Preparing for Discussion
Facilitating Inclusive VT Insights

Virginia Tech is committed to the free and open expression of ideas. In order to foster a climate of learning 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.

Setting the Space

We want participants to talk to one another. The organization of the physical space makes a difference in how engaged participants will be. Look around the space you are using:

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.

Establishing 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 * Making eye contact, acknowledging the person speaking, and listening actively creates positive impacts * Dominating discussions, rambling, interrupting, texting, and having side conversations creates negative impacts * Respect the confidentiality of the group.

Handling "Hot" Moments

Diversity discussions sometimes evoke strong emotions, especially when connected to controversial topics. 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 discussion 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: "Many people share this perspective. 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.

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.