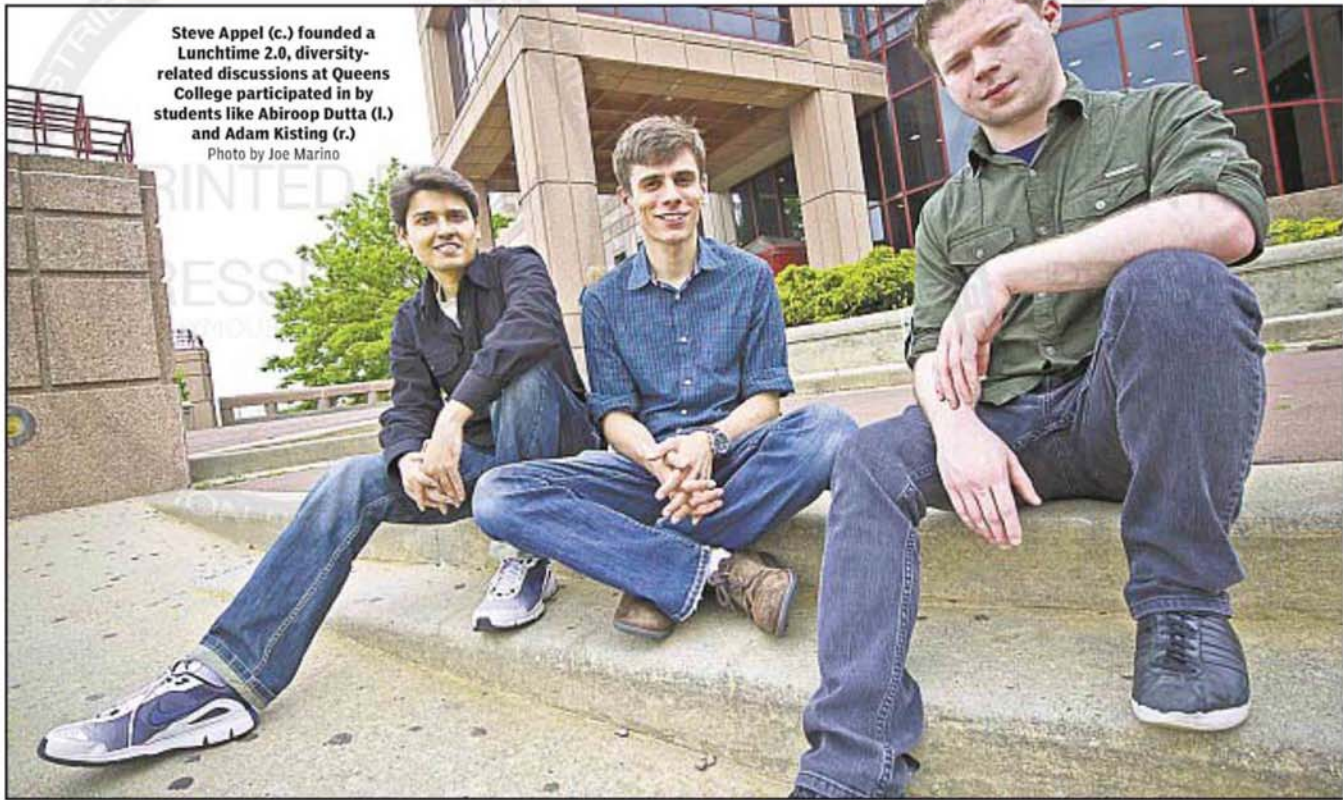


YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

Steve Appel (c.) founded a Lunchtime 2.0, diversity-related discussions at Queens College participated in by students like Abiroop Dutta (l.) and Adam Kisting (r.)

Photo by Joe Marino



What's for lunch? Diversity

A student struggling with the tenets of her Orthodox Jewish faith asks a fellow Jewish student why campus Hillel Club members pray so fervently at meetings.

A female student of Pakistani heritage agrees with a male student from Mumbai, India, that both their native countries would be better off if they dropped the long-running hostilities that have on occasion brought them to the brink of a possible nuclear war.

Welcome to lunch at Queens College.

Lunchtime 2.0 to be exact.

The brainchild of Steven Appel, assistant director of the college's Center for Ethnic, Racial and Religious Understanding, Lunchtime 2.0 is meant to get students at one of the most ethnically diverse colleges in the country talking to each other.

Ultimately, it's about improving civic discourse.

"Civic discourse and civil discourse are lacking in today's society," said Appel. "That is part of what Lunchtime 2.0 is trying to do, increase not only civic discourse, but also the civility of the discourse. We're trying to get people to really listen to each other."

Lunchtime 2.0 started a little over a month ago at the Flushing school, but it's genesis rests, like so many things since, in the rubble of 9/11.

Queens College History Prof. Mark

Rosenblum founded the Center for Ethnic, Racial and Religious Understanding in 2011 after he and a group of students watched the towers fall as they stood on the campus quadrangle.

Rosenblum created a curriculum, "Clash of Civilizations: Meeting of the Minds, America and the Middle East." As part of the course students would have to construct an argument backing a position they opposed, Appel said.

Using grants from the Ford Foundation and the Clinton Global Initiative, Rosenblum created the Center in 2009 on ideas that grew out of that curriculum. The Center now has 25 "student facilitators" and promotes various activities on campus.

Appel, 26, has been assistant director of the Center since graduating three years ago. He said he noticed that as diverse as the campus was, students tend to stay within their own social

groups. Nowhere was this division more apparent than at lunchtime.

"I've always noticed that the cafeteria tends to be pretty clique-ish," said Appel. "Everyone is in their own little bubble. This is not just an issue at Queens College. I have been to college campuses across the country and you see the same thing. People tend to stay within their own group."

"So I was thinking about what mechanism we can develop to fundamental

change college cafeterias."

He named it Lunchtime 2.0 because "Web 2.0 is about increasing interconnectivity between people in cyberspace. Lunchtime 2.0 is aiming to do that in physical space."

Using social media, lunchroom banners and good old word of mouth, Lunchtime 2.0 held its first meeting in April. Interested students met in the Queens cafeteria — there are two in the middle of the campus, but the meeting was in the larger one, Appel said.

The format: two people sat across from each other. Each had seven minutes to verbally answer five questions prepared by Center staff while the other person listened without interrupting.

Questions included What are your most important values and why? What is something you admire about another culture? What is something about another culture you have questions about?

Once each person had answered and listened in turn, both could discuss their answers, share opinions, or go wherever the conversation led them, Appel said.

The simple format is very effective, said Abiroop Dutta, 26, who is about to graduate with a Masters degree in History.

"We're just having a chat," said Dutta. "Neither of us is obligated to agree with the other person. It's an attempt to sort of look at the world through someone else's eyes, and if you want to take something from that experience, it's up to you."

Dutta was born in Calcutta, India and raised in Mumbai. A facilitator with the

Center, he had the conversation with the female Pakistani student who agreed with him that both countries would profit more if they worked together.

"You might think that an Indian and Pakistani getting together, sparks would fly, but this was the good kind," said Dutta, who came to the U.S. in 2006.

"I was surprised that she also thought that the conflict between our two countries should be put aside, that the two countries would actually mutually benefit if they renewed diplomatic relations and developed stronger, amiable ties.

"What it taught me is I had some preconceived notions in my head, and this gave me the opportunity to dispel those notions," Dutta said. "It was a very positive experience."

Adam Kisting, 24, the Center facilitator, who will graduate this year with a political science degree, said as secretary of the Hillel Club, he did not consider how much prayer was going on at the club until his Orthodox Lunchtime 2.0 companion pointed it out to him.

"Lunchtime 2.0 is about building a relationship with someone who you normally would not even get a chance to meet and becoming deeply engrossed in their personal values and ideals," he said.

Appel said he hopes to export Lunchtime 2.0 to other colleges and beyond. "This can work in corporations, in the military, everywhere," he said.

Lunchtime 2.0 Facebook page is <http://www.facebook.com/Lunchtime2.0>

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