



# Informed Discussions

Civil and Respectful  
Communication,  
Discourse & Debate

**A Staff Guide**

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Introduction

Today's students aren't staying silent. Many are eager to make their voices heard and express the depths of their emotions, frustrations and pain related to a variety of issues. And, as someone on the front lines who is known to students — and often trusted — you are likely to be on the scene when difficult campus conversations, protests or contentious debates take place.

Any number of hot-button topics have the potential to start a verbal tussle, from politics to race to social justice concerns and more. Societal issues have become campus issues, spurring community members to action and discussion. We want to encourage students to express themselves — after all, isn't that part of supporting their development during the college years? Yet, we also need to be very concerned about community safety, hate speech, instances of incivility, and how to manage the whole stew effectively and with care.

This guide highlights a variety of awareness-raising how-to strategies for caring campus staff members to employ as they work toward more productive, positive and purposeful campus conversations. We wish you all the best in this important, committed work, as you build citizens of the world who can express their perspectives while also respectfully listening to those of others. Thank you.

“The civility we need will not come from watching our tongues. It will come from valuing our differences.”

— Parker J. Palmer

#### Engaging in Respectful Discourse

- Prepares you for positive participation within the broader society
- Helps you learn to articulate what it is that you believe
- Opens you to other ways of thinking and behaving
- Enables you to proactively address conflicts before they become destructive
- Allows you to be honest while still maintaining civility
- Puts the “agree to disagree” mantra into positive action

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### Facilitating Difficult Conversations

As an educator, you regularly facilitate learning opportunities. When potentially contentious topics such as politics, diversity, social justice and more arise, however, the conversations can sometimes be more difficult and require a certain touch.

Some strategies to help you facilitate these difficult conversations can include...

- Consistently treat everyone with respect, dignity and care.
- Set up ground rules for civil discourse from the very beginning and revisit them regularly.
- Create an environment where participants are encouraged to share honestly.
- Encourage people to be aware of their own biases and assumptions, as well as how these may influence their behaviors and emotions.
- Acknowledge that everyone in the room has past and/or current experiences that impact their views on issues of politics, diversity, social justice and more.
- Keep an eye on body language to assess if someone needs assistance during a difficult conversation.
- Encourage participants to explore their reactions and to find civil ways to express them.
- Make sure equity and inclusion are in play so all participants have an opportunity to contribute and feel heard.
- Acknowledge and validate people's thoughts and feelings, whether you agree with them or not.
- Show students how to argue passionately, yet with respect, so they can learn how to disagree without personalizing their opinions to a specific person, ideology or group.
- Summarize what is being discussed at different intervals so that everyone is on the same page and not just pursuing their own agenda.

#### Improving Your Approach

What three things would you like to do more effectively as a facilitator of difficult conversations?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

- Never operate from a condescending perspective that communicates you are the authority and know so much more than participants do.
- Communicate that you are a work in progress, too, and that you are working to deepen your own cultural competence, awareness and understanding of a variety of issues.
- Redirect conflict when it arises, but don't squelch it. Instead, agree to take a break if things get too heated, with the expectation that everyone will return to the conversation calmer and ready to be civil.
- Hold participants accountable for harmful or offensive comments and behaviors.
- Demonstrate how to respond effectively after making an exclusionary or prejudicial comment — don't just expect that participants will know how to do this.

*Thanks to Laura Betti for some of the ideas adapted here.*

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### Being Prepared

It's natural to expect that you'll be on the frontlines at some point when a difficult conversation comes up, a protest begins, a petition is passed around or some other form of activism kicks in. As such, it makes sense to proactively prepare by enhancing your knowledge in a variety of areas, including...

- Key concerns among today's students — so you're better prepared to help them make sense of hot-button issues that may spur them to take action
- College regulations and local ordinances regarding civil disobedience and protests — so you know when law enforcement may step in
- Campus policies regarding petitions — so other students aren't feeling pressured to sign something they're unsure of or being disturbed by those taking action
- Who should be contacted if the media starts asking you or others questions — so you're following protocol and not unknowingly going off the rails
- How students are using social media — so you can monitor various mediums and help make your colleagues aware of them, too
- Who campus groups are — so you're not caught off guard when a student organization decides to take on a cause
- How your campus handles free speech concerns — so you're not squelching anyone's constitutional rights while also following campus policies that may be in place regarding free speech zones and the like
- What constitutes hate speech and how your campus addresses it — so you're spreading accurate messages when interacting with students and fully supporting those who are being targeted
- What your department expects — so you're looping in the appropriate people, supporting departmental protocols and communicating effectively

#### What To Do When a "Hot Button Issue" Comes to Campus

- Hold an in-service for staff on "how to meet the needs of others during volatile times"
- Involve ALL staff in the effort to address students' needs, including support staff
- Watch out for your staff members' emotions, as well as your students'
- Ensure that all staff/students know emergency plans and procedures, as well as the guidelines for student protests
- Talk with staff about appropriate contact with the media (is there a specific protocol for staff on your campus?)
- Help spread the word when other offices do programs
- Address biased comments and teach staff members how to do so, too
- Sponsor educational campaigns to learn the truth about the issue at hand
- Focus on your own emotions and fears, too, instead of pushing them aside... you're entitled!

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### Agreeing to Disagree

We've all heard the mantra of "let's agree to disagree," yet do students fully understand what this means? In today's climate of uncivil discourse, where video games, reality shows and anonymous social media posts sometimes portray the worst in people, it's even more important that we show students that they *can* agree to disagree — and still like and respect the people with whom they're disagreeing!

Disagreements can be good for students. They offer an opportunity for them to practice articulating their views and opinions, while also encouraging them to listen to those of others. The key really is agreeing to disagree in a respectful, open-minded manner. You can help students understand what goes into that by focusing on some key topics, such as...

**Engagement.** Just because people have differences of opinion, they can still let other people know that they're interested in hearing their thoughts and perspectives. This involves engaging with people, rather than writing them off due to their different views. Encourage students not to avoid the tough topics. They can learn a great deal by engaging with others and having a meaty conversation!

**Listening.** Having a conversation where you're anxious to be heard will work infinitely better if you also listen. That's an important piece for students to "get" in order to set the environment for a productive conversation. Listening without interrupting to inject your opinion may be difficult for those who have so much to say, yet it's critical to having a respectful discussion. Encourage students to show that they're listening through eye contact, an open posture and reflecting back what the other person is saying. Sometimes just knowing that you're being *listened to* makes all the difference in the world.

**Keeping an Open Mind.** We can all change our minds once we hear the facts from someone else — or those facts can clarify a pre-existing opinion. Encourage students to stay open to that possibility as they exchange opinions and perspectives. It doesn't make them weak whatsoever! Instead, it's all part of being a growing, engaged human being.

**Not Taking Things Personally.** If one person takes a different stance from another, it's not out of hate or disrespect. It's likely because that person has had experiences that have led to the formation of a certain opinion. Helping students better understand this simple fact can be the base of civil conversations moving forward.

Having an intentional discussion about agreeing to disagree can help students feel much more comfortable with controversy, as they learn to express opinions without going on the attack.

"Unfortunately civility is hard to codify or legislate, but you know it when you see it. It's possible to disagree without being disagreeable."

— Justice Sandra Day O'Connor

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### Issues Students Face

When it comes to political, racial, religious and other issues, today's students are facing a lot of pressure — from society, peers and others — to think and behave in certain ways. These expectations and “shoulds” can interfere with their own critical reasoning skills and, sometimes, from expressing how they truly think and feel.

After all, “political correctness” is a powerful force, as is peer and group pressure. As we work with students toward the goal of having difficult conversations in civil, respectful ways, it's important for us to recognize some of the obstacles they may be facing, such as...

**Fear of Being Hated.** Hardly anyone truly *wants* to be the subject of hatred. Yet, students who take the chance to state an opinion that others may not agree with can be subjected to a hateful backlash.

**Anonymous Comments Online.** It's so easy for people to slander, label and threaten others online, due to anonymity and not fully considering the consequences. So, students who put themselves — and their opinions — out into cyberspace may face online cruelty.

**Threats of Physical Harm.** Expressing an unpopular opinion has led to physical harm on some campuses, sad but true. Students fearing for their safety may come to you and it's important to know what resources are available to help them feel safe where they live and study.

**Being Put on the Spot.** Just because someone has an opinion, it doesn't mean she should be expected to speak for all women or all people of her cultural group.

#### “Shoulds” Students May Face

- You're a black woman, so you should feel like this
- You've lived without a father, so you should feel this way toward men
- You're a lesbian, so you should look like this
- You're Jewish, so you should believe this
- You grew up in the city, so you should act like this
- You are older, so you should know better
- You're a Democrat, so you should side with this

Please encourage students to be the versions of themselves that *they* want to be, rather than always responding to societal “shoulds.” It's important that we provide support as they develop their own individual voices.

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### Issues Students Face *(continued)*

**Publicly Expressing an Unpopular View.** It takes strength to go against the grain and express an opinion that may not be popular. For example, on a predominantly liberal-minded campus, expressing a conservative viewpoint may be met with incredulity, snark and, potentially, worse.

**Going Against Group Expectations.** Certain groups may expect community solidarity. So, for instance, a gay man who doesn't express outrage when transgender people aren't allowed to use restrooms that match their gender identity could be outcast. "You're not one of us," they may be told, being labeled as traitorous or uncaring. And group identification can be a very potent motivator.

"This dialogue is necessary because many students have shared with us that they are afraid to state publicly their opinions on recent events for fear of being vilified, slandered, and subjected to hatred, either by fellow students or faculty. Many who questioned the protest were labeled racist, and black students who expressed disagreement with the protesters were called 'white sympathizers' and were told they were 'not black.' We, the Princeton Open Campus Coalition, refuse to let our peers be intimidated or bullied into silence on these – or any – important matters."

– From a November 2015 letter from the Legislative Committee of the Princeton Open Campus Coalition to President Eisgruber, Princeton University (NJ)

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### Articulating and Arguing Opinions

Our students are at different developmental phases and this often comes out when they're arguing their opinions.

Some may be more **dualistic**, seeing things either one way or the other, without a whole lot of grey area in between.

Others may have a more **pluralistic** view, welcoming varied viewpoints.

Whatever the case may be, we are here to help them articulate what they believe, what they're considering and what they're feeling. It's one of the best gifts we can provide.

#### To Keep in Mind

In order to help students articulate — and perhaps even argue — their opinions, there are a few things to keep in mind...

**Susceptibility to Groupthink.** Depending on age, experience, self-esteem and a host of other factors, some students may be more susceptible to groupthink than others. So, if their peers that they respect are rallying around a certain political candidate, they may decide that's their candidate, too, without really examining

"Groupthink occurs when a group values harmony and coherence over accurate analysis and critical evaluation. It causes individual members of the group to unquestioningly follow the word of the leader and it strongly discourages any disagreement with the consensus."

Source: PsychologyToday.com

their own personal thoughts and feelings. Sometimes that desire for belonging can override independent thought that might lead to disagreement with the group. It's important that we take a look at where students are and what might be keeping them there.

#### Questions to Ask When Helping Students Articulate Their Opinions

- How does that issue strike you?
- What does that mean to you?
- How does that impact you?
- What's your view on \_\_\_\_\_?
- How might you explain the basic concept to someone else?
- If someone asked you for the 30-second version, what might you say?
- What about this issue is still unclear to you?
- What more would you like to learn?



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### Articulating and Arguing Opinions (*continued*)

**Thinking vs. Feeling.** Some students focus more on what they are *feeling* while others tend toward what they are *thinking*. Consider the Myers-Briggs Personality Indicator and how we all have different modes of operation, based on our preferences. So, asking a student, “What are you feeling about that?” may not have as much impact as asking, “What do you think about that?” And vice versa. If you’re unsure what someone’s thinking/feeling preference is, you can ask the more general, “What’s your view on that?”

**Perceptions of “Arguments.”** Making an argument is all about “expressing a point of view on a subject and supporting it with evidence,” according to The Writing Center at UNC-Chapel Hill. When the art of argument-making is put in these simple terms, it may resonate with some students, rather than thinking that “arguments” are always contentious, troubling things. We have to consider students’ backgrounds, as they can seriously impact their perceptions. For instance, a student who grew up amidst constant parental arguing may crave harmony in his life and see “making an argument” as asking for trouble. Helping him see that articulating his point of view doesn’t have to be a negative action can help him better explore his own values and views.

#### Articulating Your Own Opinion

How about a little self-work? Choose an issue that you have an opinion on or are forming an opinion on. Then, answer the following questions to help you get more in tune with the process that you may be helping students through.

- The issue is: \_\_\_\_\_
- How does that issue strike you?
- What does that mean to you?
- How does that impact you?
- How might you explain the basic concept to someone else?
- If someone asked you for the 30-second version, what might you say?
- What about this issue is still unclear to you?
- What more would you like to learn?

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### Confronting Inappropriate Comments

Generally speaking, we are a society that prefers harmony to harshness. Keeping our true feelings tucked inside is sometimes the perceived cost of keeping the peace.

Despite its image, confrontation is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it's necessary in order to move forward. Sometimes it brings things to the forefront so that everyone involved can continue on with their lives. And sometimes it's just plain crucial in order to keep students from hurting themselves or others.

Confronting inappropriate comments, in the forms of prejudiced remarks, offensive “jokes” or harmful slurs, is necessary, as they can be very destructive in community settings. Ignoring inappropriate remarks like these actually conditions us to accept them. You have a real opportunity to set an example by nipping these destructive, hurtful incidents in the bud and showing others how to do the same.

- Do not laugh at the comment.
- Remain calm and in control of your emotions. An irrational response will only escalate the situation. Remember, not only is it your goal to halt the destructive conversation, but also to educate in the process.
- If you know the person/people who made the comment(s), voice your concern calmly but pointedly.
- Depending on the situation, it might be wise to confront the situation privately, rather than publicly.
- Keep in mind that the people involved may or may not have been intentionally trying to be inappropriate or offensive. Many times you will face people who react based on

their ignorance because they have not had the opportunity to learn about other groups.

- Be sure to state how you feel clearly rather than making an abstract statement.
- Paraphrase what the person said to make sure you heard and interpreted the comment correctly. It can also help the other person realize the harmful nature of what they said to hear their words coming out of someone else's mouth.
- Ask open-ended questions to try to get at the resentments that lie behind the inappropriate comment.
- Explain why you're talking with them — such as that type of language not fitting into a caring, inclusive community or a personal reason you have to respond.
- Don't censor people or inhibit their free speech. Instead, let them know the impact of their words.
- Discuss other ways they might express their feelings and thoughts in more appropriate ways.
- Be aware of formal resources that address discrimination and injustice on your campus. Share campus policies pertaining to hate speech and harassment.
- Talk with a trusted, discrete person about what happened in order to process through the interaction after the fact, as these types of discussions can be quite upsetting.
- Let the appropriate people know about the situation and be sure to document what took place so there's a record of the conversation should the situation happen again or further action be necessary.

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### Avoiding Condescension

Go on, admit it. You likely get supremely bugged when someone acts condescendingly toward you. So, chances are that you don't want to do the same when talking with others.

Acting in a patronizing, condescending way is one sure method for stopping productive, civil discourse in its tracks. If others sense that you feel superior to them and are talking down to them, why would they seek you out? And why would they be civil? That type of disdain, whether intended or not, can shut things down in an instant.

So, it's good for all of us to take a look at what might be perceived as condescending. We won't do it perfectly, yet awareness can tweak the odds in our favor as we work to be more encouraging than discouraging.

“Of what use is it to be tolerant of others if you are convinced that you are right and everyone who disagrees with you is wrong? That isn't tolerance but condescension.”

— Anthony de Mello, *The Way to Love*

#### Phrases That Could be Considered Condescending

- » Let me put it in simpler terms for you
- » Oh, yeah, I already thought of that
- » You just figured that out?
- » You need to remember that...
- » I don't need all the details — just cut to the chase
- » Are you sure that's a good idea?
- » Let me show you how it's done

#### More Encouraging Phrasing

- » I sometimes like to break it down like this
- » What a great thought!
- » Looks like you've got it figured out
- » It's good for all of us to remember that...
- » What's the main point you'd like us to consider?
- » I trust that you've given it a lot of good thought
- » I'd be glad for us to work on this together

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### Understanding Microaggressions

It's a term being used a great deal on campus these days: *microaggressions*. They are more than just "insensitive comments," as they often indicate an undercurrent of racism, sexism and other social tensions that can leave students feeling marginalized, unsafe or invisible.

Learning to improve our campus climate often begins with better understanding what microaggressions are, the impact they can have, how to respond and how to reduce their occurrence. Here are five things to know...

**What They Are.** "Microaggressions are the brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial, gender, sexual-orientation, and religious slights and insults to the target person or group," according to author Derald Wing Sue in the book *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation*.

#### Discussion Points:

- What are some examples (see box)?
- What microaggressions have you seen, heard or experienced on our campus?

**Who Commits Them.** "Anyone can commit a microaggression and everyone can be harmed by a microaggression," said Dr. Maura Cullen during a webinar on "Microaggressions: A Campus Climate Conversation" (Paper-Clip Communications, 9/30/15).

#### Discussion Points:

- Can a well-meaning person commit a microaggression?
- Who might be harmed by some of the examples we explored previously? How might these words impact them?

"Microaggressions are remarks perceived as sexist, racist, or otherwise offensive to a marginalized social group."

— Bradley Campbell and Jason Manning, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7/9/15

#### Examples of Microaggressions

- "Nothing against you, but I don't believe gay marriage has any place in our society."
- "Has your counselor fixed you yet?"
- "Bisexual? They should call you 'trysexual' — you'll try anything."
- "How did you get a C — you're Asian!"
- "Do you really think you should eat that?"
- "You're very pretty for a black girl."
- "Hello, girls!" (to a group of women)
- Exploring case studies in class where all the names sound "white"

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### Understanding Microaggressions *(continued)*

**When They Occur.** “Each event, observation and experience... is not necessarily particularly striking in and of themselves. Often, they are never meant to hurt — acts done with little conscious awareness of their meanings and effects. Instead, their slow accumulation during a childhood and over a lifetime is in part what defines a marginalized experience, making explanation and communication with someone who does not share this identity particularly difficult. Social others are micro-aggressed hourly, daily, weekly, monthly,” according to the *Microaggressions: Power, Privilege, and Everyday Life* blog.

#### Discussion Points:

- How can the constancy of microaggressions impact someone?
- How might the setting in which a microaggression takes place impact someone’s action, reaction or inaction?

**What They Do.** “Microaggressions are constant and continuing experiences of marginalized groups in our society; they assail the self-esteem of recipients, produce anger and frustration, deplete psychic energy, lower feelings of subjective well-being and worthiness, produce physical health problems, shorten life expectancy, and deny minority populations equal access and opportunity in education, employment, and health care,” wrote Wing Sue.

#### Discussion Points:

- How might you react when someone says, “It’s not a big deal,” even though it feels like a big deal to you?
- If you commit a microaggression and it is brought to your attention, how might you react?

**Impact vs. Intent.** “Impact always trumps intent,” explained Cullen.

#### Discussion Points:

- How can we be more aware of the microaggressions we commit, even if it’s not our intent?
- Do you tend to “write off” people who commit microaggressions? Why or why not?

**Sources:** *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 7/9/15; “Microaggressions” webinar, PaperClip, 9/30/15; *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* by Derald Wing Sue, 2010; [Microaggressions.com](http://Microaggressions.com)

#### The Impact

Microaggressions can take a toll on marginalized groups, causing:

- Constant vigilance and uncertainty
- Self-doubt
- Fear that bringing it up could hurt a relationship or career path
- A feeling of not belonging
- A change in natural behavior
- Pressure to act “right,” like the majority
- A lack of trust in majority/privileged group members

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### Using Inclusive Language

Inclusive language sends the message that you value, accept and respect all people. A surefire way to alienate people is to use language that might offend them in some way. So, keep a few things in mind as you embrace the diversity of people you're interacting with, such as...

- Don't assume that everyone comes from two-parent households. And don't assume that everyone has both a mother and a father.
- Don't comment on people's bodies directly or indirectly. You never know who may be struggling with body image issues.
- Ask about personal pronouns rather than assuming.
- Don't assume that an averted gaze is a sign of disinterest or disrespect. Direct eye contact is considered disrespectful by some cultures.
- Don't rely on "people-harming humor" to get an easy laugh. That joke about an Irish person could easily offend a student and make the campus environment immediately unwelcoming.
- Make sure that when you talk about siblings, you also include only children in the conversation.
- Don't assume that all romantic relationships are heterosexual. Figure out comfortable language that includes a wide variety of relationships.
- Avoid words used within popular culture such as "retarded" or "gay" or "ghetto." These can be hurtful and alienate people.
- Don't criticize someone who is late publicly. It may be a cultural thing rather than a purposeful lack of respect.
- Don't just use student culture references (i.e. celebrities, musicians, trends, etc.) that apply to traditional-aged students. Adult student learners may feel excluded if you do.
- Use examples from a variety of religions and don't take it as a fact that everyone believes in a higher being.
- Infuse names from different cultural backgrounds when providing examples or case studies.

#### Creating a Warm Welcome

Using inclusive language is just one more way that you can create a genuinely warm welcome. It's not just about being "politically correct" — it's about making people feel like they matter and that their difference is exactly what makes them unique. Keep in mind that you're creating a campus impression as a campus representative in all of your interactions.

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### Who Am I Leaving Out?

Asking yourself, “Who am I leaving out?” or “What are some things I might need to be aware of in this situation?” are two questions that can help ensure you are being as inclusive as possible in your language and actions.

Take into consideration a wide variety of differences when talking about campus issues with students. It’s very easy to leave someone out — without even realizing you are doing it.

Since none of us are experts when it comes to human issues, we can all use a few reminders every now and again.

Consider the following characteristics and how they might play out among students...

- Family background (coming from a nuclear family versus growing up with a single parent or with relatives in the household, whether or not the person has siblings, etc.)
- Body awareness (dealing with an eating disorder versus disordered eating, etc.)

#### Ask Yourself...

When examining programs, interactions, community builders and more, ask yourself:

- “Who am I leaving out?”
- “What are some things I might need to be aware of in this situation?”

These two questions can help ensure you are being as inclusive as possible in your language and actions.

- National orientation (moving from another country, living in several different countries while growing up or being here while family is still overseas, etc.)
- Sexual orientation (being out versus in the closet, struggling with gender identity issues, trying to date, pronoun usage, etc.)
- Language (speaking English as a second language, speaking a different language at home, etc.)
- Ability (having a physical disability versus a disability that can’t be seen, such as a learning difficulty, etc.)
- Race (self-identification, pride, etc.)
- Religion (practicing a particular religion versus not practicing any religion, exploring a new spiritual path, etc.)
- Aptitude (struggling academically, various learning styles, etc.)
- Athletic involvement (being an athlete on campus, having retired from athletics, etc.)

This is just the tip of the iceberg. It’s all about human issues...and this means we aren’t just talking about the biggies such as race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. There are loads of characteristics that make us different from one another and that deserve consideration.

Considering where people might be coming from and why will help you and your students develop more meaningful connections with others. And you’ll learn a great deal in the process.

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### De-escalation Techniques

Sometimes, no matter how proactive you are, situations can escalate. These may involve verbal aggression or potentially violent behavior. And although this list isn't meant to be exhaustive, it's a starting point and reminder about some de-escalation techniques you can use.

#### Do...

- Remain calm and matter-of-fact.
- Present yourself as confident, self-assured and authoritative (not authoritarian).
- Let the person know that you take her feelings seriously by actively listening and validating what she has to say.
- Assess your own safety, as well as that of others in the space, and make sure no one is in danger.
- Allow extra physical space (three or four times as much) if the person is volatile.
- Let the person know that you want to help by supporting him and pointing him in the right direction for appropriate help.
- Be frank about your limitations if the person is demanding certain things and/or seems to need more counseling assistance than you can provide.
- Get help as soon as possible.
- Make sure to document what happened and to let your supervisor know immediately.

#### Don't...

- Try to intimidate, challenge, humiliate, argue or negotiate with the person.
- Risk touching the volatile person, as it may be misinterpreted as a sign of aggression.
- Turn your back away from the person.
- Try to analyze the person's reason for acting out or demonstrating other worrisome behaviors.
- Be defensive to comments or insults — it's likely that what's said isn't really about you.
- Raise your voice or respond to yelling in kind.
- Demonstrate a reaction of shock or disdain at the person's thoughts or feelings.
- Minimize the person's distress, fears or worries. This may upset him further.
- Be condescending, acting as if you know much better than the person.
- Make threats in an effort to get the situation under control.
- Try to handle the situation alone.

Never allow yourself or others to remain in a compromising, potentially dangerous position. Instead, call for help immediately — even if a problem hasn't yet occurred but you sense it might.



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### Handling a Verbally Aggressive Student

A verbally abusive student is typically angry at something or someone other than you, although her anger and frustration may be directed at you. This generally happens when the student is confronted with a frustrating situation that she perceives to be beyond her control.

In this situation, it is helpful to...

- Remain calm and take some deep breaths
- Maintain an alert posture with your hands visible in front of you
- Avoid making any physical contact
- Keep your voice low and matter-of-fact
- Be aware of everything in the room, including potential exits
- Acknowledge the student's anger and frustration
- Rephrase the student's thoughts and identify her emotions
- Let the student know that you are not willing to accept verbally abusive behavior ("When you are yelling at me, I find it impossible to really hear what you are saying.")
- Move back if the person is standing too close to you and infringing on your personal space
- If the student does calm down, help her problem-solve and deal with the actual issues at hand

In this situation, it is NOT helpful to...

- Get into a shouting or challenging exchange
- Become hostile or demanding
- Physically try to restrain the person
- Press for explanations or reasons for the student's behavior
- Ignore the situation
- Put your own needs or rights aside

#### De-escalate

Do not attempt to resolve the student's concerns at that moment. It's more important to first de-escalate the situation and get help — if needed (see "De-escalation Techniques" on page 16).

If, at any point, you feel like you're in danger when dealing with a verbally aggressive student, be sure to get help. This is never a failure or weakness on your part! Getting trained professionals involved can help you stay safe while also getting the student the help she truly needs.

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Addressing Missteps

In any scenario where you put yourself out there, you're bound to take some missteps. And that's okay. The true test is how you respond when this happens.

- Do you face up to mistakes and take responsibility?
- Do you pass them off on someone else?
- Do you ignore them?
- Do you embrace them as learning opportunities?

In a public setting where you're also setting an example, how you handle mistakes is critical. Here are some suggestions...

**Admit When You're Wrong.** It takes strong character to say, "I was wrong." It may feel uncomfortable at the time, yet most folks are bound to respect you for it. Admitting when you're wrong not only demonstrates human fallibility, it admits a willingness to hold yourself to certain standards.

**Apologize for Any Harm.** If you inadvertently offended someone or did them harm somehow through your misstep, be very up front and apologize. You can't take away what you did, yet your genuine remorse and desire to mend fences can make a big difference.

**Don't Pass the Buck.** Some people misplace blame to make themselves look better. In the moment, it may feel good, yet it won't feel right in the long run. And people are very perceptive to this kind of thing. They'll likely be able to sense when you're trying to build yourself up at the expense of others.

### Learning from Mistakes

When having difficult discussions, all of us are bound to make some missteps. If you or others in your group unintentionally say or do something offensive, it's not the end of the world. Yes, success and doing the "right" thing is nice, yet mistakes are often our best learning tools. Most people clearly remember the mistakes they made and what they learned from the experience. And you can help those involved learn a great deal by encouraging them to...

- Accept that all feelings surrounding the misstep are valid
- Recognize that the impact of something always carries more weight than the intent
- Think about what can be done to address the concern/mistake
- Try not to get defensive
- Not shy away from difficult subjects in the future, just because they're afraid to make a misstep
- Embrace mistakes and learn how not to repeat them
- Refuse to turn around and assign blame
- Acknowledge that missteps are part of being human
- Not let one criticism taint all the positive things they do

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Possible Discussion Topics

The following topics can contribute to a conversation about various components of respectful, civil discourse and debate...

- How people often use complaints as a way to start a conversation
- The thought among many that “He who shouts loudest is the winner”
- What in our society has desensitized us to certain words and actions (e.g. video games, reality shows, social media posts, “politics as usual,” etc.)
- What you learned growing up about how to have a healthy, respectful argument
- If today’s students are coddled and too protected
- What the concept of non-violent protest means to you
- Some effective ways to be heard
- The origins of my name are...
- A group I’d really like to learn more about is \_\_\_\_\_ — and here’s why
- Here’s what social justice means to me...
- Some effective ways to respond when people get nasty via social media
- It’s possible to be honest while still being civil
- An inclusive community looks like this...
- When someone is upset, I may be able to diffuse that tension by...
- What civility looks like to you
- I respect people who...
- Some ways to handle it if you make a hurtful misstep
- Two things I can do here on campus to keep learning and growing are...

#### Improving Cultural Competence

What 5 things would you like to learn more about in order to enhance your cultural competence?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

This topic can lead to great conversation among group members, too!

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Terms to Know

**Allyship.** The process of standing up for and building relationships with those in marginalized/targeted groups; work is not self-defined, but recognized by others.

**Bias.** Prejudice that interferes with one's impartiality.

**Discrimination.** The behavior of treating people unequally because of their group memberships. Discriminatory behavior, ranging from slights to hate crimes, often begins with negative stereotypes and prejudices.

**Entitlement.** The belief that one inherently deserves a privilege or special treatment that has not necessarily been earned.

**Equality.** Giving everyone the same thing, regardless of what they need.

**Equity.** Giving everyone a fair shot so inequality doesn't continue.

**False-Consensus.** A bias where a person overestimates the extent to which their own opinions, behaviors, preferences, beliefs, etc. are normal and shared by other people. In other words, we tend to think that others act and feel the same way as we do.

**Hate Crime.** Generally, a hate crime is a crime of violence, property damage or threat that is motivated in whole or in part by an offender's bias based on race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender, physical or mental disability, or sexual orientation.

**Hate/Bias Incident.** According to the U.S. Department of Justice, these types of incidents are acts of prejudice motivated by bias based on race, religion, ethnicity, national origin, gender, disability or sexual orientation that are not accompanied by violence, the threat of violence, property damage or other illegal conduct.

**Horizontal Hostility.** When members of targeted groups intentionally try to put one another down — creating competition rather than support — and furthering discrimination against their group that is already in place by dominant groups.

### Cultural Appropriation

This refers to “picking and choosing elements of a culture by a member of another culture without permission. This includes traditional knowledge, religious symbols, artifacts or any other unauthorized use of cultural practice or ideation” (MTV's LookDifferent.org).

Examples include someone who's not a member of the relevant culture...

- Wearing a sombrero on Cinco de Mayo
- Dressing up as a geisha in a kimono
- Wearing a Native American headdress as part of a Halloween costume
- Dancing a certain way in a concert or video

“What would America be like if we loved black people as much as we love black culture?” This is one of the questions posed within “Hunger Games” actress Amandla Stenberg's four-and-a-half-minute “crash discourse on black culture” video called “Don't Cash Crop My Cornrows.” It explores issues of cultural appropriation and has led to further discussion about the subject (<http://on.mtv.com/1NqGzfS>).

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Terms to Know *(continued)*

**Internalized Dominance.** When members of a privileged or dominant group see themselves as having a socially superior status and accept that as normal and deserved.

**Internalized Oppression.** When members of targeted/marginalized groups believe and further perpetuate the dominant system of beliefs about their own group.

**Marginalized Groups.** Have less access to power and resources and are generally assumed to be “less than,” “inferior” or “deficient.” Often feel the need to assimilate or to try to fit in, but have their truth and experiences questioned and invalidated; relegated to outer edge of society/community and very aware of oppression.

**Power.** Position within the social structure.

**Prejudice.** This is an opinion, prejudgment, or attitude about a group or its individual members.

**Privileged Groups.** Define what is normal, make the rules, and have greater access to power and resources. Generally assumed to be “greater than” or “better than” and given the benefit of the doubt; often unaware of privilege.

**Social Constructs.** Ideas or perceptions about an individual or a group that have been created over time through social practices; they appear to be “just the way things are” when, in reality, they have just evolved out of historical repetition.

**Social Justice.** Genuine equality, fairness, opportunities and respect among all people.

**Stereotype.** An exaggerated belief, image, or distorted truth about a person or group — a generalization that allows for little or no individual differences or social variation.

**Sources:** [www.tolerance.org](http://www.tolerance.org); U.S. Department of Justice; [LookDifferent.org](http://LookDifferent.org); Some definitions created by PaperClip Communications staff

#### Privileged Groups:

- Define what is normal
- Make the rules
- Have greater access to power and resources
- Generally assumed to be “greater than” or “better than”
- Given the benefit of the doubt
- Sometimes feel they have to defend themselves
- Often unaware of privilege

#### Marginalized Groups:

- Have less access to power and resources
- Generally assumed to be “less than,” “inferior” or “deficient”
- Often feel the need to assimilate or to fit in; afraid to challenge the status quo
- Have their truth and experiences questioned and invalidated
- Relegated to the outer edge of society/community
- Sometimes challenged to find their voice or speak up
- Very aware of oppression

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Engaging in Self-Work

#### Purpose:

To provide participants with an opportunity to explore their own diverse characteristics.

#### Materials:

- Paper
- Pens or pencils

#### Description:

We often jump directly into “diversity discussions” without giving people an opportunity to examine their own personal diversity. It’s easy for someone to say, “Oh, I’m not that interesting” because they don’t feel diverse. Yet, this very feeling can lead to a closed-off point of view and even envy directed toward those they label as “diverse.” After all, if you don’t feel special, it’s often tough to celebrate the special qualities in others.

So, use some or all of these simple activities to help participants focus on doing some self-work as they learn about the special characteristics they possess.

- Start off by explaining to participants that this activity is intended to be as high or as low risk as they want it to be. Encourage them to share if they feel comfortable but not to feel obligated.
- Begin by brainstorming a list of diverse groups on a large piece of newsprint (i.e. Asian Americans, transgender people, overweight people, people from high socioeconomic backgrounds, etc).
- Once your brainstorm is over, ask participants to jot down things they first learned about each of the groups on the list. They can share these observations with one another, if they like.
- Talk about how family and friends influence our early perceptions of different groups. Mention the role personal experience plays, too.
- Next, start participants talking more about themselves and their own personal riches. Have them select five words that best describe themselves and share these with the group. This helps identify personal values (i.e. Is it more important to be described as a “sister” or a “biology major”?) while also letting other group members know a bit more about them.

#### Additional Thoughts

- This activity typically works best if the group has already spent some time together. The element of personal risk is high enough that familiarity will lead to more complete disclosure.
- This can be an excellent retreat activity.
- Components of this activity can be used separately if you don’t have enough time to engage in the entire exercise.

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### Engaging in Self-Work *(continued)*

- Go one step further by asking everyone to take some time describing themselves in terms of cultural background, gender, religion, class, sexual orientation, etc. — whatever they feel comfortable with.
- Once these components have been shared with the larger group, discuss the difficulties they experienced coming from this background as well as how it was a source of strength for them.

Depending on what level your group is at, you may also want to explore how their background has impacted their “fit” at college so far. Have they felt an easy fit in some areas while others have been more challenging? Or how have culture, religion, sexual orientation, gender and more impacted their “fit” within your particular group?

This type of self-work provides an opportunity for individuals to examine who they are and what pieces make up their whole. There is a wealth of diversity within each of us! And the sooner we recognize the beauty of our internal diversity, the sooner we’ll be able to relish the diversity in others.

#### Self-Reflection... Where Do I Stand?

When you’re discussing sensitive, emotion-laden topics such as diversity, it’s important to get in touch with your own feelings first. Grab a dose of self-awareness by asking yourself questions like...

- Is there something in my past that makes me feel biased against a particular group(s)?
- What group(s) do I know little about?
- How does fear play into my view of diversity and social justice?
- How do my values impact my take on diversity and social justice?
- How do I serve as an ally?
- What parts of my background do I take pride in? Are there any components that are lesser known or that I’m not particularly proud of?
- Growing up, who are some of the people that had the most profound impact on me regarding issues of diversity and social justice?
- What five diversity/social justice topics do I *need* to learn more about? Which five do I *want* to learn about? Is there a difference between these two lists?

# Informed Discussions

## Civil and Respectful Communication, Discourse & Debate A Staff Guide

### In a Community of Character...

We don't tolerate discrimination based on race, gender, religion, faith, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, size, socioeconomic status, age or ethnicity.

Tough topics are discussed face-to-face, not behind people's backs.

There's an environment that welcomes multiple ideas and multiple ways of thought.

We celebrate the accomplishments of others rather than being threatened by them.

People do their own work, and never take credit for that of others.

We don't take advantage of the kindness of others.

Trust is the name of the game.

We leave a place better than we found it.

People ask, "How are you?" and stick around for the answer.

We admit when we're wrong instead of playing the blame game — and learn from our mistakes.

People want to improve the world and enjoy it, too.

Interruptions are infrequent. After all, it's not just about us.

We listen to the views of others, even if we don't agree.

There are always *at least* two sides to an argument.

We rise to the challenge instead of hiding behind what's "safe."

There's an awareness of "How will my actions impact others?"

We look out for one another.

We teach one another and willingly accept what we can learn from one another.

There's a desire to go beyond first impressions.

We treat people fairly, kindly and with compassion.

Everyone is encouraged to get involved and share their special gifts.

Everyday moments, as well as big accomplishments, are celebrated.

Respect is earned — and mutual.

We seek to include people, not exclude them.

We look for the good in people and honor the content of their character.

*By Julie Phillips*