

CHARLES KOCH INSTITUTE



New Grant Supports Civil Dialogue

There are few points in American history where public opinion has been as sharply divided as it is at present. Vigorous debate — especially on controversial topics — is increasingly difficult. Polarization, paired with a tendency to seek information exclusively from ideologically friendly sources, has reduced the likelihood that undergraduates will encounter opinions that they oppose. Consequently, their own views are never interrogated and they are more likely to succumb to confirmation or selection bias. How do we, as speech and debate professionals, create forums where opposing viewpoints can be considered in a thoughtful and civil way?

One answer is to use humor as a vehicle to encourage audience members to set aside their own predispositions and to consider opposing viewpoints. Thanks to a generous grant of nearly \$100,000, The Charles Koch Institute has enabled The Theater of Public Policy (T2P2) and Pi Kappa Delta to promote civic engagement and open debate on college campuses. The Charles Koch Institute (CKI) shares PKD's commitment to free speech and open inquiry. Their mission statement reads, in part: "Freedom of speech and expression are essential for individual flourishing and a truly free society. They allow us to explore, learn, and innovate in ways that challenge both ourselves and the status quo. Free speech and academic freedom are at the core of a thriving marketplace of ideas and are essential to lasting freedom from oppression." Like Pi Kappa Delta, CKI is a non-partisan, 501(C)(3) non-profit organization and it does not endorse political candidates or engage in electoral politics.

The Theater of Public Policy is an innovative theater troupe whose mission is to engage audiences in serious public policy deliberation by blending expert interviews with improvisational theater and sketch comedy. By making deliberation both interesting and entertaining, T2P2 cast members can transform almost any subject — no matter how dry — into something that audiences will remember long after the event. More importantly, the use of humor encourages audiences to consider opposing points of view while at the same time, discouraging the sort of name calling invective that are all too common in contemporary political discourse.

T2P2 can also offer training for speech and debate teams that will enable them to assume more central roles in promoting civil dialog on campus and that will make them visible to new audiences (and hence, more attractive to prospective recruits). The grant will fund T2P2 performances, workshops and training sessions on PKD campuses across the country. Local hosts need only reserve the space, publicize the event, and help PKD collect audience reaction data for future study. (PKD will provide the forms, and they will already have been cleared for use by an Institutional Review Board). The only expenses borne by local hosts will be lodging costs for the T2P2 cast members during the performance dates. All other costs (food, transportation, payments for the cast-members, etc) will be provided by the grants. PKD and the CKI will also help create publicity materials and write press releases to attract local media coverage. In short, this is a fantastic opportunity for your campus to get a free resource that would normally cost more \$10,000 or more. Rather than shying away from difficult conversations, this grant encourages speech and debate teams to embrace a central role in promoting ethical deliberative dialogue on their campuses, and in modeling "The Art of Persuasion, Beautiful and Just." I hope you will seriously consider hosting a performance. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions or need more information.

Phillip Voight

Showcasing the Art of Persuasion, Beautiful and Just *and Funny*

An innovative group is working to get more students at colleges and university students across the country to say “Yes, and...” to speech and debate programs.



The Theater of Public Policy on stage for a show with Congressman Keith Ellison.

The Theater of Public Policy (T2P2 for short) is an improv comedy troupe that brings hard, “thinky” topics and debates to life on stage. Their unique shows mix thoughtful conversations or debates with experts and unscripted comedy improv. National media have called it, “What would happen if C-SPAN was suddenly invaded by SNL,” and “The Millennial answer Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.”

“It’s a way to attract new audiences to forums,” explained co-founder Tane Danger. “Getting students to a 90 minute debate on state tax policy might be a tough sell, but if an improv show is part of it, a whole new crop of folks turn out.”

This academic year, T2P2 is looking to bring its troupe to campuses across the country for one or more of their unique program offerings.

Flagship Show on Challenging Topics

The Theater of Public Policy’s Flagship/interview show can facilitate more successful public talks on controversial or challenging subjects. These shows start with an on-stage interview with an expert or panel on a particular issue. Then the cast of T2P2 re-imagines the topic through unscripted comedy.

The interview element and the promise of improvised interpretation is an unconventional format that opens audiences up to hearing from people with whom they might otherwise just ignore or be hostile towards. T2P2 has used this format to facilitate respectful and thought-provoking talks by speakers on issues like 2nd Amendment rights for people of color, free-market energy and education policies, and challenges to modern feminism.

Improv Café Shows for Student/Faculty Dialogue

T2P2 has created a show format they call the “Improv Café,” in which an audience—students and faculty—are arranged around tables. The show host asks each table to talk amongst themselves around several pre-planned prompts.



“What is most important to you about your education?”

“What is one thing you wish were different about the school?” etc.

As the groups discuss these questions, the cast of T2P2 fan out and embed themselves at different tables where they absorb and collect stories. Then

the cast of T2P2 take the stage, bringing all the stories and anecdotes they have heard with them. Those stories are the inspiration for T2P2’s improv performance. The performance reflects back the real thoughts/ideas of other individuals that might otherwise be lost or ignored making for a highly democratic and entertaining community conversation.

Student Debate Shows

The Theater of Public Policy is adept at taking varied and sometime opposing points of view and bringing them to life on stage. For college campuses with an active speech and debate program, T2P2 hosts events where students formally debate a proposed motion. What’s different is that each team have a small cast of improvisers allied with them.

After the formal verbal debate, the cast of improvisers illustrate the ideas presented and argued through unscripted theater. The promise of improv brings new audiences to a formal debate.



Speech and Debate Team Workshops

"The workshop was incredibly fun and educational. It brought people out of their shells, and forced them to take into account the people around them. Our students broke out of their comfort zones and reached new places in their personal growth " - Hamline University

Improv trains you to think on your feet, grapple with loads of incoming information, and communicate complex ideas to an audience. T2P2 has led workshops previously for college speech and debate teams and intends to bring it to more broadly to colleges this year.

These workshops lead speech and debate students through exercises that T2P2 cast use in rehearsals to hone their skills as improvisers. After each exercise, a T2P2 trainer deconstructs the skills to show how they are valuable for those practicing speech and debate.

For more information about The Theater of Public Policy and bringing them to your campus for a show, workshop, or both, contact co-founder Tane Danger at Tane@t2p2.net or by phone (612) 304-8153.

Are you interested in hosting a Theater of Public Policy Event on your campus?

Please contact either Phillip Voight at pvoight@gustavus.edu (651) 492-8449 or Tane Danger at T2P2.net (612) 304-8153 for more information about bringing the Theater of Public Policy to your campus. Pi Kappa Delta is currently scheduling T2P2 performances during both the Fall and Spring semesters. Don't worry if you don't have a clearly formed topic idea in mind, Pi Kappa Delta and T2P2 will work with you to determine a topic that meets your needs. We will also help book local and national experts that can serve as panelists.

What do you need to provide? Travel and most other costs associated with the visit will be covered by the grant. Local hosts need to provide hotel rooms for the T2P2 cast (usually for one night), book the performance space, publicize the event on campus, and assist PKD with collecting audience reactions to the performance.

We will help you think of a good topic for the event and locate experts that can participate.

Application Form:

PKD Chapter Sponsor Name: _____

Chapter Address/School: _____

E-Mail Address: _____

Office: () _____ - _____ **Home/Cell:** () _____ - _____

Nearest Airport: _____

Campus newspaper contact information:

Local newspaper contact information:

I am interested in (check all that apply):

____. **Improv Café for Student/Faculty Dialog**

____. **Student Debate Show**

____. **Speech and Debate Team Workshop**

____. **Flagship T2P2 Show on Challenging Topics**

What topics would work well on your campus?

What local or campus experts should we contact as panelists?

Please submit electronically to: pvoight@gustavus.edu or mail to:

Phillip Voight

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