



**2026 Annual OPCSN Conference**  
**Strengthening Democracy through Civic Engagement & Peacebuilding**

**Friday, February 13, 2026 (9:30AM - 4:30PM)**  
**John Carroll University, University Heights, Ohio**

**(Deadline to register, Feb. 3) Conference Registration Link**

<https://givepul.se/37ri1k>

**OPCSN Conference Hosted by:** John Carroll University’s *Tuohy Center for Interreligious Understanding; Peace, Justice & Human Rights Program; Center for Service Learning & Social Action, and their office of Student Experience & Campus Belonging;* Wilmington College’s Peace Resource Center, & Community Campus Coalition.

**Partners:** The Ohio State University, Divided Communities Project & University of Akron’s Center for Conflict Management

**AGENDA OVERVIEW**

**(See detailed agenda w/workshop summaries below the overview)**

<b>8:30 – 9:30AM</b>	<b>Registration</b>
<b>9:30 – 10:30AM</b>	<b>Welcome Networking, Display Tables &amp; Program/Research Posters</b>
<b>10:30 – 11:40AM</b>	<b>Welcome &amp; Opening Panel: <i>Strengthening Democracy through Civic Engagement &amp; Peacebuilding</i></b>
<b>11:45 – 1:15 PM</b>	<b>Lunch &amp; OPCSN Members Networking Luncheon</b>
<b>1:15 – 2:45 PM</b>	<b>Workshops (Select 1 of 4)</b>
<b>3:00 – 4:30 PM</b>	<b>Workshops (Select 1 of 4)</b>

## **DETAILED AGENDA**

### **8:30 – 9:30 AM Registration**

### **9:30 - 10:30 AM Welcome Networking & Program/Research Posters**

Join us to connect with colleagues and learn about other programs. Learn about the research and projects that faculty, staff, administrators and students are working on in the field.

### **10:30 - 11:40AM Welcome & Opening Panel: *Strengthening Democracy through Civic Engagement & Peacebuilding***

#### **Panelists:**

- Carl Smallwood, Executive Director, Divided Community Project (DCP), Moritz College of Law
- Ashley Nickels, Growing Democracy Project & Associate Professor, Kent State University, School of Peace and Conflict Studies
- John Crowley-Buck, Director, Arrupe Social Justice Scholars Program, John Carroll University

**Moderator:** Jen Batton, Conflict Management Training Instructor, Center for Conflict Management, University of Akron

### **11:45 - 1:15PM Lunch & OPCSN Members Networking Luncheon**

#### **1:15PM – 2:45 PM Workshops**

**Select *ONE* of four (4) options, a 90- minute panel or 90-minute interactive workshop**

#### **Workshop 1 (PANEL format)**

***Examples of Experiential Learning & Service Learning: Integrating Community Peacebuilding into the Curriculum***

This panel includes presenters from the University of Akron (UA) and John Carroll University (JCU) that will share their work. JCU will begin with an overview of the difference between service learning and experiential learning and then students will share examples, followed by related work at the University of Akron.

#### ***A. The Role of Student Leadership in Service-learning and Civic Engagement***

This panelist will explore the role of student leaders in helping students develop a critical consciousness around injustice and motivation to become civically engaged. JCU students will speak first-hand about their experiences in our programs.

**Panelist:** Heather Craigie, Associate Director, Center for Service Learning and Social Action, John Carroll University

***B. Strategies for Effective Community-Engaged Teaching Examining Conflict in the Community***

The Spring 2026 community-engaged class at UA will be discussed. This course examines community conflict related to environmental hazards in the East Akron neighborhood where residents have been in conflict over a waste transfer station and other environmental problems that have shaped their health and community. Working alongside Akron Community Action Network (Akron AN), UA students will conduct research to understand how environmental hazards influence social conflict and health crises.

**Panelist:** Andrea Meluch, Associate Professor, School of Communication, The University of Akron

***C. Connecting Town and Gown through Experiential Learning***

Universities and their surrounding communities often operate in silos, missing valuable opportunities for collaboration. Experiential learning projects can bridge this divide by partnering students with local organizations and government agencies to work on real-world challenges. These partnerships provide students with practical skills and a chance to do meaningful work, while delivering resources to community partners, demonstrating how town-gown collaboration can achieve outcomes neither could accomplish alone.

**Panelist:** Stacey Nofziger, Professor, Director of Undergraduate Studies, Department of Sociology, University of Akron

***Workshop 2 (PANEL format): Creating the Conditions for Positive Change – Media Literacy Tools & Student Led Examples from Advocacy to Use of New Media Formats (Podcasts, Substack & Video)***

***A. Constructive Conversations: Finding Valid Information & How to Use It***

Tired of today's divisive rhetoric and political polarization? Frustrated by misinformation, disinformation, and the fact that lies travel faster than truth? Learn tips for navigating the wide array of news sources and applying respectful and positive communication techniques when discussing hot button issues. Leave with tools to use in the classroom or clubs.

**Panelist:** Jen Batton, Conflict Management Training Instructor, Center for Conflict Management, University of Akron

***B. Voices of Unity: Student-Led Advocacy for Positive Change, Mount Union's Friend's Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) Delegation***

Oftentimes, lobbying is viewed in a negative light. To combat the negative connotation and emphasize its role as a mechanism for positive change, students established a delegation of the Friend's Committee on National Legislation (FCNL) at the University of Mount Union. The chapter engages students from different backgrounds, fostering a space for productive dialogue, learning and understanding, demonstrating the positive impacts while also educating students on the role of activism and civic engagement in their campus community and beyond. Through educational events – seminars, training, virtual lobby visits, letter-writing campaigns - students have an opportunity to interact directly with legislative staff on both sides of the aisle to discuss relevant social issues. Students expanded the impact through educational tabling events and community service projects.

**Panelist:** Emily Krizner, Student, University of Mount Union; Emily Denney, Student, University of Mount Union

### *B. Modeling Civic Dialogue on New Media (Podcasts, Substack & User Created Video) Platforms*

New media (podcasts, Substack, user created video platforms) are a place where civic skills such as dialogue can effectively be modeled. How does one prepare for difficult conversations that will be recorded as a podcast? Examples of how to do this, such as spending time in the beginning of the conversation, building common ground and engaging about conversations about experiences, will be shared. These conversations can not only be civil, but also highly enlightening. Learn how formats, such as long form podcasts, allows for a healthier model of civic dialog for consumers of the media to emulate. Experiences from the student presenter's work as a consultant/non-profit leader engaging in conversations that crossed political and ideological lines recorded as podcasts (*Why Should I Trust You?*) will be included.

**Panelist:** Mark Harris, Student, Master of Applied Politics & TA, Roy Bliss Institute of Applied Politics, University of Akron

### **Workshop 3 (INTERACTIVE Format): *Fishbowl Style Dialogue: Teaching Peace Under Senate Bill 1***

This session will feature a fishbowl conversation on teaching peace in Ohio under current laws and restrictions. This is a time for dialogue, community ideas, and sharing.

**Facilitators:** Johanna Solomon, Assistant Professor, School of Peace and Conflict Studies, Kent State University (KSU); Ashley Nickels, Associate Professor, School of Peace and Conflict Studies, KSU

**Workshop 4 (INTERACTIVE format) Part 1: Sustained Dialogue at Work (\*\*This is part 1 of 2, this is a 3-hour session)**

This session will cover the basics of Sustained Dialogue (SD), SD methodologies, the difference between dialogue, discussion, and debate, and how to ask effective questions. Participants will have opportunities to interact with the material and gain a greater understanding of key terms and concepts for effective dialogue.

*\*\*It is preferred that participants attend both sessions, but not required. Participants attending either session will receive material about SD methodologies, and will leave with dialogue skills that they can implement into their everyday work.*

**Facilitators:** Calloway Kusold, Coordinator for Student Experience & Campus Belonging; Lysette Roman J.D., John Carroll University Wellness Center Coordinator

**3:00 – 4:30 PM Workshops**

**Select ONE of four (4) workshop options. There are 90-minute panels or 90-minute interactive workshops.**

**Workshop 5 (PANEL format): Peace Pedagogy, Theory & Study Abroad Application**

**A. Teaching Peace as a Matter of Justice**

The first panelist will explore the idea of peace as a matter of justice and a pedagogical approach for the development and exercise of citizens' capacities for moral reasoning and judgment regarding potential responses to the basic questions of justice, including resisting injustice. The just conditions necessary for peace are contingent upon the informed participation of democratic citizens who are capable of becoming dynamic agents of justice. This presentation will engage participants in this pedagogy.

**Panelist:** Dale Snauwaert, Professor, University of Toledo

**B. Critical Peace Theory**

This presentation aims to address how we have fallen short in our approach to both being human and engaging in a civil society, using several philosophical ideas: Heidegger's thrownness, domination, and Rawls' Original Position, with secondary points spanning from Ancient Greece and China to contemporary thought. Upon accepting that Heidegger's notion of Thrownness is accurate, and that the point of philosophy/knowledge is the perpetual betterment of humanity, society, life; it becomes apparent that our only path to lasting peace is to start thinking like a species who wants to exist here indefinitely which entails the eradication of domination.

**Panelist:** Bryan Mullins, Assistant Professor of Philosophy, Central State University

*C. John Carroll's Ireland Peacebuilding Program: Immersive Encounters in Peacebuilding in Northern Ireland and the Lessons Students Bring Home*

This session will explore the history and itinerary of a twenty-year program that takes students to Northern Ireland for two weeks to study the Troubles and the long peacebuilding process. Students learn about Northern Ireland's stunning transformation from a society that endured a bloody thirty-year civil conflict ("The Troubles") to one where peace is being forged each day. Students have a transformative experience and bring back reflections on that damage of political violence and the long slow work of peace and reconciliation.

**Panelist:** Phil Metres, Director, Peace, Justice and Human Rights Program, Professor, Department of English

**Workshop 6 (INTERACTIVE format): *Game-Based Dialogue and Bridgebuilding: The Breaking Bread Series Model***

In this workshop, the Bridgebuilding fellows will demonstrate 2 games and receive feedback on how to adapt those activities into fostering political dialogue. The Breaking Bread interfaith lunch series at John Carroll University reimagines campus dialogue by using interactive, game-based activities to foster understanding and build relationships across lines of religious, cultural, and political difference. Through the Bridgebuilding for Campus Leaders grant from Interfaith America, six student fellows will be developing interfaith dialogue games throughout the year.

**Facilitators:** Semiha Topal, Program Manager, Tuohy Center for Interreligious Understanding at John Carroll University; JCU Students - Cooper Eberly, Rasmia Alnadi, Faith Berner, Arthus Azais de Vergenon, Lea Kanbar, Olivia Ziccardi

**Workshop 7 (INTERACTIVE Format): *Growing Democracy: Organizing & Nonviolent Action***

This workshop, co-facilitated by Ashley E. Nickels and Sara Koopman, explores organizing and nonviolent action as democratic practices grounded in everyday civic life. The session examines how communities build power, sustain participation, and navigate conflict through relational, place-based strategies. Participants will engage with practical tools that bridge peacebuilding, grassroots organizing, and democratic renewal.

**Presenters:** Ashley Nickels, Associate Professor, Kent State University, School of Peace and Conflict Studies; Sara Koopman, Associate Professor, Kent State University, School of Peace and Conflict Studies

**Workshop 8 (INTERACTIVE format): *Part 2: Sustained Dialogue (SD) at Work (\*\*This is part 2 of 2, this is a 3-hour session)***

Participants will have opportunities to practice dialogue skills through real time dialogue with one another. Participants will work through the different stages of sustained dialogue (SD) in small groups, allowing them to put the skills they learned in session one to work. Participants will also have the opportunity to brainstorm how they may use these skills in their work.

*\*\* It is preferred that participants attend both sessions, but not required. Participants attending either session will receive material about SD methodologies, and will leave with dialogue skills that they can implement into their everyday work.*

**Facilitators:** Calloway Kusold, Coordinator for Student Experience & Campus Belonging;  
Lysette Roman J.D., John Carroll University Wellness Center Coordinator