



Guide for Navigating Difficult Conversations on Race

As a University, we unequivocally condemn injustice and discrimination, and reaffirm our commitment to live by our values and principles in cultivating a workplace and learning environment that make equity, diversity, pluralism, and inclusion priorities. As members of this beloved institution, we must strive to listen, engage, and learn from one another in safe and inclusive environments, and with respect for different perspectives and backgrounds.

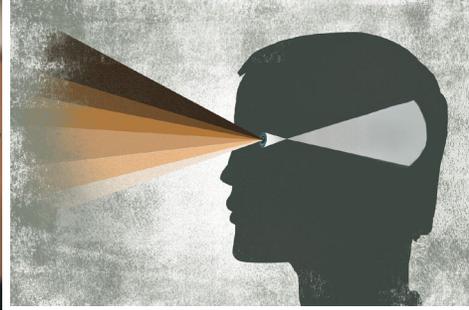
This guide was developed by OEI to help UTC community members navigate common conversational roadblocks in order to engage in meaningful, respectful, and informed dialogues with colleagues and students. To facilitate use, this guide is divided into two sections:

- (1) [Discussions between students and faculty/staff, and](#)
- (2) [Faculty/staff discussions with co-workers.](#)

As always, OEI is here to provide training, consultation, and guidance on equity, diversity, inclusion, and compliance matters and concerns. We also have an expanding library of recommended books and resources available in our office. Please feel free to reach out to us for departmental training needs or to address any questions or concerns you may have, and we look forward to continued progress in fostering and maintaining a diverse, equitable, inclusive UTC for all!

Sincerely,

Rosite Delgado
Director, Office of Equity & Inclusion



Talking About Race in the Classroom

Because race is part of our public conversation and integrated into so many aspects of our world, young people want to and should be part of that conversation, no matter their race. White students in predominantly white classrooms should be discussing race for those reasons, and because they are members of a multicultural society and world. Sometimes educators feel reluctant to raise the topic of race, especially if they are teaching in a predominantly white community. Professors may be concerned that students bring their own assumptions and stereotypes and will hold back for fear of saying the wrong thing, or bias will emerge and will be hard to facilitate and contain. In addition, professors may fear pushback from administrators who feel they should not talk about it at all. With all that being said, here are some tips and strategies to facilitating difficult conversations about race in the classroom – this includes conversations between faculty and students, as well as between groups of students.



Establish Group Guidelines

Students, and white students in particular, sometimes don't participate in discussions about race because they feel inadequate, worry they'll be mocked, are embarrassed by their lack of knowledge, or are concerned that strong feelings will arise. Some may even think the topic is not relevant to them. When engaging in conversations about tough topics, it is critical to set up group guidelines to promote a classroom environment that is safe and respectful. Do this collaboratively with students and make sure that the following areas are discussed: listening and interrupting, how to deal with strong emotions, establishing trust, confidentiality, sharing "air time" and dealing with differences or disagreements. Further, from the beginning, establish an environment that allows for mistakes. Because we are products of a biased society, students may not be cognizant that everyone has biases and holds stereotypes. This should be explained to them explicitly. Assume good will and convey to students that they should do the same. Find ways to inspire students to challenge themselves and their assumptions by asking open-ended questions.



Accept Discomfort and Uncertainty

A safe learning environment does not mean the instructor and the students will or should be comfortable with every discussion. Be prepared for these conversations to potentially be messy and complicated. They may not end as you expect they will. You can remind yourself of this and share that understanding with the class so you manage everyone's expectations. It is helpful to remember and share with others that often times deep learning, the kind that is lasting and long-term, comes when things are uncomfortable or "sticky" and you are able to work through those things. It may also be helpful to explain to students that when difficult conversations, even ones that lead to conflict, are handled well, there can be a higher understanding or improved relationships on the other side.



The Goal is Not to be "Colorblind"

The goal of teaching about race and racism is to help students understand the historical context and current manifestations of racism in the U.S. There are many white people who believe the best way to eliminate racism is to not talk about it and not notice racial differences at all (i.e. be "colorblind"). They may want to tell young people not to notice differences because they conflate noticing differences with having bias. It may also be a way to avoid dealing with discussions of race because they are uncomfortable. It is completely natural to notice race and other physical characteristics, but telling others not to see it is incorrect and confusing. Let students know that noticing differences does not promote bias – judging and discriminating based on race does. Further, it is important to acknowledge that white is a racial identity and even explore with students what being white means to them.



Learning about Racism is a Process

It is often the case that white people who have always been in the majority do not think about their own racial identity the way that people of color often do. Recognize that learning about race and racism is a process because many white students may not have had the opportunity to reflect on and discuss it. They will come with bias and misinformation, as we all do, and it will take time for them to develop their own understanding and insights. Make it clear that this can be a lifelong process and that one is always learning, including yourself and that you will be learning together. Introduce less complex topics at first and from the beginning, present and use accurate terminology. At the same time, do not sugarcoat or simplify language or concepts. Defining words and the language of race and bias can be one of the first things you do

which can include differentiating prejudice, bias, discrimination, racism and implicit bias. In the beginning, establish the fact that we all have a race, and they are included in that. Sometimes white students think that race does not apply to them and includes only people of color.



Address White Privilege in Non-Defensive Ways

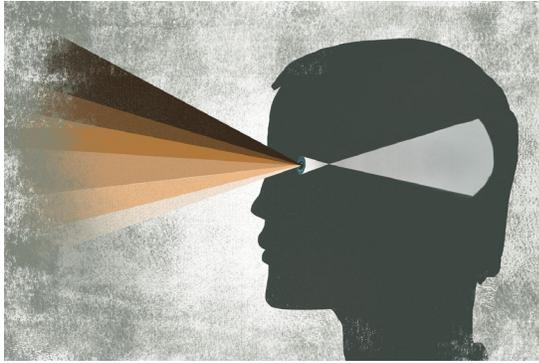
The term “white privilege” is one that often produces anxiety and defensiveness among white people, including students. At the same time, if students are going to engage in conversations about race, privilege has to be on the table. The goal of a discussion about white privilege is not to make anyone feel guilty for who they are or defensive about their lot in life. The goal should be to help students understand and analyze issues of power and privilege as they relate to racism. One way to start the conversation is to talk with students about the ways bias manifests in institutions (i.e. discrimination). Explain that bias can affect people in two ways: (1) by discriminating against some, or (2) by advantaging others – depending on race or other aspects of identity.

Another angle to discuss privilege is to talk with your students about the ways they feel disempowered or discriminated against as young people, often through ageism directed towards them. These can include things like not being allowed to do certain things they think they should be allowed to do, assumptions adults make about them, or discriminatory acts that targets them. Students can reflect on the ways that they, as young people, lack privilege in these situations. This discussion will help them understand the concept of privilege without getting defensive and will help to foster empathy. You can then make the connection to white privilege and since you have set the groundwork, and hopefully the leap to white privilege is not too far a reach.

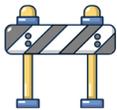


Acting as an Ally

As students discuss race, some of them may be interested in addressing the racism they have learned about, both in their interpersonal relationships and in society. Helping others understand what it means to act as an ally and learning the different ways to engage in ally behavior is an important next step. White people can act as allies by identifying racism when they see it, calling it out, and challenging it in a myriad of ways. You can help to facilitate this process by giving students an opportunity to explore how to act as an ally and practice different strategies, both interpersonal or on a larger stage by getting involved in activism. There are a wide variety of ways to do this, including educating others, online activism, advocating for legislation, protesting, creating public awareness, etc.



Navigating Conversational Roadblocks on Racism



Roadblock: “I don’t see color – only people.”

This phrase is often uttered out of a place of good intent; however, the effect of its usage is actually detrimental and can perpetuate racism. It is not racist to see a person’s race or ethnicity – in fact, it is a natural tendency. In business life, however, we typically pretend we do not notice – a behavior called “color blindness” – because we want to reduce our odds of exhibiting prejudice or engaging in discrimination. However, ignoring differences or similarities for that matter, across race and ethnicity can lead to confusion and misunderstanding. Avoiding conversations about race to maintain neutrality will not create an ideal work environment for all employees. Different backgrounds should be honored, and celebrating differences should be encouraged. An all-inclusive, multicultural approach can create an employee community where everyone feels both a sense of uniqueness and a sense of belonging. Furthermore, as educators, when we hear someone say, “I don’t see color,” we should seize that moment as a teaching opportunity instead of rebuking someone as insensitive or racist.



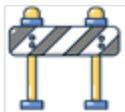
Start a Conversation

- Ask colleagues who have a different racial, ethnic, or cultural background if they feel our workplace honors their identity and experiences.
- Ask colleagues if they think people would feel more included if we talked about our differences.
- Ask colleagues if they feel different from team members because of their own race and ethnicity.
- Ask colleagues how they think we can build trust and authenticity in our workplace by having conversations about racially biased behavior.
- Encourage one-on-one or group discussions about traditionally unspoken issues related to race or ethnicity in our workplace culture.



Pay Attention

- How do my cultural background and experiences shape how I perceive the world, and how others may perceive me?
 - Under which circumstances do I feel more or less comfortable discussing issues of race and ethnicity?
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Roadblock: “Talking about our differences can only further divide us.”

Current events often highlight social injustices against racial/ethnic or religious groups, as well as issues of shaming and victim blaming. News outlets amplify awareness about these inequalities and injustices as they occur around the world. Additionally, our experiences on social media engaging with complete strangers – so called “keyboard warriors” – on these topics can often turn nasty, personal, and counterproductive. What we see and hear in mainstream society often focuses on individual bias and “bad behavior” rather than broader systemic or societal problems. These messages may reinforce a common misconception: that talking about these issues will fuel interpersonal conflict and create divisions among social groups in the workplace. They create fear that more harm will occur than good. Indeed, talking about race and ethnicity may feel uncomfortable and unapproachable, and it requires some risk-taking. However, we must not let our fears and discomfort get in the way of building inclusive work environments so that everyone feels valued, respected, and heard.



Start a Conversation

- Ask colleagues what fears or misconceptions prevent them from having discussions about race and ethnicity. Do they assume that differences will be divisive?
- Ask colleagues if they think that not talking openly about our differences perpetuates assumptions, stereotypes, and biases.



Pay Attention

- What topics are “off limits” in the workplace?
- Who gets penalized or rewarded for talking about difficult issues at work, and by whom?



Roadblock: “I’ll say something inappropriate – or worse, be viewed as a racist.”

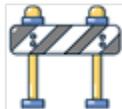
Words are powerful. The fear of saying something inappropriate about a person’s race or ethnicity may stifle dialogue – especially if you fear that people will view you a racist. Sometimes this fear emerges because you once tried to communicate with someone different from you and things did not go as expected. That negative experience can make it hard to have a difficult conversation in the future.

Fear of saying the wrong thing stems from a mindset that proposes that potentially offensive or uncomfortable topics should be avoided, ignored, and silenced – or spoken about in a very light, casual, and superficial manner. However, we should not let fear or the potential of saying something unintended interfere with having difficult conversations. There may be consequences, and those should certainly be considered, but they should not stifle open communication. Even with the best of intentions, you can say or do things that are offensive or hurtful. If this happens, apologize. Engage in further conversation to better understand why the situation was perceived in a negative way, and learn how it feels to be in another person’s skin.



Pay Attention

- What fears stop me from having conversations about race?
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Roadblock: “People think I’m overly sensitive, and I feel that my experiences are minimized.”

A sure way to shut down a constructive conversation is to suggest that someone is being “too sensitive,” and making assumptions about the validity of their feelings. These sentiments disempower and shame people. They diminish their experiences, feelings, and sense of worth. They assume the conversation is not even worth having. In these moments, a constructive conversation can quickly turn into an emotionally charged exchange. Defensiveness is high, tensions can rise, and resentment starts to brew. Instead of sharing and learning from someone different from you, it is easy to inadvertently reinforce exclusionary behavior.



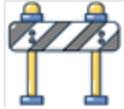
Start a Conversation

- Ask people who are different from me how they experience their own race – and then really listen to the answer.
- Ask colleagues if they have ever felt that their experiences were minimized.



Pay Attention

- Am I receptive and attuned to the unique perspectives and experiences of other people?
 - What can I do to step into another person's shoes and learn more about their experiences?
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Roadblock: "It's not safe to speak up. There will be negative consequences to my actions."

It happens more often than we think - a colleague does not share a personal story about an aspect of his or her identity because it does not feel safe. Perhaps you've felt it too - when you struggled to say something when a colleague was put on the spot related to an aspect of his or her identity (e.g., "You're a woman, I know how you're gonna vote!"). Maybe you were reluctant to reach out to the colleague afterward to learn if she was offended, and maybe you didn't feel comfortable speaking up to the person who made the comment.

Speaking up and talking about our differences can be tricky, difficult, or taboo. People hesitate to speak up because they fear repercussions (e.g., job loss, loss of opportunities, eroded relationships, or performance-related penalties). In some work settings, speaking up or engaging in difficult conversations can have real and negative consequences: being excluded, isolated, or even punished.

Yet every needs to feel safe speaking up in the workplace. Remember, this includes not only people from non-dominant racial groups but also dominant group members who no longer want to stand by as passive witnesses to exclusionary behaviors, bias, or discrimination.



Start a Conversation

- Ask my colleagues what it would take for them to feel safe sharing their opinions and ideas.
- Ask my colleagues to talk about and set ground rules for everyone to feel safe and practice engaging in difficult conversations.
- Ask my colleagues and leaders if there are particular issues that they do not feel safe discussing.



Pay Attention

- What does it take for me to feel safe speaking up?
- Have I ever remained silent and hesitated to engage in a conversation that addressed issues of race in the workplace?