



# Informed Discussions

Civil and Respectful Communication,  
Discourse & Debate

**A Student's Guide**

# Why This Matters

No matter how hard we try, when it comes to race, culture and difference, there is no one-size-fits-all. And when you throw politics and religion into the mix, things get even messier. Our society has yet to get this right. Like ever. Our campus should provide a safe place to have difficult conversations and debates about these topics,

as long as we remain civil and respectful of one another in the process. But this can sometimes be challenging, especially when our values are questioned and our buttons are pushed.

## Questions to Consider

*Who am I?*

*What am I carrying with me?*

Asking yourself those questions is important because they shape every interaction you have. Considering those questions about others in your community is equally important. We often miss the *context*, but we must pay attention to it because it informs the *content*.

As we work together to shift our society to be even more inclusive, it's important to remember that diversity is a topic that pertains to everyone. This is about *all* of us. The road will be bumpy, as we're human and make mistakes, but if our common goal remains to understand and to grow, we'll be on the right track.

## Agreeing to Disagree

Unfortunately, it's easy to find examples of uncivil discourse all around us. Our politicians are often rude to one another. Reality TV shows make arguments and insensitivity appear to be the norm. And anonymous social media posts create conflict with no accountability.

Our community welcomes free speech, of course. However, when language offends, threatens or insults groups based on race, color, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, ability, nationality, political affiliation or other traits, it doesn't contribute to an inclusive community. Purposefully inciting hate and doing harm has no place at an institution of higher learning. We can agree to disagree — as long as we do so honestly and respectfully.

# How to Have Informed, Civil Discussions

You *can* have difficult discourse and debate in a way that is respectful and civil. After all, being civil doesn't mean you can't be honest. Our campus community can be one of the best places to engage with those who are different from you. In fact, you may never get the chance to be surrounded with so much difference in a safe environment than during your college years. Take advantage of this opportunity!

- Listen more than you speak.
- Seek to learn instead of just reinforcing the opinions you already hold.
- Be honest about your biases and lack of knowledge.
- Own your feelings.
- Watch your non-verbals.
- Agree to disagree when necessary.
- Maintain a positive attitude.
- Remember that conflict can be a good thing because challenge leads to growth.
- Take a break and agree to re-group at another time if things get out of hand.
- Tap into professionals on campus for support and information.

## Use "I" Statements

Usually, you can't go wrong with "I" statements because they generally emphasize what you feel. Plus, they make it harder for others to get defensive because you aren't placing blame on them. Using "I" statements in a difficult conversation is a great way to be assertive, rather than aggressive. It can make the difference between agreement and disagreement.

## Anonymity is No Excuse for Incivility

Imagine you're in a room full of people and somebody pushes your buttons. How do you react? Do you remain silent or address the situation civilly? Or, do you rant, spewing whatever comes to mind without thinking about how inappropriate or hurtful it may be? It's likely you do the former, rather than the latter.

So why do so many people post things on social media they would never say in public? Just because you can hide behind anonymity online, it doesn't mean civility should go by the wayside. The more you let yourself be disrespectful online, the less likely you are to act civilly in situations where professionalism and decorum are required. You could lose a friendship, a job opportunity or something even bigger.

# The Components of Civil Dialogue

Conflict is a part of life. It's an opportunity for learning because it forces people to explain their opinions, brings issues to the surface, offers room to express empathy and serves as a great vehicle for creating change. But tough conversations can sometimes be rather uncomfortable and awkward.

Consider these components of civil dialogue in order to work through difficult discussions:

- **Behavior.** What you say, what your non-verbals show and the actions you take when engaging with someone are behaviors that make a difference.
- **Intent and Impact.** You can't choose the outcome of a conversation, but you can choose the goal: to help or to hurt.
- **Context.** The background individuals bring to the table, what the community you are in looks like and what's going on in the world at the time of the conversation all matter.
- **Identity and Social Capital.** Power and privilege impact who you are entering a conversation with and the standard to which you are held.
- **Norms and Rules.** Pay attention to written and unwritten codes of conduct, common understandings and social contracts that govern how we interact with one another.
- **Free Speech.** Develop the ability to express your views respectfully, even if others don't agree.

Conversation is *never* really simple. There are always a number of dynamics at play. Remembering these dynamics can help you conduct yourself well, especially when dialogue becomes difficult.

## We Don't All Think the Same — and That's a Good Thing!

We sometimes tend to think that all others act and feel the same way that we do, especially when we surround ourselves with those who share similar values. Yet there is a whole world of beliefs, opinions and preferences out there.

Challenging yourself to embrace other ways of thought and action leads to growth. The more you expose yourself to difference, the more you'll equip yourself with the tools and awareness you need to be successful on campus — and in your professional and personal life after graduation.

# What an Inclusive Community Looks Like

Civil communication, discourse and debate happen when communities are inclusive.

Inclusive communities have people who...

- Welcome and value difference
- Act and listen to others respectfully
- Expect civility
- Value honesty
- Actively work to include everyone and to eliminate oppression
- Engage and empower others
- Acknowledge everyone's unique contributions
- Are open to new perspectives — and intentionally seek them out
- Share air time
- Hold people accountable for their actions
- Take risks
- Respect and maintain confidentiality
- Recognize their hot buttons and work to manage them
- Trust in the dialogue, even when it's difficult

## When You Are Exclusive

People are exclusive when they maintain dominance of one group over another, restrict membership to their “group” and are discriminatory towards others. If you catch yourself or someone else being prejudicial or engaging in exclusive behavior:

- » Take a moment to breathe and collect yourself.
- » Acknowledge what's happening and hold those responsible accountable — including you, if you're engaging in the behavior.
- » Engage in a respectful, civil dialogue about how to rectify the situation.
- » Apologize to those involved.
- » Learn from the mistake and move forward.

## Equal vs. Equitable

Imagine two students sitting in a classroom lecture. Both students have equal access to the verbal lesson and opportunity to learn. But one student was the last to arrive and the only seat left was in the back of a huge auditorium. That student happens to use a hearing aid. Equal? Yes. Equitable. Nope.

***Equal = the same***

***Equitable = fair***

Equality is not enough because it means giving everybody the same thing, regardless of what they need. Equity means everyone gets a fair shot so inequality doesn't continue.

# Microaggressions

## “Little” Acts That Have Big Consequences

*“Where were you born?”*

*“You’re very pretty for a black girl.”*

*“Has your counselor fixed you yet?”*

*“Why do you sound ‘White’?”*

*“When I look at you, I don’t see color.”*

*“You people are so inspiring.”*

*“Do you really think you should eat that?”*

As we continue to see tremendous upheaval in our world, it’s critical that you consider the role and responsibility you have in maintaining a safe, secure community.

“It’s not a big deal.” We often hear that after an insensitive comment is made. But what happens when that comment is indicative of an undercurrent of social tension on campus? An environment where some feel invisible or unsafe? “IT” *is* a big deal. **These “microaggressions” create a larger divide and have a cumulative impact, leaving some people feeling unheard, unsafe and unwelcome.**

## We All Make Missteps

Most people mean well. It’s important to remember that. Unfortunately though, even when we don’t intend to hurt others, we sometimes do by not being conscious of the meaning and effect our statements or behaviors may have. If you do unintentionally cause harm:

- Remember that impact always carries more weight than intent
- Don’t dismiss or diminish the feelings at hand
- Try not to get defensive
- Recognize that you made a mistake and learn how not to do it again

## Recognizing Your Triggers

We all have conflict hot buttons, those actions and topics that irritate us or trigger our emotions. It’s important to recognize yours so you don’t get caught off guard, react in a way that escalates a conflict or make a swift, broad-sweeping decision that you later regret.

Ask yourself:

- » What behaviors do I dislike?
- » When do I feel irritated?

By knowing your triggers, you’ll be better able to keep your emotions in check when people push your buttons. As a result, you’ll be able to engage in calm, respectful conversations.

# Terms to Know

We know that you know the basics, but here are some key terms to understand while living and learning in our community — and beyond.

**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

**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 try to fit in, but have their truth and experiences questioned and invalidated; relegated to the outer edge of society/community and very aware of oppression

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

**Bias** – Prejudice that interferes with one’s impartiality

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

**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

**Power** – Position within the social structure

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

**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

## 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

*Definitions created by the PaperClip Communications Staff*

# In a Community of Character...

We don't tolerate discrimination based on race, gender identity, religion, faith, ability, sexual orientation, 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.

Treating others' property with care is how it's done.

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*