



essential PARTNERS

DONOR NEWSLETTER

A QUARTERLY UPDATE FOR OUR ESSENTIAL PARTNERS | WINTER 2025

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Meet our New Staff Member, Kaelyn!

It's been a remarkable year since I joined this organization as Essential Partners' Development Manager. I've gained a profound understanding of dialogue's ability to transform fractured communities, enabling them to collaborate, build trust, and develop solutions rooted in shared values. The celebration of our 35th anniversary this past December highlighted Essential Partners' significant contributions as a cornerstone of the global dialogue movement.

What's truly striking is the universal need for connection and trust, regardless of political leanings, geographic location, or personal identity. We're experiencing a heightened demand for our services as communities grapple with national and global challenges.

Our approach remains to empower local communities to address local challenges, strengthen democratic engagement, and cultivate resilience against polarization. We don't seek to sway opinions; we equip communities to find their own solutions, fostering an environment where neighbors can engage respectfully across differences.

The power of this work is undeniable, and I'm honored to be a part of it. I extend my sincere gratitude to our donors for their unwavering support, which allows us to expand our accessibility and impact, and meet the increasing need for our expertise in conflict resolution and reflective dialogue.



Thank you for your support!
With gratitude,

Claire Lindsay
Development Manager, Essential Partners

DONOR IMPACT SPOTLIGHTS



ESSENTIAL PARTNERS HOSTS INAUGURAL BIPOC COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE GATHERING

On December 18th, Essential Partners convened its inaugural Community of Practice BIPOC Gathering, a 90-minute webinar designed to engage and connect with BIPOC community members.

This initiative was spearheaded by EP's Community of Practice liaison, Winnie Rugamba, who sought to understand how diverse communities interact with EP's approach. In recent years, EP has strategically expanded its reach to diverse populations, focusing on ensuring its work is culturally relevant and accessible across various norms and languages. This includes adapting the language and application of EP's methods to resonate within specific community contexts.

EP has made significant investments in supporting its Community of Practice through expanded resources, such as free consultations, peer learning webinars, and office hours. To foster deeper engagement with BIPOC communities and organizations, EP explored strategies to build more meaningful relationships. The concept of consistent one-on-one coaching emerged as a potential avenue to better understand how BIPOC individuals utilize EP's approach and identify areas for tailored support.

The inaugural BIPOC webinar was launched as part of the peer learning series and aligned with EP's strategic goal of initiating one-on-one coaching with 6-8 BIPOC community members. The event garnered significant interest, with 20 attendees, including current and former associates, new clients, Open Enrollment Workshop participants, and those involved in past micro-trainings. This demonstrated a clear need for dedicated spaces and community for BIPOC practitioners.

The webinar's primary objectives were to facilitate connection, introduce EP's associates of color, and explore participants' experiences with EP's approach. Discussions centered on how attendees connected with EP, their positive experiences, and the challenges they faced in implementing the approach within their specific contexts. The event successfully created a safe space for participants to raise questions, share experiences, and celebrate the impact of EP's work within their communities. Attendees appreciated the focus on the intersectionality of identities and the recognition of multiple identities within BIPOC communities.

This webinar served as a crucial step towards initiating the one-on-one coaching series, with three participants already signed up. EP plans to continue this initiative, hosting quarterly gatherings to further explore the questions and themes raised during the inaugural event.

OPEN ENROLLMENT WORKSHOP HIGHLIGHT: BUILDING RELATIONSHIP WITH A LOCAL LEADER

Essential Partners believes dialogue should be accessible to everyone. Through donor-funded Open Enrollment Workshops, we share our dialogic approaches globally, empowering communities to build stronger social fabrics. We offer scholarships to under-resourced communities, equipping them with the tools to facilitate vital conversations. Our alumni join a global Community of Practice, receiving ongoing support and learning opportunities.

These workshops connect us with inspiring individuals like Wendy Tuck, a Parkersburg, West Virginia councilperson. Parkersburg, grappling with industrial decline and environmental concerns, faces deep community divisions. Three years ago, Wendy used EP-designed conversation starters in Cortico and Deloitte-funded listening sessions on energy transitions in Appalachia. In St. Mary's, WV, residents with opposing views on a coal power plant engaged in their first meaningful dialogue.

“ I noticed right away that using dialog as an entry into group discussions set a qualitatively different tone that carried through the whole evening. Using the stories and conversation starters provided by Essential Partners built relationships, created awe and wonder, and awakened empathy and interest. We also found many many more ideas, values, and experiences in common. A simple query about sharing a time you felt Parkersburg was a vital and liveable city brought both the nostalgia of shopping with grandparents, but also an awareness of sharp racial fears that existed and still exist in the community.

— Wendy

Now, as a city councilperson, Wendy continues to use EP's methods. She and EP's co-Executive Director, John Sarrouf, have hosted "office hours" for community members, fostering deeper engagement. Essential Partners is proud to be a catalyst for positive change in Parkersburg, demonstrating how our open source opportunities can seed growth and build movements.

SHENANDOAH UNIVERSITY TRANSFORMS CAMPUS CULTURE WITH REFLECTIVE STRUCTURED DIALOGUE

Since 2017, Shenandoah University has embedded Reflective Structured Dialogue into its curriculum and campus life, spurred by a need to address divisive issues following the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally. A group of faculty members attended one of EP's Open Enrollment Workshops, and as a result launched Shenandoah Conversations, integrating RSD into undergraduate education and extracurricular activities.

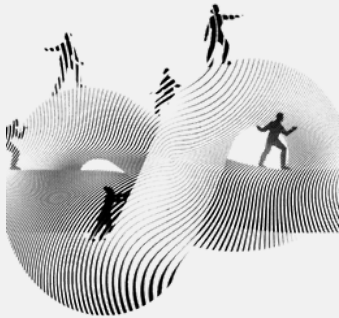
The program's impact is significant: over 150 faculty members are trained in RSD, 3,400+ students have participated, and 275+ students are trained as dialogue facilitators. RSD has become integral to SU's culture, enabling constructive conversations on sensitive topics. Faculty like Jonathan Noyalas use RSD to navigate controversial historical issues, fostering a safe environment for students to explore complex perspectives. "RSD has been the most transformative thing in my 21 years of teaching," Noyalas states. Other departments, from chemistry to music therapy, utilize RSD to enhance collaboration and create inclusive learning spaces.

Shenandoah Conversation's motto, "Be understood. Be understanding," reflects the program's success. An October 2023 dialogue focused on the conflict in Israel-Gaza highlighted the program's ability to foster connection amidst conflict. "The cultural shift spurred by the university's commitment to RSD was the only reason that I had the faith to hold such an event at Shenandoah at that time," Minister reflects. Shenandoah University's partnership with Essential Partners has fundamentally transformed its campus, creating a culture of respectful dialogue and understanding.

Read our full [Impact Story on Shenandoah University](#)



EP IN THE NEWS!



OPENING UP: A CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION PODCAST, "STRUCTURED DIALOGUE & HIGHER EDUCATION"

Join Meg Griffiths, Essential Partners' Director of Programs, as she shares her insights on Middlebury College's "Opening Up: A Conflict Transformation Podcast."

Drawing on 15+ years of experience and EP's ongoing partnership with Middlebury's Engaged Listening Project, Meg discusses the power of dialogue to enhance student learning and strengthen campus communities. This episode delves into how EP's dialogic practices disrupt limiting patterns and navigate common critiques within the conflict transformation field.

[Listen Here](#)

CO-ED JOHN SARROUF DISCUSSES DIALOGUE WITH TOGETHERUP INSTITUTE



[Watch Here](#)

The TogetherUp Institute advances local voice and belonging through a science-driven, practical approach. They focus on three core areas: equipping leaders and citizens to build inclusive communities, advocating for the connection between belonging and resilience, and aligning best practices for impactful belonging initiatives.

TogetherUp's "Reimagining Us" podcast, episode 6 featured Ep's co-ED John Sarrouf. In the episode, John explains that dialogue, unlike typical conversations, prioritizes mutual understanding over debate. It explores diverse perspectives and avoids defensive patterns, skills accessible to everyone.



MEET OUR NEW PROGRAM COORDINATOR, KAELYN KAM!

We're thrilled to announce that Kaelyn is joining the Essential Partners team as our new Program Coordinator! Kaelyn will play a vital role in streamlining our program operations, ensuring smooth coordination between our internal staff, associates, and facilitators.

With her expertise in organizational efficiency, Kaelyn will be instrumental in managing our diverse projects across the country, helping us to maximize our impact. She will also contribute to grant management, strengthening the vital connection between our funding sources and the transformative work we do in communities.

We feel incredibly fortunate to welcome Kaelyn to the Essential Partners family. Her extensive experience, combined with her warm and engaging personality, makes her a perfect fit for our team and for those we serve.

She thrives at the intersection of organization, collaboration, and creativity. With a passion for turning ideas into impactful programs, Kaelyn has spent her career ensuring that every detail of an initiative aligns seamlessly with its broader vision.

Rooted in a background that spans operations, event management, and customer success, Kaelyn graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Marketing from West Virginia University. She brings both technical expertise and a genuine enthusiasm for people-focused work, believing in the power of organization to drive progress and fostering collaboration to achieve common goals.

Based in Virginia Beach, Kaelyn enjoys putting together puzzles and visiting local restaurants. Please join us in giving Kaelyn a warm welcome! She can be reached via email at kaelyn@whatisessential.org.

THANKS FOR READING—AND FOR SUPPORTING OUR MISSION.

