

Center for Teaching Innovation

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Engaging Viewpoint Diversity in the Classroom

*"From our founding, Cornell has stood for free and open inquiry and expression. **Learning flourishes in an environment where diverse ideas are presented and debated without hindrance.** As a university we prize freedom of expression just as we honor our commitment to being a community of belonging."*

-Cornell University values statement from Cornell's Freedom of Expression theme year.

Encouraging free and open inquiry, engaging wide-ranging and sometimes conflicting or contending ideas, and fostering inclusive learning environments where students feel challenged and supported are essential to Cornell's values and mission. They are also essential to the role of the university in a democratic and pluralistic society, and to Cornell's obligations under federal, state and local civil rights laws, which include [Title VI and Title IX](#). This crucial work can be difficult, especially during emotionally charged moments that affect the teaching and learning environment.

The Center for Teaching Innovation offers the following framework and approaches:

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Your Role as an Instructor

As a Cornell faculty member, you are the expert on your field, topic, and the subject matter of your courses. At the same time, you are an essential facilitator of classroom discussions where the exploration of diverse viewpoints may be critical. Instructors set up the classroom conditions for discussion, implicitly or explicitly, and provide structure and guidelines for debate, discussion, and dialogue. It takes practice to learn how to effectively facilitate and support such discussions. The [Cornell Policy Statement on Academic Freedom and Freedom of Speech and Expression](#) encourages instructors to create an atmosphere of inquiry that values diverse ideas and reasoned opposition. Cornell faculty are obligated to uphold University values and commitments as articulated in [Policy 6.4](#).

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Why Engage Viewpoint Diversity in the Classroom?

Cornell is a community that brings together people with many different beliefs, perspectives and worldviews. Engaging with diverse views helps us to meet students where they are, and to build the kind of community across difference that is essential for a vibrant university. Engaging different perspectives and world views is also central to the learning process. Students who hold different views benefit from seeing those ideas addressed and considered in class, enabling them to critically consider their perspectives and positions. Finally, learning to engage divergent views - in critical, effective and empathic ways - is central to the democratic practice itself, and to the University's distinct contribution to civic and democratic health.

Engaging with diverse views helps students learn to:

- Think critically, ask questions, and **investigate different points of view**
- **Demonstrate understanding of others' perspectives**
- **Communicate with different aims** ranging from argument to advocacy
- **Work out their own responses** to ideas with which they disagree
- **Respond respectfully** to having important beliefs challenged

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Ideas and Strategies for Course Implementation

To support instructors, the ideas below provide guidance for planned conversations that work to meet a variety of learning outcomes, as well as suggestions for unplanned discussions that may arise when immediate incidents or hot moments occur. The relevance and application of these methods will vary depending on the discipline and on course learning outcomes.

Successful classroom discussions rest on a strong foundation of trust, skill development, and classroom management within the learning community, preparing learners to handle challenging conversations in the future. Investing time and thought into laying the groundwork for rich classroom discussions is the best way to prepare students to consider diverse ideas in productive discussion.

What follows are suggestions for how to create a strong foundation for conversations that engage viewpoint diversity at various points of the semester.

Start of Semester:

- ⊕ Develop syllabus language:

- ⊕ Share community agreements and set expectations:

- ⊕ Implement ice breakers/activities:

- ⊕ Identify students' current understanding of the topic:

- ⊕ Practice foundational skills:

During the Semester:

- ⊕ Planning for discussions that may be difficult:

- ⊕ Facilitating difficult discussions:

- ⊕ Other structured activities for the exchange of ideas:

End of Semester:

⊕ Integrate what you've learned:

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Additional Resources

Cornell University Resources

- [Centers for Student Equity, Empowerment, and Belonging](#)
- [Faculty & Staff Assistance Program \(FSAP\)](#)
- [Faculty Senate](#)
- [Intergroup Dialogue Project](#)
- [Counseling and Psychological Services \(CAPS\)](#)

External Resources

- [Guidelines for Discussing Difficult or High-Stakes Topics](#), University of Michigan
- [Instructor's Guide to Academic Freedom in the Classroom](#), Colorado State University
- [Tips for creating an academic freedom policy or statement on your syllabus](#), from PEN America's *Campus Free Speech Guide*.

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References

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