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### Building BRIDGES: Fostering dialogue and shared understanding between communities and government agencies

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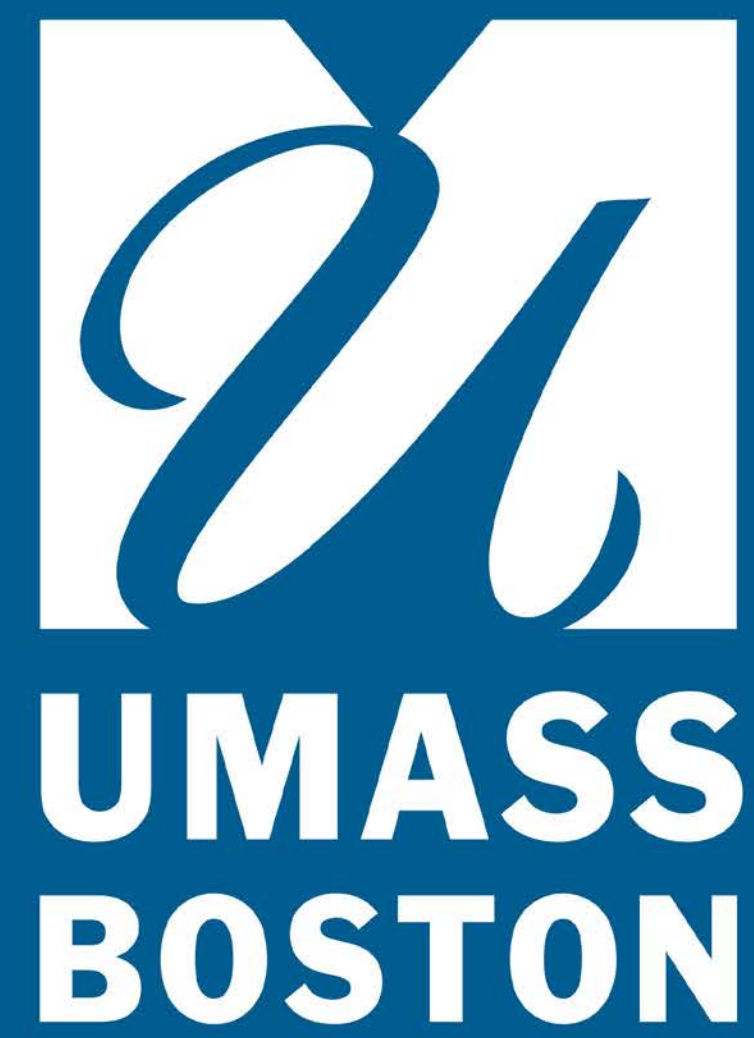
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# Building BRIDGES

Fostering dialogue and shared understanding  
between communities and government agencies

## Summary

Professors Eben Weitzman and Darren Kew of the Department of Conflict Resolution, Human Security, and Global Governance at the John W. McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies are facilitating conversations among state and federal agencies and minority community representatives as a means for fostering shared understanding of the challenges and opportunities inherent to their relationship. Working with the BRIDGES program, they are using group dialogue to help stakeholders build lasting, productive connections.

## Goals and Objectives

Apply conflict resolution and group dialogue theories to assist the BRIDGES program in strengthening connections between state and federal agencies and minority communities in Massachusetts.

Create a forum through which members of minority communities may speak directly with representatives of state and federal agencies to highlight concerns and ask questions.

Provide a platform for state and federal agencies to showcase career opportunities and through which minority community members may learn about careers in civil service.



## Results/Impacts

Ongoing monthly meetings and two large Town Hall meetings have opened lines of communication and allowed for robust, candid discussions around substantive issues.

Both community and government representatives report that progress has been made.

Both parties are committed to continuing dialogue and to extending participation to broader segments of the community.

The dialogue has fostered strong relationships among participants, which have facilitated spin-off activities and provide a platform for future communication and action.

## Approach

Fostering understanding through dialogue

Adaptation of the Open Space Technology of Harrison Owen<sup>1</sup>. Key to this is the “Law of Two Feet”: Participants choose the topics to discuss and move freely among multiple facilitated discussions depending upon what interests them.

<sup>1</sup>Owen, H. (2008). *Open Space Technology: A User's Guide*, 3rd ed. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

## Conclusion/Next Steps

- Dialogue is an effective, but slow, process for building relationships and trust.
- The work to date has yielded important lines of communication, strong relationships, greater mutual understanding, and movement toward shared perspectives.
- The dialogue will continue, enabling the sometimes difficult conversations that are necessary for fostering understanding and cooperation.

## Learn More

For more information about this project or to learn about our graduate programs in conflict resolution, [ww.conflict.umb.edu](http://ww.conflict.umb.edu)