

Facilitator Guide for Departmental Discussions about Race

For a variety of reasons, race is not an easy topic for many people to talk about. This is why we often avoid these discussions. However, failure to find ways to manage our discomfort and have these conversations is part of the problem we collectively face as a campus community. The purpose of this guide is to provide some suggestions for ways to begin this conversation. Remember, these issues will not be solved in one discussion. However, only by having the courage to engage and stay present in these difficult or uncomfortable discussions can we make progress towards the inclusive, safe, welcoming culture that we want for everyone at Mizzou.

BEFORE THE MEETING

Determine the specific purpose(s) of the conversation prior to the meeting. Some examples include:

- Better understand the experiences of students of color in the department.
- Better understand the experiences of faculty of color in the department.
- Discuss why there are not more faculty of color in the department and brainstorm ideas about addressing this issue.
- Share experiences with addressing difficult situations that come up around race in the classroom
- Share concerns about race in the context of Mizzou



Ask all participants to read “Tips for Talking about Race” in preparation for the meeting.

<https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/handouts.php>

AT THE BEGINNING OF THE MEETING

Before delving in to the discussion, it is important to set the right tone and some basic agreements about how to have this conversation. Here are some suggestions:

- **Check in.** Restate the goal of the conversation, make sure that people still want to have this discussion.
- **Acknowledge the hopes and fears that everyone brings to the table.** One effective

and safe way to do this is by asking each person to write on an index card (without writing their name on it) three things they hope to get out of the conversation and on another index card three fears they have about having the conversation. The facilitator will first read out loud the cards with each person's hopes. Then, the facilitator will read the cards with the fears. In this process, people may see that they have both shared hopes and fears as well as different hopes and fears.

- **Create some ground rules.** Based on the hopes and fears, ask participants for some ground rules for the conversation to make sure that everyone feels that they can safely participate. Some suggestions might be:
 1. **Acknowledge that racism is a problem.** This is the starting point of the conversation. We may disagree as to the nature of the problem, but denial of the problem is a non-starter. That said, it is important to keep everyone at the table. So, if there are people who do not personally believe that racism is a problem, they are asked to suspend that belief for the duration of the meeting and move forward with the question "What if it is true?"
 2. **Assume good intentions.** Everyone is in the room because they desire to learn and to make things better.
 3. **Acknowledge emotions up front.** There are many emotions that may come up when talking about race such as fear, anger, hurt, and frustration. These are not easy emotions to manage and they are not easy emotions for others to deal with. Therefore it is important that people be allowed to express how they feel and for people to be okay with the discomfort. However, it is important the emotions do not overtake the conversation.
 4. **Take care of yourself, take care of the group.** When things get uncomfortable for people, it is common to mentally 'check out.' People need to balance taking care of themselves and staying present so that the group can have these important discussions.
 5. **Participate by actively listening and actively sharing.** Participation is a two-way street. Listening is as important as sharing. Participants should agree to do both.
 6. **Push back respectfully.** It is likely that people will not agree with each other. It is important that people are able to disagree with each other and that they do so in a way that does not create an environment where other people will be afraid to speak up for fear of being attacked.

7. **Avoid guilt and blame.** We are all born and socialized into a society that we did not create. Therefore, it is not reasonable or productive to feel guilty or to blame others. At the same time, we all have a responsibility to work towards making things better for everyone. By acknowledging responsibility without guilt or blame, we can put our energies in a more productive direction.
8. **Avoid minimizing or dismissing others' experiences.** Recognize that multiple perceptions and experiences can co-exist and that others' experiences are just as real and valid as your own.

FACILITATED DISCUSSION DURING MEETING

Some guidelines for facilitating this discussion:

- **Spend sufficient time discussing the issues.** It is common for people to want to quickly shift into problem-solving or fix-it mode. However, the facilitator should make sure that enough time has been spent identify/discussing the issues. Writing discussion points on a flip chart or white board can be helpful for bringing the conversation back if it gets off track. The facilitator can also point to the list and ask “Is there anything more we need to add to this?”
- **Check in.** Now that all ideas have been put out there, ask the group “What do we now know?” AND “What don’t we know?”
- **Brainstorming.** Based on what we know and don’t know, start with brainstorming. It is critical to the brainstorming process that ideas are NOT evaluated (until later). It should be a free and open discussion of ideas, not a debate about whether the ideas are workable or useful.
- **Next steps.** As previously mentioned, the problems will not be resolved in one discussion. Have the group determine the next steps based on brainstorming. Another full group discussion? Committee work? Bring more people to the discussion? Information gathering?

NOTE: Whatever the steps you collectively plan to take, ask the group to select point persons for specific tasks and set a mutually agreeable time to check back in with each other. Doing so can minimize the tendency to stall or resist change through inaction and improves the likelihood that your proposed action steps come to fruition.

- **Close the meeting.** Acknowledge everyone’s hard work. You may want to go around the room as ask people how they feel about how things went or what they got out of the discussion. If there is no time for this, ask for written comments.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- General Guide to Facilitating Dialogues
<https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/handouts/facilitating-dialogue.pdf>
- Tips for Talking about Race
<https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/handouts/talk-about-race.pdf>
- Speaking Up Against Bias and Prejudice
<https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/handouts/speak-up.pdf>
- Inclusive Terminology
<https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/handouts/inclusive-language.pdf>
- MU Division of Inclusion, Diversity & Equity Book List
<https://diversity.missouri.edu/education/books.php>

Books

How to Talk About Hot topics on Campus: From Polarization to Moral Conversation
by Robert Nash and Arthur Chickering.
Jossey-Bass, 2008.

Start Talking: A Handbook for Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education
University of Alaska, Anchorage.
<http://www.difficultdialoguesuaa.org/index.php/handbook>

Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most
by Douglas Stone, Bruce Patton and Sheila Heen. Penguin Books, 2000.

Race Talk and the Conspiracy of Silence: Understanding and Facilitating Difficult Dialogues on Race by Derald Wing Sue.
Wiley, 2015.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion: Strategies for Facilitating Conversations on Race by Caprice Hollins and Ilsa Govan. Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

35 Dumb Things Well-Intended People Say: Surprising Things We Say that Widen the Diversity Gap by Maura Cullen. Morgan James Publishing, 2008.

Classroom

Teaching in Racially Diverse College Classrooms. Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning, Harvard University
<http://bokcenter.harvard.edu/teaching-racially-diverse-college-classrooms>

Creating a Positive Classroom Climate for Diversity. UCLA Diversity & Faculty Development.
<https://faculty.diversity.ucla.edu/our-library/creating-a-positive-classroom-climate-for-diversity>