

Engaging Your Students on Issues of Race in the United States: Supporting Students and Supporting Learning Outcomes

At the University of Delaware, our students are increasingly diverse and that diversity requires thoughtful engagement if we are to include all students in our vision of success. Black students, in particular, are experiencing stresses tied to current events that may impact their success on our campus and beyond, as reflected in the disparities in the graduation rate.¹ All instructors at UD are empowered to be agents of both educational and social change through their privileged positions in the classroom. In the service of that effort, faculty across the country and on our campus have been circulating documents like the “[Black Lives Matter Syllabus](#),” in order to introduce important texts, works of art, and narratives that speak to oppression and injustice. While the Black Lives Matter Syllabus excels in regards to content, it requires framing within the context of learning objectives and support from current research in order to generate improved student outcomes. This document provides context and suggestions that cast the classroom as a point of intervention—a space for assuaging some of the anxiety and hurt, from both nationwide and on-campus factors, that contributes to unbalanced outcomes for students of color. Engaging with your students purposefully, thoughtfully, and honestly, about the impact of incidents of racial violence can provide context to learning and is a best practice that supports all of your students, not just those of color, by learning through diversity.²

This document:

- Elucidates the contemporary real-world context for learning that affects students of color
- Persuades instructors to use high-engagement strategies to create inclusive and welcoming classroom spaces for all students.
- Provides specific suggestions for how to proceed with that engagement

Inclusion and Learning Outcomes at UD and Beyond

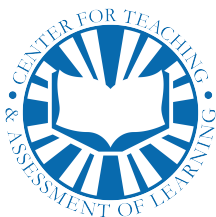
Moving from diversity to inclusion is at the heart of many of the University of Delaware’s strategic initiatives and is embedded within the [General Education learning objectives](#). In addition to supporting critical reading and communication skills, these outcomes also stress the importance of working collaboratively and independently within and across a variety of cultural contexts and a spectrum of differences (Objective #3), and critically evaluating the ethical implications of what students say and do (Objective #4). Confronting issues like racism, hate crimes, and the limits of free speech has deep ethical implications for your students. If they are provided support to understand these issues and learn to work across differences, they will become more thoughtful and engaged learners³. Courses that effectively do this emphasize perspective-taking, social responsibility, and cultural intelligence as described in the [Center for the Study of Diversity](#)’s Competence Model. This model, which is supported by nationwide research trends, challenges students to engage at the local and global levels, stresses intercultural knowledge, and reinforces that ethical reasoning and actions will prepare students for the challenges of the twenty-first century.⁴ Exploring issues of diversity in the classroom (including race, ethnicity, and gender) using real world context is considered a “high impact practice” that supports these goals.⁵ Helping students develop the cultural competencies to work with diverse groups provides them with the skills most in-demand from major employers, 71% of whom reported that they are seeking college graduates who have experience with working in diverse groups.⁶

An Evidence-Based Intervention: Why Students of Color Need Thoughtful Classroom Dialogue

Because we know how important engagement and cross-cultural conversation is towards improving student development, it is imperative that we take the opportunity to address current events when they arise. In the wake of public traumas like Ferguson, the death of Freddie Gray in police custody, or the numerous shootings of unarmed black men across the country, students are bombarded with media coverage of these violent events. For students of color, black male students in particular, these images can trigger severe anxiety and depression.⁷ That anxiety affects all aspects of life, including how one participates in the classroom or performs on assessments. Some psychologists have coined the term “ethnocultural allodynia” to describe the extreme emotional impacts that seemingly benign images and experiences can have on members of a minority who are regularly exposed to insults and stereotyping.⁸ Black men are also more likely than white men to develop PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) when exposed to trauma⁹ and are less likely to seek treatment for it.¹⁰

While exposure to images of violence and expressions of racism in the public sphere contribute to an experience of trauma, there is a larger, more subtle issue in higher education that conveys the message that students of color do not belong. The vastly unequal distribution of advanced degrees in a field like Physics (nearly 80% of PhDs in Physics between 2006-2008 were awarded to white graduates, while only 2% were awarded to black graduates) has led to a crisis of invisibility.¹¹ The effect is even more striking when gender is taken into consideration: less than 1% of the country’s 9,050 Physics and Astronomy faculty members are minority women.¹² Across all disciplines and schools, the national distribution of black faculty members in post-secondary degree-granting institutions is just 6%.¹³ This crisis of visibility within higher education, when coupled with relentless external imagery of violence and oppression, conveys a dangerous message of exclusion to our students of color. As outlined in the [University’s blueprint for Inclusive Excellence](#), students need to see people who look like themselves in faculty and staff positions in order to feel like valued members of the campus community.

In the face of these enormous challenges, it is our responsibility as members of the UD community to ensure that students of color are provided a safe space for learning. It is not their responsibility to bring their diverse experiences and perspectives into the classroom. Faculty, staff, and administrators share the responsibility to ensure true inclusion. Students who engage with their peers on issues of diversity, and confront challenging discussions within the framework of a supportive learning environment report significant gains in both processing complex ideas and interest in reading.¹⁴ When supported in the classroom, all students are also better equipped to continue difficult conversations outside of the classroom, thus becoming agents of social change.¹⁵ These conversations matter, but they can create a discomfort in the classroom that is a challenge for both instructors and students. Working through that challenge purposefully can lead to improved campus climate and more successful students.



Discussion Starters and Activities

Activities to jump-start a discussion

1. Ask your students to take a [privilege quiz](#) or an [implicit bias quiz](#) and discuss their results:
 - a. What aspects of your own identity are you most conscious of on a daily basis?
 - b. Did your results for the implicit bias quiz surprise you? How so?
 - c. Do you feel that your implicit biases, or your privilege, affects the way you interact with other people? How so?
 - d. Can you recall a recent incident where you were aware of your own privilege? Your biases?
2. Offer students a current data set or a poll from a popular press source (such as: [The Pew Research Center](#), [Reuters](#), or [Gallup](#)) and ask them to analyze the results:
 - a. What context is needed to interpret these data?
 - b. What assumptions lay behind the questions that were asked in the poll or survey?
 - c. Challenge your students to articulate, in their own words, a position outlined in the poll or survey that is the opposite of theirs.
3. Play a sound-bite, show a tweet or an Instagram post, and ask students to reflect on it. Challenge them to focus their responses on the concepts and ideas expressed rather than the person behind the remarks.
 - a. What hashtags are trending on Twitter right now that you find offensive? What is offensive about the term or phrase?
 - b. Use an active-listening strategy: After playing a soundbite from the news or a media outlet, ask a student to paraphrase what they have just heard. Ask another student to respond to that version statement, and to offer their own interpretation. Continue in this manner getting students to focus on terminology, tone, and argument.
 - c. Give students 1 minute to write down, anonymously, their immediate responses to the clip or image. Place these responses in a bowl or bag and mix them up. Have students pull a comment, read it out aloud, and then explain why they agree or disagree with the statement.

How to frame a difficult conversation

- 1) Have the class create a [discussion policy](#). Tell your students that respect for their peers is a foundation for effective communication. Even though these are difficult issues and there might be discomfort, everyone can learn something by listening and reflecting.
- 2) Ask students to frame their comments or questions to focus on the issue at hand not the individual raising the issue.
- 3) Try to get your students to focus on issues of meta-cognition: “How do you know that is true?” “Where did you get that statistic?” “Who specifically is the originator of that quotation?”
- 4) Ask students to engage in perspective-taking: “What would be different in your life if you believed that this premise was true?” “Can you imagine a set of circumstances under which you might agree with that idea?”

Annotated Resource List

Mayhew, Matthew J., Heidi E. Grunwald, Eric L. Dey (2005). "Curriculum matters: Creating a Positive Climate for Diversity from the Student Perspective" *Research in Higher Education*, 46 (4), 398-412.

When faculty members incorporate and foster institutional diversity goals in their curriculum the curriculum reflects the institution's priorities, and students, particularly students of color find the climate to diversity favorable. The authors of this article use factor analysis to demonstrate how the beliefs, experiences, and perceptions of undergraduate students and identifies the factors that create a positive climate for diversity at a large public, predominantly white institution. Among other factors, the authors find that If an institution wants to be perceived by students as a community that welcomes diversity, it needs to include diversity in its curriculum.

Connelly, Robert J. (2009) "Introducing a Culture of Civility in First-Year College Classes" *The Journal of General Education*, 58 (1), 47-64.

Have students create a published code of academic civility. This code can stimulate and reinforce the idea that the classroom is another community where individuals should learn acceptable behavior. Students learn the importance of civility through course materials and the behavior of the instructor. In this article, Connelly suggests faculty members use the first-year classroom as the place to explicitly introduce academic civility in the classroom. In constructing the Code of Academic Civility, Connelly establishes a bridge between the a mission statement and the specific rules of typically contained in a syllabus to set the tone for introducing new students to the culture and expectations of the community they are about to enter.

Pasque, Penny A., Mark A. Chesler, Jessica Charbeneau, Corissa Carlson (2013). "Pedagogical Approaches to Student Racial Conflict in the Classroom" *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 6 (1), 1-16.

Faculty can have impact simply by learning students names, and asking them about their social identities and helping students share that identify with the class when they respond in discussions. This will allow the faculty to identify triggers in racial tense situations.

This article is useful for faculty who want to change their classroom practices to deal with issues of diversity and racial conflict. The authors examine different ways to enhance student learning about race and racial interactions and emphasize the need for interventions to improve faculty members' ability to deal with racial situations.

Cabrera, Nolan L., Jesse S. Watson, Jeremy D. Franklin (2016) "Racial Arrested Development: A Critical Whiteness Analysis of the Campus Ecology" *Journal of College Student Development*, 57 (2), 119-134.

Safety and inclusion should be prioritized over social comfort. Cabrera et. al problematize perceptions of safety and inclusion on the college campus and argue that there is too high of a premium placed on social comfort during the undergraduate experience. Pointing to the White dominance of campus environments and the predatory effect "White spaces" have on people of color. The authors urge white faculty to be cognizant of how we create safe spaces that prioritize White comfort over the racial safety of students of color.

For more information and additional resources, visit: ctal.udel.edu

¹ Currently, the 4-year graduation rate for black students at UD is more than 22% lower than that of white students. For the IR statistics on graduation rates for the Newark campus, see:

<https://sites.udel.edu/ire/files/2016/01/48-newarkgradrate-296gqda.pdf>

² Hurtado, Sylvia, Jeffery Milem, Alma Clayton-Pederson, and Walter Allen (1999) *Enacting Diverse Learning Environments: Improving the Climate for Racial/Ethnic Diversity in Higher Education*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report Volume 26, No. 8. Washington, D.C.: The George Washington University, Graduate School of Education and Human Development, p.7.

³ Gurin, P., Nagda, B., & Lopez, G. (2004). "The benefits of diversity of education for democratic citizenship." *Journal of Social Issues*, 60, 17–34.

⁴ "The LEAP Vision for Learning: Outcomes, Practices, Impact, and Employers' Views" (2011) AAC&U publications, 7.

⁵ "LEAP vision," p. 18.

⁶ "LEAP vision," p. 26.

⁷ <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/culturally-speaking/201509/the-link-between-racism-and-ptsd>

⁸ Lillian Comas-Diaz and Frederick M. Jacobsen (2001) "Ethnocultural Allodynia" *Psychotherapy Practice and Research* 10.4, 246.

⁹ PTSD is no longer relegated to the effects of war or physical abuse; psychologists now argue that our definition of trauma must be expanded to include the kind of emotional abuse experienced as systematic racism. Sanchez-Hucles (1998) "Racism," *Journal of Emotional Abuse* 1(2):69-87.

¹⁰ Roberts, et al. (2011) "Race/ethnic differences in exposure to traumatic events, development of post-traumatic stress disorder, and treatment-seeking for post-traumatic stress disorder in the United States," *Psychological Medicine* 41(1): 71-83.

¹¹ <http://www.aps.org/programs/education/statistics/degreesbyrace.cfm>

¹² Ivie, Rachel Garrett Anderson, and Susan White (2014) "African Americans and Hispanics among Physics and Astronomy Faculty: Results from the 2012 Survey of Physics and Astronomy Degree-Granting Departments." *American Institute of Physics "Focus On" Report*.

¹³ https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator_csc.asp

¹⁴ Goodman, et al (2011) "Good Practices for Student Learning: Mixed-Method Evidence from the Wabash National Study" *About Campus* March-April, 5.

¹⁵ *ibid.*