



The Juneteenth Discussions

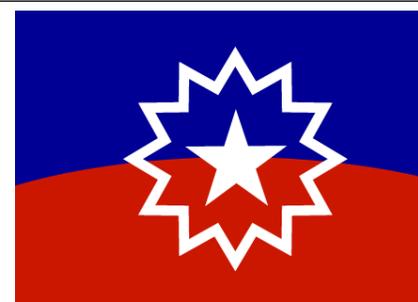
On Friday, June 5th, the Office for Inclusion and Diversity hosted an Unfinished Conversation on Race in response to the tragic death of yet another Black person at the hands of police. The purpose of the conversation was to launch campus-wide discussions about how the university, in its capacity as a university, should respond. The purpose of this guide is to assist units as they proceed with plans for conversation and action with colleagues in their areas.

What Is Juneteenth?

Juneteenth, also known as Freedom Day, Jubilee Day, Black Independence Day, and Cel-Liberation Day, is an American holiday that celebrates the emancipation of the last remaining enslaved African Americans in the Confederacy. On June 19, 1865, the Emancipation Proclamation— which had been issued on January 1, 1863— was read to enslaved African Americans in Texas by Gordon Granger. Formerly enslaved people in Galveston celebrated after the announcement, and the following year, organized the first of what became an annual celebration of freedom. Over the years, celebrations spread beyond Texas. Juneteenth is now recognized as a holiday in 47 states and the District of Columbia, with efforts underway for it to be made a federal holiday.

How does Juneteenth Guide Our Discussions?

At this historical moment when the symbolic relics of white supremacy are being dismantled in cities across the nation, it is more important than ever that we lift up Juneteenth as a day for celebration, education, and action. At Virginia Tech, Juneteenth is an opportunity to deepen knowledge around our shared history so that we may advocate for narratives that have been erased or forgotten. With this knowledge, we recommit to the Principles of Community



Juneteenth flag

Learn more about Juneteenth

What is Juneteenth?

www.history.com/news/what-is-juneteenth

What is Juneteenth?

By Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/what-is-juneteenth/

“Teaching Juneteenth,”

www.tolerance.org/magazine/teaching-juneteenth

“Ten Books to Celebrate Juneteenth
No Matter Your Age”

<https://blackandbookish.com/blog/top-ten-tuesday-juneteenth-books-for-all-ages>

and embolden ourselves—individually and collectively--to make Virginia Tech an anti-racist institution.

Leadership across the university as well as student organizations and caucuses have already issued statements condemning the violence, as well as stating their commitment to improving conditions for Black students, faculty, and colleagues. We encourage you to **read these statements**, and to then **enact** the sentiments expressed therein. As you plan to act, look first at the work you already do as instructors, researchers, professionals, advisors, coaches, administrators, and more.

Here are some questions to prompt your discussions:

How will we put the commitments in our unit / university statement into action?

How can we evaluate the work we do through an anti-racist lens?

How can we leverage the Strategic Planning process to make real change in our area?

Are we engaging with existing initiatives such as the Black College Institute, SOAR, or the Future Faculty Program that directly impact Black students and faculty? If not—how do we start?

Do we reward team members who give time to mentoring and advising minoritized students? Serving on diversity committees or caucuses? Participating in diversity education? If not—why? And, how will we fix that for the future?

Do we make time to hear from our Black colleagues about their experiences at the university? Are we sensitive to excessive service demands they may assume because they are among the few—and do we compensate or recognize them for this labor? If not, how will we change this?

How do we as individuals respond when we hear that a student or co-worker experienced racism? Is our unit prepared to respond when these concerns are raised? If not—what will we do to get ready to respond?

Is our curriculum informed by a diversity of perspectives, especially those that have been historically suppressed? If not—how will we enrich our syllabi?

Is our teaching informed by inclusive pedagogy, including an awareness of how implicit bias and stereotype threat impact minoritized students' performance? If not—how can we customize an inclusive teaching workshop for our unit?

What do we need to do differently in order to enact our unit or university statement?

Need more ideas?

Visit the Unfinished Conversations on Race page: www.inclusive.vt.edu/index/VT_UCOR.html

Preparing for Discussion

Virginia Tech is committed to the free and open expression of ideas. In order to foster a climate that appreciates the diversity of opinion, experience, and perspective in the room, it is vital to establish a safe and welcoming space. Doing this includes establishing guidelines for good dialogue and being prepared to navigate “hot” moments that may arise when addressing issues or beliefs that evoke strong feelings.

Creating the Space

We want participants to engage. The organization of the physical space makes a difference in how engaged participants will be. Since most of us are working remotely and meeting with our colleagues through online platforms like zoom, the organization of the meeting space requires even more attention. Whether meeting in person or virtually, consider:

If you are meeting in person: Is the room accessible for all participants? Are there enough seats for everyone? Are the seats comfortable? Can participants make eye contact? Is there good lighting and air circulation? Is the location free from distractions such as outside noise or piped-in music? After conducting a visual assessment of the space, determine if it is the appropriate setting for the kind of discussion you want to have. If the space is problematic, consider changing locations. If changing locations is not an option, consider what you can do to improve the physical environment by rearranging furniture or creating more privacy.

If you are meeting virtually: Do all participants have the necessary tools and bandwidth to participate? Are chat functions activated so that participants can contribute? Is there a co-facilitator who can monitor the chat? Are meeting settings secured from intruders that might disrupt (“zoom bombing”)? Are expectations clarified about when participants should mute their microphones or turn on their videos? After preparing the virtual space, determine if it is appropriate for the kind of discussion you want to have. If a virtual format is problematic, consider adjusting the nature of the discussion until there is sufficient trust within the group to tackle hard conversations online, or until the group is able to meet in-person.

Establishing Community Guidelines

Begin the discussion by establishing guidelines that build trust and community in the group. Clearly defined and communicated guidelines provide tools for participants to listen and respond with civility. Be specific and, if necessary, demonstrate what you mean by each guideline. Frame the guidelines in positive language. Invite participants to contribute their own ideas for having good conversations. Some examples of guidelines include:

Use “I” language (“In my experience”) * Listen with the goal of understanding and building connections * Speak for yourself and not for others, including groups of which you are a member * Pay attention to your personal impact on the group * Make eye contact, acknowledge the person speaking, and listen actively in order to create positive impacts * Be mindful of how long or how often you speak, avoid interrupting, and stay focused on the task at hand (no multi-tasking!) * Respect the confidentiality of the group.

Handling Hot Moments

Race discussions can evoke strong emotions. Your community guidelines are in place to help you navigate challenging or difficult conversations. If tensions become too high for productive dialogue there are some strategies you can take to handle the moment.

Take a moment to decide if you want to address the issue immediately, handle it at another time, or address it individually.

If you feel unprepared to deal with the question, comment, or topic in the moment, indicate so. Make a point to revisit it when you feel more prepared.

Remind participants of the community guidelines.

Give participants time to process the moment by asking them to write individually about their thoughts or reactions.

Where appropriate, seek to clarify the participant's point: "What do you mean by X?" Or "I heard you saying Y; is that what you meant to say?"

Try to depersonalize insensitive or marginalizing statements while modeling appropriate responses: "Some people share this view. What might their reasons be?" Then: "And why might others disagree or object to this position?"

When appropriate, validate the participant's contribution by saying, "I'm glad you raised that perspective because it's one that needs thought about carefully."

Breaking the Silence

What do you do if no one talks? You can still prompt good discussion if your group is reticent. Consider how you can help participants build their confidence in order to enter more fully into robust dialogue. There is value in beginning with simple questions that allow for brief answers, or in asking participants to write out their thoughts before stating them in front of the group. Keep in mind that some participants take longer to formulate their thoughts. Be mindful of the space these participants need in order to contribute.

Think-Pair-Share is a strategy that works well with groups of all sizes. Propose a question and ask everyone to take two minutes to consider a response. Then, have participants pair up to share responses with one or two others. After the pair-share is completed, invite volunteers to report their conversation to the large group. As each person reports out, ask the large group if they heard similarities to their own conversations. Use the break out room function for online discussions.

Circle settings are also useful for getting conversation started. Go around the circle and ask everyone to say one thing in response to a prompt. Everyone listens without commenting. After everyone has had a chance to say one thing, open the circle to cross-talk, encouraging participants to ask one another to say more about their response.

Take the risk. Be prepared. Have the conversation.

If you need assistance or just a little confidence boost, contact inclusivevt@vt.edu.