

Campus Table: A Case Study on Cross-Campus Dialogue

Hannah Adams Ingram
Director of Religious Life and College Chaplain
Franklin College

Abstract: In this case study, the chaplain reflects on their role and response to the Hamas attack in Israel in 2023. They serve a small, regional college with a student body that has different political views, though political conversations are not often at the forefront of the campus community. This case study explores how such a context resulted in a different engagement with the events in the Middle East than institutions with more public demonstrations.

Keywords: Israel-Hamas, dialogue, Middle East, cross-campus partnerships, civic engagement

Context

In March 2022, I joined a group of faculty members and counselors to provide a space of learning about what was happening between Ukraine and Russia. Reflections after this event lauded the cross-campus partnership that blended education and attention to mental/emotional well-being in the face of difficult topics. Buoyed by the success of the event, I worked directly with the Dean of the College and the Dean of Students to design Campus Table, an event over lunch where people from all roles on campus would be invited to practice talking about difficult topics in hopes that we would learn skills for dialogue in this laboratory setting, as well as establish a norm on campus that when we need to talk—we could do so at Campus Table. This dream was part of a reimagining of what was historically held as chapel time in the campus schedule. We launched Campus Table in Fall 2022, and soon enough, it was time to use this format to address another global conflict.

In October 2023, campuses across the country grappled with the Hamas attack in Israel and Israel's subsequent response. The students at our small, regional liberal arts college in the Midwest raised questions in the classroom and in social settings but did not organize large-scale protests in the same way as students at other, larger institutions. Still, there was a small number of informal student requests for the institution to respond in some way.

Because of the difference in context of our college campus, my advice as the chaplain was to take the time to be thoughtful about how best to accompany the campus community in their journeys to make sense of global conflict and its relationship to individual and collective values, beliefs, and identity of the campus. As a white chaplain convicted by anti-racism training and the Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture collected by Tema Okun, I worried that the temptation to act urgently on a matter that the institution had not previously engaged with could cause more harm than good in the hope of being perceived as morally good.¹ I am not suggesting

¹ "CHARACTERISTICS." n.d. WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE.
<https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>.

that silence is the right course of action in times of injustice, but rather, I am describing a commitment to humble reflection on what work we are called to and when. This answer will vary from campus to campus dependent on mission, demographics, and previous work.

Specifics

The format we had designed for Campus Table went as follows:

- As people entered the room, they were met with an invitation to get food and to find seats. Faculty and staff were asked to spread out amongst students.
- Each session, I would welcome everyone and establish the goals of the event.
- Each session, there would be 15 minutes for a couple invited faculty and staff members to establish a shared context in the room with some information about the topic from their differing disciplines.
- After this, each table would be invited to have small-group conversations that ranged from 4-8 people. The reflection guide they were given contained questions from five different angles with an invitation to start wherever those around the table wanted to start. This allows people from different experience levels to share at their own comfort level.

We had previously used this format to explore ethical consumerism, the good life, community living, wellness culture, and artificial intelligence. Topics are intentionally selected for the potential to have clearly different views and perspectives pertaining to them without being easily partisan divided. In other words, it is essential to the format of Campus Table to have hot topics that might stir passionate disagreement without being about to stereotype someone's potential view based on their political or social leaning. In this way, the community can practice truly listening across difference without turning opinions into straw man arguments based on the hyper-polarization we are experiencing in the United States.

I gathered a small team to consider this format to discuss what is happening in Gaza. This team included a faculty member from political science, religion, and history, in addition to a professor emeritus of history that focused on the Middle East and a staff member from our diversity and inclusion office. I asked this group about what our campus needs most this moment and what it would take to get there. Because our campus is not always high on political/social engagement, and because of concern that students were getting facts only from limited social media accounts, this group agreed that what the campus needed even before dialogue was information and guidance for how to keep seeking trustworthy information.

We decided at that time to address campus with a two-part invitation. First, the campus was invited to an information session where each campus expert had 10-15 minutes to offer a perspective on how we can make sense of what's going on in the Middle East. As chaplain, I introduced this event and served as the main host, but I did not offer my own presentation, instead focusing on helping the other presenters really distill such complex information into something helpful for a student body that is largely unversed in the topic. My main work in this was as coach, supporter, and caregiver throughout a heavy task.

Second, and marketed hand-in-hand with the information session, was the invitation to Campus Table, which would serve as the chance to dialogue with others about what they were learning. I made small shifts to the format of Campus Table given the sensitive nature of this topic at this time. First, instead of starting with 10-15 minutes of shared context building by faculty and staff members, we decided to show an informational video at the beginning of the event. Our team had already shared their information at the previous session, but we needed to make sure to provide context for people who came only to the second event. I was proud of the team that decided they would rather show a video that day than speak again, as they made that decision for pedagogical reasons over any sense of academic ego, which might have pushed for more airtime.

This led to another slight shift in format—we asked specific faculty and staff members to serve as facilitators of each table conversation to help make sure the conversation did not go off the rails and fall prey to religious or cultural attacks. We had a couple of reports of discriminatory comments made in classrooms, and we wanted to take care to encounter challenging conversations without sacrificing security and respect. The team that led the information session anchored most of the individual tables, but we also drew on student affairs professionals to cover other tables.

Takeaways and Ongoing Questions

About 50 people came to this Campus Table session. After the event, I asked some of the faculty and staff members present to send me a reflection of what happened at their tables. These are their direct reflections, shared with permission:

- a. *The conversation at my table was well rounded in receiving a faculty, staff, and student perspectives on the issues. The faculty felt that there needed to be more conversation/involvement on campus surrounding this conflict to not continue the silencing of the conflict existing. The staff expressed feeling fear of the ongoing conflict and what is to come, and the detriment to one's mental health. And the students concluded in wanting to make more of a conscious effort to show their support in recognition of the conflict. While there were differing views, everyone was respectful and appreciated hearing one another's perspective.*
- b. *Our table first focused on what students had heard about the conflict in Gaza—were they following it on social media, the news, discussing the situation in classes? We then had an interesting discussion comparing their access to information about Gaza to their access to information about the war in Ukraine. Students noted that they simply heard more about Ukraine than Gaza and had interesting reasonings why—US allies, US/Russian aggression, charismatic leadership. There were also interesting comments discussing how they could see an end to the war in Ukraine but how the situation in Gaza seemed to have no solution.*
- c. *It was so lovely. It was the most engaging conversation I've had at Campus Table, which I don't think I would have expected given the topic and just how complex it is. The students led the conversation, and I can't get over how precious and sincere they were. We spent a lot of time talking about social media and the role it*

plays, as well as US news sources/politics and often their bias toward Israel. Also that helpless feeling of what can we possibly do? And it being far away, easier for us to ignore, though not because we don't care. Someone talked about the difference between news reports vs. citizens of Palestine or Israel who post on TikTok who are there, living it. They wished they talked about more things like this in class.

- d. I asked my table to explore whichever of the prompts spoke to them. Several spoke to identity while others spoke to their experience and knowledge. This fostered opportunity for each member of the table to relate how they felt connected to Israel-Hamas Conflict. The discussion ranged from personal experiences in the area and knowing Israelis and Palestinians to what they heard on the news and knowing Jews and Muslims. Much discussion centered on how they received their news (mostly social media). The discussion wound through how they might help (donations to non-aligned organizations) and how we might find a resolution that honors both sides.*
- e. As I mentioned after the gathering, our conversation was really great! There was candor and vulnerability. There was a great mix of students, faculty, and staff coming together to try to grow in understanding and empathy! We wrestled with some hard things together and did it with respect. All of us made sincere commitments to keep learning and growing as we moved on from that hour.*

I was encouraged by these reflections because of the work we did to build up to this event, both specifically with the information session and more broadly with the construction and investment in the Campus Table series generally. Talking over shared bread is not a new idea in religious circles by any stretch of the imagination, and yet, it still proves to be an effective way to ask people to engage with one another across difference. While I knew doing this series over lunch would be helpful on a philosophical level, it was actually a pragmatic choice born out of student complaint that they could not attend events in the “free” 11 o’clock hour without missing time for lunch. So, we provided lunch so they could come.

It will come as no surprise to my higher ed colleagues that the ongoing question and challenge in such work is one of capacity—we know we can provide meaningful content, but our campuses are often over-scheduled and optional programming is hard to embrace when you are tired, overwhelmed, or just burnt out. Most of my chaplaincy work currently pushes people to more rest and more space for the sake of spiritual well-being, so there is a constant give-and-take involved in asking anyone to participate in chapel programming. That is why Campus Table was created as a cross-campus initiative between academic and student affairs, rather than living simply in religious life.

Lastly, I continue to ponder my role on a campus that is not always activated as hotly about social and political issues. I have deep commitments as a person of faith, but I am also deeply committed to my vocational responsibility to accompany folks in their own journey of integrating faith and values and their place in the world without imposing my own. It is an honor

to do this work, but every attempt comes with its own questions about positionality, responsibility, and call to justice.

Rev. Dr. Hannah Adams Ingram has served as the Director of Religious Life and College Chaplain at Franklin College for over seven years. She is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ and author of *The Myth of the Saving Power of Education* (2021).