership team participated in the first iteration of the Academy in March 2019, they represented the only institution of higher education.

Some members of Kenyon's team wondered what they would be able to contribute to connect with the issues facing larger communities. Upon reflection, participants noted their team was facing many of the same issues as representatives from larger cities and municipalities. All participants were grappling with how to support their communities in the face of crisis as well as how to design processes to identify and address tensions reverberating across their respective communities. However, some members of Kenyon's core leadership team noted that the structure of the Academy felt like it was intended for a different sort of group (i.e., municipalities), and saw it as a challenge to transpose the lessons for a campus setting.



Communication

Academy participants embedded several enhanced communication principles into their professional practice as a result of the Academy. Kenyon already had a solid culture of consultation and a strong system of shared governance, and the Academy provided ideas to refine and fine-tune existing practices. The specific lessons on communication pertained to acquiring and disseminating information to diverse audiences (e.g., students, staff, faculty, alumni), investing in relationship-building to minimize miscommunication, and institutionalizing processes so that they would not be dependent on any individual, particularly when the majority of the Kenyon community cycles on and off campus every four years.



Inclusion

The Academy heightened Kenyon's core leadership group's focus on improving internal communication, and also encouraged them to identify others who might be missing from the conversation. Another aspect of improving communication was the idea of having relationships in place ahead of time so that leaders could be in conversation prior to any incident and continue the dialogue through the resolution of it. The Midland simulation was particularly helpful for assessing the core leadership team's ability to react to rapid change and allowed them to recognize their lack of control, particularly in crisis.

IMPLEMENT

Kenyon's participation in the Academy has had both direct and indirect effects on its community.

Thinking back on the controversial play in 2018, the core leadership group wanted to design an initiative that could anticipate and minimize division, and more importantly establish lines of communication and conversation prior to tensions escalating.

Specifically, the leadership group wanted to become more intentional about keeping their ears to the ground to anticipate campus conflicts, while finding ways to keep the community engaged in collaborative problem solving.



Direct Effects

In a direct application of the Academy's principles, the core leadership group formed the "Kenyon Concerns Coalition" (KCC). The college's website describes this initiative as "an advisory group of Kenyon staff, faculty[,] and students whose purpose is to support a connected community by identifying and positively intervening on issues of broad campus concern to avert community division." [4]

Since its formation, the coalition has expanded to include additional campus leaders, such as the Director of Campus Safety and the Chair of the Student Council Committee on Diversity and Inclusion. KCC meets monthly to discuss any areas of possible campus-wide concern, and other members of the community can also raise issues for discussion using an online form or by contacting one of the coalition members.

KCC was loosely modeled after the Kenyon emergency preparedness team (KEPT), which handles common emergencies related to weather, crime, disasters, and other threats to bodily harm. The idea was to create a coalition that could be similarly prepared to address social grievances.

While issues were mostly tackled on an ad hoc basis previously, KCC now exists as a platform for various campus leaders (representatives of different sub-communities) to come together regularly to discuss emerging concerns proactively and to plan ahead to ensure a proper response in the event of social unrest. KCC is a vehicle for community leaders to stay connected and remain informed about emerging issues across campus, and doubles as a tool for strengthening ties among campus leaders.

[4] "Kenyon Concerns Coalition." Accessed July 25, 2021. <<https://www.kenyon.edu/offices-and-services/ombuds/kenyon-concerns-coalition/>>.

In addition to KCC, the Campus Mediators[5] was launched in the fall of 2019 to provide mediation services and to facilitate on-campus dialogue at Kenyon.[6] The dual purpose of Campus Mediators is to train interested students, faculty, and staff in the skills of mediation and conflict resolution, and to subsequently employ these individuals to co-mediate peer conflicts, facilitate programs such as Kenyon Listens,[7] and to serve as a resource for conflict resolution on campus.

Although not a direct byproduct of the Academy, the Campus Mediators was similarly developed in the aftermath of the controversial play and has helped reinforce Kenyon's commitment to strengthening community resiliency and cohesion.

KCC and the Academy concepts were put to the test in 2020, when the Kenyon Student Worker Organizing Committee (K-SWOC) sought to create a union for undergraduate employees.

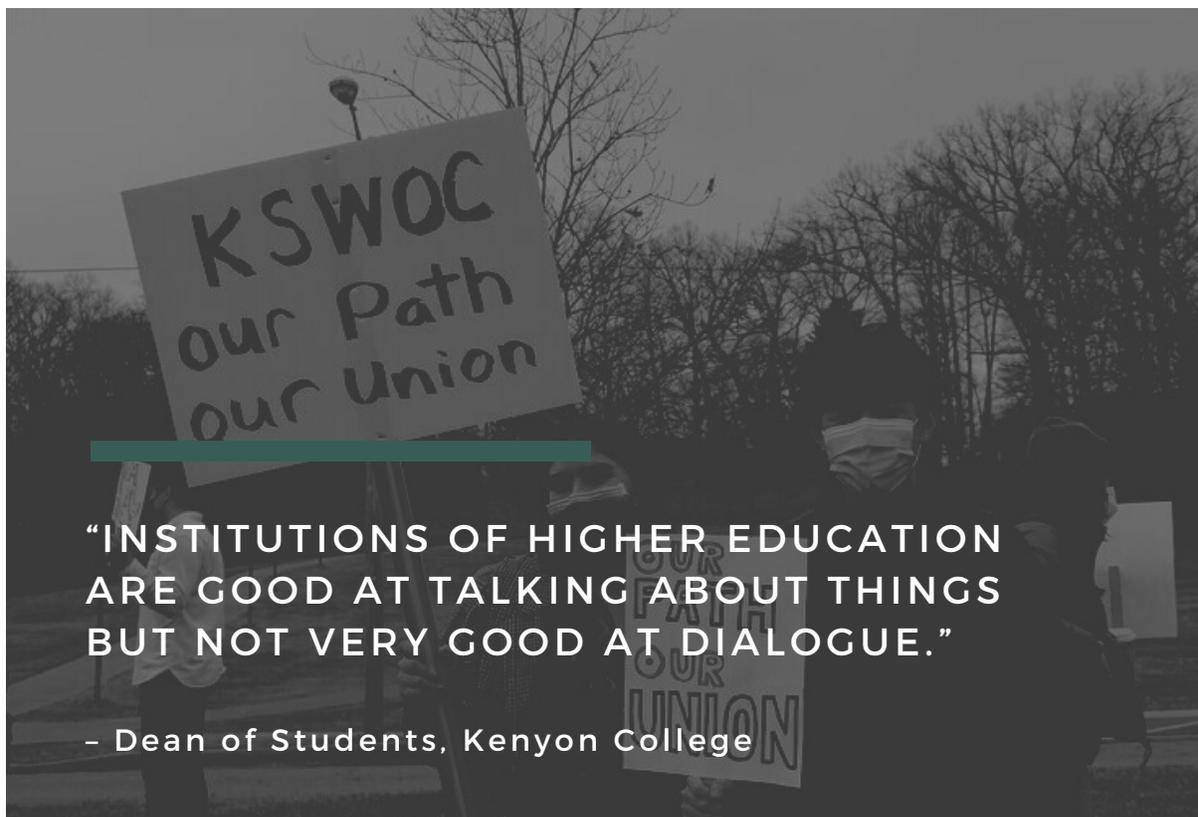


Photo credit: K-SWOC website: <https://www.kswoc.org/about-k-swoc>

[5] “Campus Mediators.” Accessed September 13, 2021. <<https://www.kenyon.edu/offices-and-services/ombuds/programming/campus-mediators/>>.

[6] McCoy, Kayleigh. “New ‘Campus Mediators’ to help resolve conflicts.” *The Kenyon Collegian*, October 3, 2019. <<https://kenyoncollegian.com/news/2019/10/new-campus-mediators-to-help-resolve-conflicts/>>.

[7] “Kenyon Listens.” Accessed September 13, 2021. <<https://www.kenyon.edu/offices-and-services/ombuds/programming/kenyon-listens/>>.

The COVID-19 pandemic had various effects at Kenyon, including disrupting the ability for Kenyon to be in community together physically at the conclusion of the spring 2020 semester.

But the pandemic also served as a catalyst for organizing a campus-wide union, as student workers were unsure if they would be paid for the duration of the semester when the college closed.[8] Student workers were paid, yet the concerns motivated calls for collective action and the institutionalization of a student bargaining unit.[9]

K-SWOC presented a list of demands to the Office of the President in August 2020 and began a “week of action” to seek official recognition as a bargaining unit.[10]

Kenyon’s leadership had to find ways to facilitate conversation across lines of disagreement that were in line with the mission of the college, while also being mindful of the legal constraints, such as those entailed in the Fair Labor Standards Act and the National Labor Relations Act.

Although the issue is not yet resolved, campus leaders noted that they felt better prepared and empowered as a result of the Academy. Moreover, KCC was a vehicle to discuss the state of student opinions regarding the attempts at union organizing.

Campus Mediators were also actively involved in facilitating conversations between students, Senior Staff, and members of the Board of Trustees to discuss issues pertaining to K-SWOC.



“In any community, there will inevitably be different perspectives. How do you find ways of making people feel heard and their concerns acted on? How do you find ways of arriving at consensus? These are the questions the Academy helped us ask and answer.”

– Senior Advisor to the President, Kenyon College

Photo credit: Lawrence G. Miller, Ascension Hall, Kenyon College. Flickr (2009).

[8] Wishnia, Steve. “Ohio College-Student Workers Go on Historic Strike for Union Recognition.” Labor Press, April 28, 2021. <<https://www.laborpress.org/ohio-college-student-workers-go-on-historic-strike-for-union-recognition/>>.

[9] Wishnia.

[10] Weisblat, Evey. “Student employees seek to form nation’s first all-inclusive undergraduate union.” The Kenyon Collegian, September 3, 2020. <<https://kenyoncollegian.com/news/2020/09/student-employees-seek-to-form-historic-undergraduate-union/>>.



INDIRECT EFFECTS

The Academy curriculum helped Kenyon improve its protest policy, prioritize communication at the senior staff levels, and become more intentional with community interactions.

The Academy has also indirectly influenced Kenyon's community. Prior to Kenyon's participation in the Academy, the Campus Senate was tasked with creating a protest policy.

The intention was to ensure the rights of students, staff, and faculty to voice their opinions without concern for their educational or employment status, but the need for such a policy was controversial from the beginning. Without the policy, the administration's response to faculty, staff, or student protests was entirely discretionary and campus leaders sought to clarify the conditions and expectations around protesting.

However, some saw it as an effort by the administration to control or eliminate all protest activity. Lessons from the Academy helped campus leaders better articulate the purpose of the policy, highlighting the need to develop protocol for adverse protest groups, and how Kenyon would ensure the safety of protesters, observers, and visitors to campus during periods of unrest.

The Academy curriculum highlighted the elements that should be incorporated into a protest policy that would both allow for civil protests while ensuring the safety of those protesting and not protesting, as well as the development of civically engaged Kenyon students. The simulation helpfully illustrated how quickly demonstrations can shift as new issues and counterprotests emerge; that speed made the need for prior planning especially acute.

Relatedly, another byproduct of the Academy has been prioritizing communication at the senior staff level. Because two members of Kenyon's core leadership team were high-level administrators, lessons from the Academy have infused decisions at the senior level and its effects have trickled down.

Additionally, three members of the senior staff now participate in KCC, so significant concerns and issues raised in the KCC meetings are relayed to the entire Senior Staff and directly inform conversations within the Division of Student Affairs, the Academic Division, along with the Division of Communications.

Efforts to improve communication have helped campus leaders become more intentional in their interactions with the community, helping them think through questions such as: How do we communicate? With whom and with what frequency do we need to communicate? What medium is appropriate to relay what kinds of information? What information is helpful to share versus not, and what should be shared publicly versus privately?

CONCLUSION

“The idea of putting relationships in place ahead of time to start talking about things in advance, and to keep conversations ongoing was a big takeaway from the Academy Initiative.”

– Ombudsperson, Kenyon College

Like other small communities that emphasize personal connections, there is a sense that everyone knows each other at Kenyon and that the community at large thinks similarly. Kenyon’s culture of kindness is coupled with the often-false assumption that all issues can quickly and collaboratively be addressed through the thoughtful engagement of academic and student leaders at the university.

This assumption crumbled when Kenyon collectively struggled to host constructive conversations to address issues raised by the divisive play. In applying the lessons from the Academy, Kenyon’s core leadership team sought to formalize a mechanism that could be used to consistently identify the pulse of the community in addition to relying on personal relations and informal conversations. The newly instituted KCC fulfills this function, acting as an early warning system for alerting campus leaders to potentially polarizing issues, and formalizing lines of communication to ensure an appropriate response should tensions escalate.

Beyond the KCC, the legacy of participating in the Academy also indirectly informed the development of Kenyon’s protest policy and encouraged more effective communication from senior administrators. The lessons from the Academy were effective in strengthening Kenyon’s processes related to dispute resolution, and Kenyon’s size as a small liberal arts campus likely made it easier to be nimble in instituting change with limited resistance.

However, the Academy is not a panacea. The Academy offers process guidance for communities, not substantive guidance about what solutions might look like. As COVID-19 restrictions relax and this residential campus learns to live in community again, Kenyon will undoubtedly face many opportunities to remain committed to building a better community. The lessons from the Academy can help anticipate and address obstacles to stay the course, but it will be up to the members of the Kenyon community to define and refine who they want to be as a community.

This case study was produced through semi-structured interviews with members of Kenyon College's core leadership group. The authors triangulated information between the interviewees and publicly available primary source documents, when possible, to make general observations and statements. However, specific parts of the case study highlight individual thoughts and insights and indicate them accordingly, where appropriate. We thank our interviewees for their time and contributions to this work.

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Additional resources developed by the Divided Community Project are available at <https://go.osu.edu/dcptoolkit>. For more information about DCP, the resources listed above, or for a copy of Academy curriculum, please email Bill Froehlich at Froehlich.28@osu.edu.