

Discussion Guide

If your students have had time to work on talking to each other to build understanding, it can feel like time to add to the conversations. This resource details a structure for guided conversations that start from understanding yet focus on deliberation and recommendations for navigating challenges related to free speech on campus. This guide can provide the added benefit of engaging students in ownership of the hard work of building a culture of dialogue and open inquiry on campus.



Directions

Form four small groups. Assign each group one of the following scenarios. Within each group, imagine that you are collectively in a position to advise your higher education institution on its response to this scenario. Develop recommendations for the higher education institution using the guided questions included below. After your group has had an opportunity to develop your recommendations, present your scenario and results to the full group. You do not need to answer each of the guided questions, **but please include some elements from each section of questions:**

1. Identify the problem.
2. Determine key players.
3. Develop possible response.
4. Look ahead.

Guiding Questions

1. Identify the problem.

- What part(s) of this scenario presents an issue that needs to be addressed?
- What are the competing parts of the university mission, values, or goals at play here, if any?
- What are the key tensions at play here?

2. Determine key players.

- Who are the key players affecting this case?
- What are their roles in this case?
- What is their relationship to the institution?
- What other stakeholders need to be considered?

3. Develop possible responses.

- What actions do you recommend in response to this scenario?
- Who should own these actions?
- How does the response support the fundamental mission of the institution?
- What stakeholders should be involved in formulating the response?
- What other information do you need to know?
- What are the implications of these actions for key stakeholders?
- How will you evaluate success?

4. Look ahead.

- What can be learned and applied from this scenario to help manage similar conflicts in the future?



Scenario 1: Empty Seats at the Table

A tenured professor believes that it is their pedagogical mission to create an environment of rigorous debate in their classroom. However, students, particularly students of color, have complained to the dean that the professor's approach to fostering debate creates a hostile environment and makes them feel emotionally unsafe. After a conversation with the dean, the professor suggests that they have a conversation with the students about how to debate while upholding emotional safety to create new norms. However, students say it is “too little, too late” and demand the professor be replaced or they will boycott the course.

Scenario 2: To Take a Stance or Not to Take a Stance?

Following the Supreme Court's decision to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the university president and senior leadership, who tend not to take stances on political issues in an attempt not to show bias and to create a welcoming environment for everyone, declined to issue a statement or to provide any guidance to the campus community regarding the decision. When the university does not take a stance, many students feel that the university does not support them or share their values. Additionally, faculty would like guidance from the university about how to manage this topic in their classes. Several faculty have complained that heated and unruly debates have disrupted classroom discussions. Many faculty feel that the university has left them on their own to manage conflicts among students over the decision. Lastly, staff members, particularly medical staff, feel ill-equipped and are worried about mandatory reporting rules proposed by the state legislature.

Scenario 3: Controversial Speakers and Guests

As a policy, your campus grants student groups the autonomy to invite any speaker to campus. A student club has invited a former elected official to give a talk on campus. Several former employees have accused this former elected official and members of their office of workplace sexual harassment. Although these accusations have made national news, no formal investigation has taken place as of yet. Many students do not feel the former elected official should be allowed to speak on campus. A local activist group outside the campus has denounced the speaker's presence and has gotten involved in calls to stop the speech. On the day of the speech, protestors occupy the stage to block the former elected official from speaking.

Scenario 4: Social Media Circus

Old tweets from a highly touted baseball player at the university have resurfaced and are being spread on social media. The tweets, written several years earlier when the student was still in high school, contain racial and homophobic slurs. The tweets have gone viral across the campus, amassing criticism and angry comments online. Despite an online apology from the student, many are not appeased and are demanding the school suspend the student from the baseball team. Although it is within the students' First Amendment rights to criticize their classmate online, this behavior has gotten to the point where it can reasonably be seen as creating a hostile environment on campus for the baseball player.