



***CATALYST*NU**

**2024 - 2025
IMPACT REPORT**



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BACKGROUND CONTEXT

CatalystNU: Conversations that Transform is a program that was designed to address two fundamental problems: (1) increasing polarization and unwillingness to engage across difference, and (2) lack of skills to engage meaningfully with one another in dialogue. Put simply, many of us don't want to and don't know how to have hard conversations. The premise of the program was that how we talk to one another is more important than what we talk about—especially when we deeply disagree with one another—and we can learn how to do this well. The purpose is not to avoid uncomfortable dialogue but to embrace it by being thoughtful about the processes we use.

The CatalystNU internal leadership team included Michelle Manno (Office of Community Enrichment), Sarah Klaper (Office of the Ombudsperson), Adam Goodman (Center for Leadership), and Janet Walzer and Charles Kellom (Human Resources). This team met over the Spring and Summer of 2024 to discuss a plan for bringing a program like this to the Northwestern community. They engaged three external consultants and experts in negotiation and conflict resolution—Naseem Khuri, Jayne Nucete, and Rob Wilkinson (full bios available upon request)—to design a multi-session program providing learning and skill development related to dialogue, conflict, behavior patterns, deep listening, power differences, divisive issues, and more.

What resulted was a sustained and comprehensive six-part program featuring three (3) required full-day workshops led by our external facilitators, three (3) optional half-day workshops led by the CatalystNU internal team, and ongoing resource sharing throughout the program. Workshops included formal presentations, interactive exercises, small and large group discussion, and role play. CatalystNU launched in January and ended in June 2025, engaging faculty and staff across 11 Northwestern schools and most of its major administrative units.

As you will read in this report, **CatalystNU was a success by any number of measures. It was a true partnership, and a university-wide investment. It brought eager participants together with world-renowned experts to produce tangible results—increased learning, enhanced skill development, and better relationships.** We are confident that the benefits of this program will last for years to come.

CatalystNU was generously funded by the Office of Community Enrichment, the Office of the Ombudsperson, the Center for Leadership, Human Resources, the Office of the Provost, and the Office of the President. Special thanks to Leona Quist for their many hours of behind-the-scenes work to make this program happen.



BRAND DEVELOPMENT

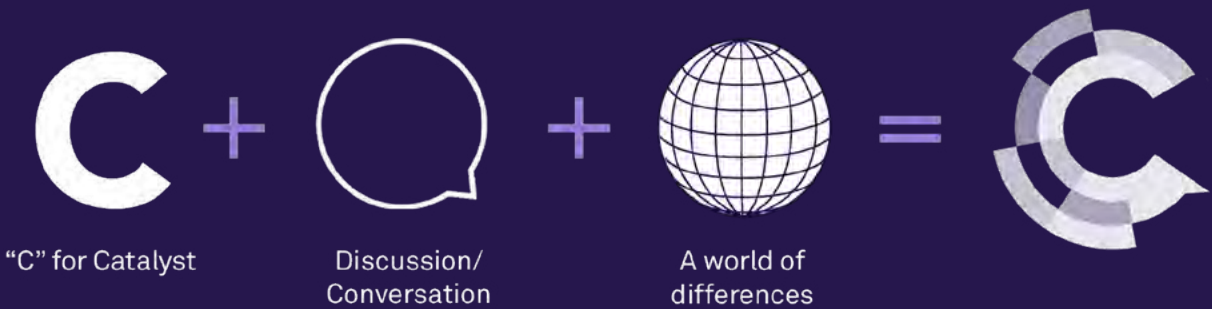


By Anthony McCray, Communications Specialist
in the Office of Community Enrichment

The CatalystNU visual identity was designed to reflect the program’s focus on dialogue, transformation, and connection. The logo combines three key elements: (1) the letter C for *Catalyst*, (2) a speech bubble representing conversation and the program’s tagline “Conversations that Transform,” and (3) a globe symbolizing dialogue across differences and cultures.

The color palette pulls from Northwestern’s brand identity, anchored by the Northwestern Purple and complemented by lighter and darker shades of purple, blue, and black to maintain a strong institutional connection while introducing a sense of depth and uniqueness.

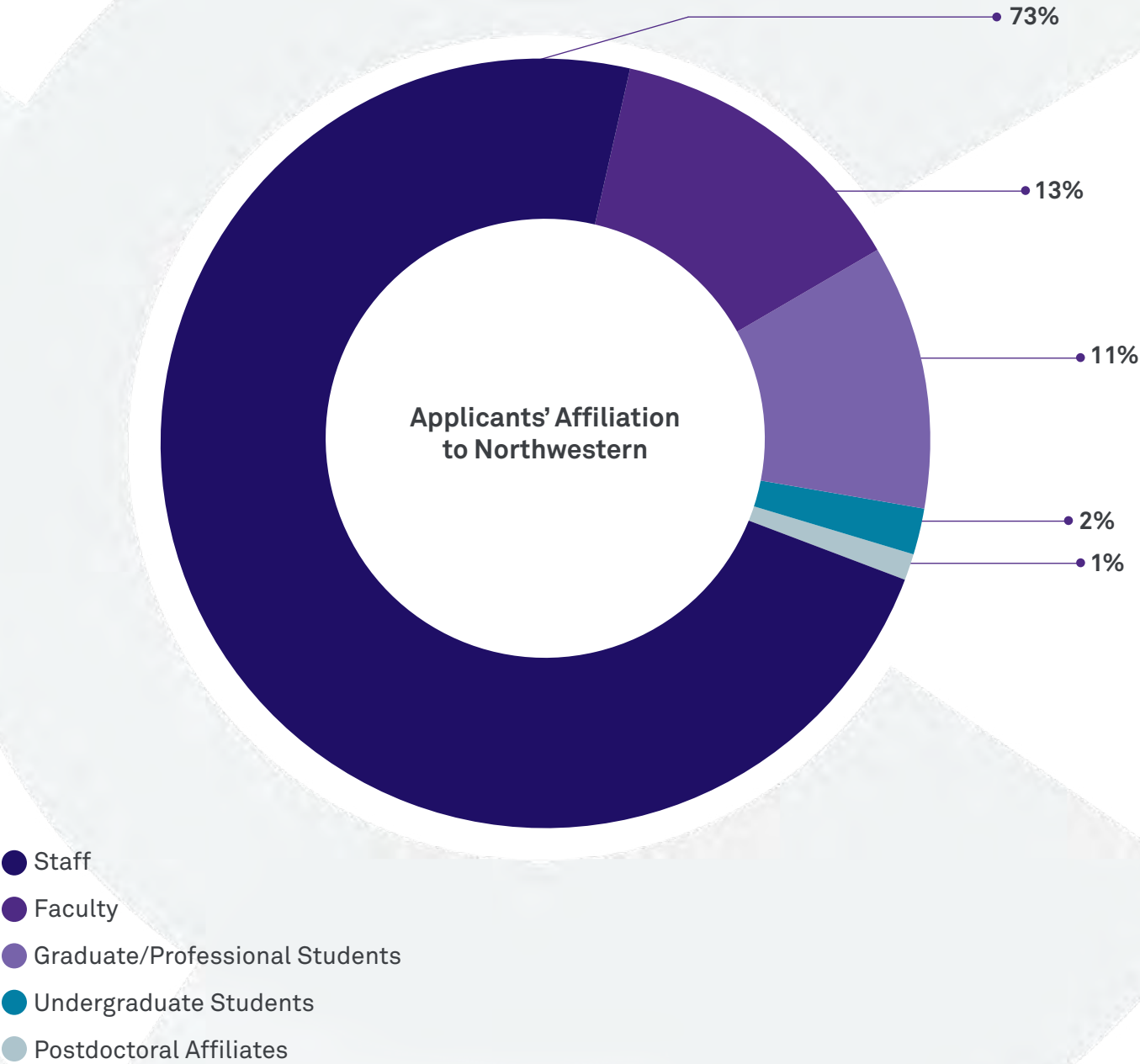
Together, these elements establish a modern and purposeful brand that visually communicates CatalystNU’s aim to equip participants with the skills to engage in meaningful dialogue across perspectives.



APPLICANTS

There were 127 applicants to the CatalystNU program. Staff, by far, made up the largest group among the applicants. Almost three-quarters of the applicants identified as staff members. The next largest group consisted of faculty who made up roughly 13.4% of the applicant pool. However, faculty, staff, postdocs, graduate, and undergraduate students are all represented across the applicant pool.

Overall, applicants came from 24 different academic or administrative units across Northwestern's three campuses. Applicants for the program represented 11 of the 12 academic units, and there were 16 different units (school/college or administrative unit) that had more than four people who applied to the program.



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APPLICANTS FROM 24 ACADEMIC AND ADMINISTRATIVE UNITS APPLIED TO THE PROGRAM
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ASSESSMENT DESIGN

The learning objectives and outcomes for the program were used as a framework for assessment. In addition to learning about overall satisfaction with their experiences, we assessed the learning and skill development of participants. To that end, the research questions guiding the overall assessment of the CatalystNU program were:

- 1. How are CatalystNU participants growing in their knowledge and application of dialogue skills?
- 2. How, if at all, are participants (students, faculty, and staff) using their skills in their Northwestern environments?

The assessment plan for the program used a logic model to understand, organize, and structure the connections between resources, activities, and desired outcomes. Based on the logic model, we designed an assessment plan that included a mixture of quantitative and qualitative data and a plan for collecting data over the course of the program.

50%

matched response rate based on survey responses from participants on both the pre-test and post-test surveys.

Thematic qualitative coding resulted in

23

unique codes across each of the 8 timepoints.

Surveys included both **quantitative scale questions** and **short answer questions** which were qualitatively coded.

6

short surveys administered after each full-day and half-day workshop.

Field notes obtained from **seven-hour observation** of workshop 2.

91

faculty and staff participated in the program.

349

survey responses from participants across 8 different timepoints.



"I was ready to feel change in how I operate professionally, but I've been really pleased to find how frequently I'm using these skills in my conversations with people in my personal life. I patched things up and found a way forward with someone I haven't spoken to in 6 months. I finally understand the intricacies of why an old hard conversation went so off the rails. I feel myself gauging what I want to say based on keeping my original goal in mind, and adjusting to stay on track. Thank you so much for this."

"What a great program! I feel so lucky that I was afforded the opportunity to participate in this experience. Not only did I grow as a person, leader, and Northwestern staff member, but I also made connections that I hope will last for some time."

"This is one of the BEST workshops I've ever attended in my work life. I hope the CatalystNU program continues to be offered in the future."

"It was a phenomenal program. I learned so much. It was well structured and I'm thankful to the University for making the investment."

"I want to sincerely thank you for this opportunity. It has been, hands down, the most enriching program I participated in outside of my department since I started at Northwestern almost 20 years ago. It was refreshing to work with colleagues that do work in a variety of different areas of our campus and I learned a tremendous amount from my time spent in the workshops."

"Thank you for this opportunity. I appreciate the work of the team and the resource commitment from the university to make this cohort possible."

"My role as an NU staff member requires me to interact with others not in my office most frequently through not positive circumstances. Beyond everything I learned through the training, the space to be able to interact with other members of the NU community was so refreshing and wonderful. I left each session feeling energized and excited and this has helped me in my day-to-day work. We have a wonderful community and I am immensely grateful for the space to learn alongside colleagues and interact with so many people I would not ordinarily. THANK YOU!!!"



MAJOR FINDINGS



FINDING 1: GROWTH

Overall, participants' confidence in their dialogue abilities increased over the course of the program. Participants' confidence in bringing complaints to leadership and working to resolve them and discussing divisive issues while maintaining relationships increased the most. Further, most participants who started the program feeling like they had average dialogue skills ended the program feeling above average or high levels of confidence in their skills.

FINDING 2: PREPAREDNESS

Participants consistently felt “quite prepared” to apply dialogue skills after each workshop. They also reported growing confidence in using and applying their skills as time went by in the program.

FINDING 3: COMMITMENT

CatalystNU participants started the program being committed to using their skills in the workplace, and they finished the program with that same commitment—even demonstrating it before the conclusion of the program. After the conclusion of the program, all (100%) of participants said they used the skills they learned in CatalystNU in their work.

FINDING 4: CONFIDENCE

The vast majority of people surveyed concluded the program feeling average or above average/high confidence in their dialogue abilities. However, there were a small slice of participants who concluded the program having below average/low confidence in their dialogue abilities.

FINDING 5: CONNECTION

It was important to participants coming into the program that CatalystNU serves as an opportunity for connecting with others in the Northwestern community. By the end of the program participants consistently shared their gratitude for the sense of community and connection that they felt.

CAMPUS TRANSFORMATION

CatalystNU has had a positive impact on the broader Northwestern community through events, programs, and projects that participants developed as a result of their learning and the connections they've made with co-participants from across the institution.

- Based on overwhelming participant requests, the CatalystNU team will be re-convening the cohort in Fall 2025 to continue learning, build continuity across program years, and reconnect.

- CatalystNU will launch cohort 2 in Winter 2026!

- Inspired in part by CatalystNU, Northwestern's Pritzker Law school developed "The Perspectives Project," a five-day, immersive experience for first-year law students to learn skills related to dialogue, listening, negotiation, and perspective-taking.

As the above examples demonstrate, CatalystNU has not only transformed those who directly participated in the program but will be transforming the broader culture at Northwestern for years to come.



"This was one of the best [programs] that I have attended at NU. It had a very good mix of "why" things happen and very practical approach to "how" to act, interpret, and prepare. It helped me almost immediately after the first session and continues to help me in my work relationships, personal relationships, and mentoring relationships. "

"I really appreciate the energy and dynamic environment this program creates, not just for learning tools, but for practicing real conversations in a safe and supportive setting. It helped me explore different perspectives, be more intentional, and shift how I engage with others. Thank you for making that possible. "

"Wonderful job to all involved! This program came at such a critical time in higher education, when our conversations are so difficult to navigate, and acted as both a needed distraction but also a time of enlightenment and levity. "



CATALYSTNU 2024-25 IMPLICATIONS



By Dr. Hilary Zimmerman, Director of Evaluation and Assessment in the Office of Community Enrichment

From my perspective engaging with the program from an assessment lens, there are three big things that I am taking away from the assessment of the program.

First, the model of a cohort program with semi-frequent in-person engagements works well. This group of 91 CatalystNU-ers demonstrated

high levels of participation in the full-day workshops, optional half-day workshops, and assessment surveys. They maintained their engagement across six in-person gatherings from January through June with only slight levels of drop-off from the beginning to the end of the program. Furthermore, participants are not only asking for opportunities to get together again the future, they are also asking how to bring more people into additional cohorts and expand this community of learners.

On the note of program expansion—we need to spend some time thinking more deliberately about how to engage students, both undergraduate and graduate/professional students. There were a small number of students who applied and were accepted into the program; however, prior to the program those students declined their invitation. Perhaps there is room to offer student-centered cohorts that work at times more friendly to student participation. There are also opportunities to partner with other units across Northwestern who are also engaging in dialogue-centered programming. Units such as, Student Affairs, Human Resources, Center for Leadership, the Ombuds Office, and the Center for Enlightened Disagreement, all work to support dialogue initiatives in unique and necessary ways. Bringing those units together, at times, could provide possibilities for strong partnerships that span silos across the University.

The relationship between learning content and practicing skills was a critical piece of the foundation of this program. The program framed dialogue as a skillset that can be learned, practiced, and honed over time. Participants liked to have opportunities to practice and apply their skills. Additionally, the space to try out concepts in a community of people that were all learning together allowed participants to build confidence in their skills. The confidence built in a safe community then created pathways for them to use their skills in their work environments and share them with others in the Northwestern community. Finding ways to frame things as skills and provide communities of practice is something to pay attention to in the ways the we structure both the future of CatalystNU as well as other programming for students, faculty, and staff at Northwestern.

Finally, the opportunity for people within the Northwestern community to meet new people and work across silos is important. We know that connection is a critical piece of creating a sense of belonging and those things lead to longer retention of both students as well as employees. In a time where many organizations are trying to figure out what community and engagement looks like in a world still navigating the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, perhaps there is something to be learned here from the CatalystNU cohort. Participants were deeply grateful for the time, space, and resources (like swag, food, and parking options) to develop their dialogue skills, and they want others in their communities to get similar experiences. What would it look like to replicate those things in the future on a broader scale?

Things to Observe

① Engagement

- ↳ With others
- ↳ With material
- ↳ With facilitators

② Skills taught

- ↳ What skills are participants learning about convo?
- ↳ How do they demonstrate learning?
- ↳ How do participants think about utility/usefulness of skills?

③ What seems to work well?

- ↳ Why?
- ↳ How do I know this?

What is not working?

- ↳ Why?
- ↳ How do I know this?

Breaking down to parts + order (process)

Embracing "gray area"

I keep visualizing bringing things from binary poles to middle as balance but IDK if that's right

mean.

12:03 → ind. ref., write 3 words about self

① "IF I know nothing else about myself, its that I am a — — — person"

12:10 → Partner ①

↳ F content lecture style in between

Circle back ① + write opposite words

⇒ The up

Descriptives

~ 21 tables w/ 4-5 people * 84 people in attend

3 facilitators w/ projectors * 3 from LT room

Handouts for each person

F: post debrief ?

- ↳ Practices used thru email
- ↳ One person designated diff btw "getting point across" vs "in conflict"
- ↳ "artisting" required to create dialogue

* F: DE? to open up dialogue

- ↳ apply skill w/ world that has Δ < 1st in HE in particular

* "Effective" convos

* Heads nod + smiling @ opening up workshop + moving towards advocacy

* 3/4 of people raised hand when asked to recall ladder of inference ① (Per of prev. wkshp)

* Some people taking notes but most just listening ①

* W do ②

Above displays Hilary's observation notes.

