

On November 17, 2015 staff and students from Baylor met for a Public Deliberation Forum to discuss Racial & Ethnic Tensions on College Campuses. Participants were divided into six groups, each with a facilitator that guided their discussion through three possible options. The goal is not consensus but to deliberate together to understand each option, the benefits and the consequences of each, so that we can make informed decisions together about a possible way forward.

In Option 1, students discussed this approach to dealing with racial and ethnic tensions: Everyone on a college campus should be able to speak their beliefs without fear of repercussions even if it's not deemed politically correct. When discussing this opinion, participants questioned what is politically correct and who defines that for a community, campus, or nation. They talked about where misinformation stems from and whose job (parents, schools, self) it is to educate so that ignorance cannot be an excuse. The statement "there is a big difference between free speech and hate speech" resonated with many of the participants. However, they determined that line is hard to draw because of sensitivity levels, and some participants suggested that offensive and uncomfortable experiences can be places of growth. All groups noted that a repercussion-free platform for thoughts and fears would be a good idea. However, without discussion and a mediator, there is room for civility, compassion, and consideration to be thrown out the window.

In option 2, students discussed this approach to dealing with racial and ethnic tensions: Everyone should feel welcome and safe on their college campus and any speech or action that makes them feel otherwise should not be tolerated and should be dealt with swiftly. When discussing this option, participants had questions regarding the lines of punishment. They wondered who would decide what exactly gets punishment and what the disciplinary action would be. Many agreed that an important part of any disciplinary action would be an accompanying education piece so that offenders could learn more about why their actions were deemed offensive and the educators could discuss motives and cultural awareness. In response to one of the questions from the moderators, "Do we spend too much time blaming social problems on past examples of racial prejudice and ethnic tensions that we are unable to focus on the present?," participants quickly responded yes. We walk into situation with biases and past experiences and past knowledge. It is hard to be open-minded, and some students are simply not educated enough to know when they are being offensive. Participants also had a good discussion about feeling safe and welcome, and if we can truly create a welcoming environment for all and a safety that cares for both emotional and physical well-being.

In option 3, students discussed this approach to dealing with racial and ethnic tensions: You may not always say the right thing and sometimes people's feelings get hurt but we need to keep having discussion in appropriate environments. The majority of participants selected this option as the best starting point, but still saw room for improvement. Everyone acknowledged that discussion is a good, necessary skill that all people need to develop and continue to develop, because discussion and the willingness to seek to understand someone is a large part of reconciliation. In order for this option to work well, an environment must be created in which all voices are heard, and people must be willing to take part in difficult discussions. There was discussion about whether social media provided an appropriate environment because there are often no repercussions, and people can display some anonymity through different handles or names.

A 4th approach to the problem was discussed among a few groups. They thought that the most organic solutions were conversations in the context of friendships between people who respect and are eager to understand differing viewpoints. However, if people naturally choose to be in groups and friendships where they feel comfortable, difference and multiple viewpoints on different issues may not be as prevalent.

Larger questions that arose from the discussions were:

Who would implement these ideas—who would create space for discussion, who would decide what deserves disciplinary action, who would monitor or mediate conversations, and what would give these people or groups the validation to create these spaces for other?

Whose job is it to educate people about other races, ethnicities, cultures, faiths? Are families, schools, or people responsible? How do we correct misinformation?

How do we define “hate speech” and offensive action when people claim ignorance? And who defines what is politically correct?

Different courses of action that participants offered were cultural awareness courses and more space for minority groups to show and share their culture, non-anonymous social media or online platforms that are monitored, more public dialogue and public spaces that nurture diversity.

At the end of the evening, a vote was administered to see where students were leaning in terms of an approach that they would like to see college campuses move towards.

7 % of participants voted for option 1.

16% of participants voted for option 2.

76% of participants voted for option 3.

Some participants did not cast a vote and 1 preferred the fourth option discussed above.