

## Civic Conversations - Building Relationships one Conversation at a Time

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*By Maggie Woods, NC State University.*

North Carolinians are feeling more disconnected than ever. And in this increasingly polarized time, we are less able to talk to each other. That's a problem.

Historically, **we have been socialized NOT to talk about issues that may be divisive**. We are told we shouldn't talk about politics and religion, so we don't, and we avoid conflict at all costs.

And now we find ourselves unable to engage with coworkers, unable to talk with friends, and certainly unable to have a conversation with our uncle at Thanksgiving dinner (yes, everyone has *that uncle*).

At the [Institute for Emerging Issues at NC State University](#), we are trying to address this disconnection through the [ReCONNECT NC](#) series, and through a newly launched initiative called [Civic Conversations](#).

### ***What do we mean by 'civic conversation'?***

**A civic conversation simply means a dialogue across difference.** We're inviting people from different backgrounds and perspectives to spend time together in real and rich conversation in which all listen first to understand. Such conversations across difference are all too rare amidst the rising rancor and deepening division plaguing society. But we seek to make them the norm in North Carolina.

### *What is the format?*

The conversations may be casual, one-on-one or in small groups, and cover any topic of interest. They can also be more formal, facilitated events. We know there are many ways to engage in these conversations, and many kinds of methods. The goal is to reconnect with fellow North Carolinians, learn from each other, build relationships, and identify opportunities to bridge divides in our state.

### *Examples of successful civic conversations in North Carolina*

Civic Conversations come in all shapes and sizes. I've outlined two below but there are many others:

1. **Better Angels:** [Better Angels](#) is a national citizens' movement to reduce political polarization in the United States by bringing liberals and conservatives together to understand each other beyond stereotypes. They have a North Carolina coalition that runs Red/Blue skills building workshops throughout the year. Check out this blog post about a [May 2019 workshop in Pittsboro](#)
2. **Jefferson 'lunches':** [Jefferson dinners](#) was developed by Thomas Jefferson to explore topics from many different perspectives. This format can be adapted for many groups. I recently attended a teacher training program run by Julie Pittman, a local teacher, in Rutherfordton that is using Jefferson dinners (or lunches, since they are held over lunch) to

engage teachers, students and community members in conversations about important community issues. For example, the session I attended in May was focused on workforce development and utilizing the community college as a community asset.

### ***Next Steps: How YOU can get INVOLVED!***

We are kicking off Civic Conversations on **August 14th, which we are deeming ReCONNECT NC Day!**

ReCONNECT NC Day is a day for North Carolinians of diverse backgrounds and perspectives to rally around conversations that create greater connection. Through in-person and virtual conversations from the mountains to the coast exploring any topic of interest, people of all stripes will listen first to understand and revitalize North Carolina together.

**We are looking for people and organizations across the state to join us by hosting a civic conversation on August 14th? Will you join us?**

Are you a beginner, but want to get involved? We suggest starting with some of these methods:

- [Living Room Conversations](#),
- [Jefferson Dinners](#), and
- [Civic Dinners](#).

[Click here](#) For more information on Civic Conversations, ReCONNECT NC Day, and how to get involved.



## **Maggie Woods is a Policy and Program Manager at the Institute for Emerging Issues**

Prior to joining IEI, Maggie was the Senior Program Coordinator for International Academic Programs at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy, where she managed four programs in five countries. Maggie has served many capacities in the nonprofit and public policy sectors. She's worked as a consultant on education access programming, was a policy intern at the International Labour Organization in Geneva, Switzerland, and served two years as an AmeriCorps VISTA where she developed college readiness programs. Maggie is the current co-leader of the Triangle AmeriCorps Alums chapter, and holds a Master of Public Policy from Duke University and a Bachelor of Arts in International Studies from California State University, Long Beach.