



VCU

Faculty Affairs

Managing Controversial Classroom Topics

Resources for Faculty

Dear Faculty:

We recognize that we are starting the semester in an educational and political climate that is intense, somewhat frightening and quite complex. It will shape all of our pedagogical experiences, regardless of our disciplines. We also appreciate that faculty have varying degrees of experience and comfort with addressing these issues. We are here to offer resources and support. [The Division for Inclusive Excellence](#), [The Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence](#), and [The Division of Community Engagement](#) are excellent starting points. While any resources we provide you may simply add to the overwhelming amount of information you are already receiving, we are committed to provide support to all our faculty. We don't have all the answers, but we also don't have to try and address these questions alone. We know that acknowledging these concerns goes a long way toward fostering effective learning climates. Many departments are particularly well-versed in addressing these topics and we will continue to collate resources and share them with everyone as they become available

If you choose to address controversial topics in the classroom setting, or if such topics are a necessary part of your discipline and/or course materials, then it is critical to establish group norms that will guide and regulate the conversations. Here is an excellent [resource](#) that addresses ground rules, faculty rights, and best practices. Below are group norms informed by instructors at VCU that help create and maintain a safe and inclusive learning environment.

Group Norms:

- Genuine Intent
 - We assume a genuine intent to learn.
- Ouch and Educate
 - Keep in mind that you may be hurt by something someone says, but they might not know it, so you need to share when you are "hurt" by something someone says.
- Stay Present, Stay Vulnerable, Hold Space
- Intent vs. Impact
 - The intent of a comment might be different from the impact. Be mindful.
- Holding Still in Discomfort and Defensiveness
 - Being uncomfortable does not necessarily mean lack of safety.
- Utilize "I" statements
- Each the person is the authority of their own experience
- Dialogue, not debate
 - The purpose is not to debate positing one's established perspective against another. It is to explore and learn.

You can contact the Division for Inclusive Excellence, the Center for Teaching and Learning Excellence, or the Division of Community Engagement to assist in contextualizing the above group norms. You can also contact these units to plan, develop, implement, observe, assess or discuss your experiences,



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challenges or desires related to building safe, constructive and intellectually disciplined learning environments.

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What follows are resources from other institutions of higher education that address various dimensions of teaching and learning when topics and social environments become heated. Feel free to browse, read, and apply as deemed appropriate for your classes and students.

Resources for Building and Maintaining Safe and Inclusive Learning Environments

- [Techniques for diffusing the “hot moments”](#) (VCU)
- [Building Rapport](#): (University of Nebraska-Lincoln)
- [Engaging Difficult Dialogues in Higher Education](#) a Handbook (University of Alaska Anchorage)
 - [PDF copy of the handbook](#)
 - Link to [different techniques](#) for engaging difficult dialogues

Resources Specific to the Charlottesville Rallies on August 11-12, 2017

- [Responding to Critical Incidents](#) (Center for Teaching Excellence, University of Virginia)
- [Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom](#) (Harvard’s Derek Bok Center for Teaching and Learning)
- [Guidelines for Discussing Incidents of Hate, Bias, and Discrimination](#) (University of Michigan)
- [Inclusive Conversations](#) (Inside Higher by Ed Simmons)
- [Managing Difficult Dialogues: A Guide](#) (Vanderbilt University)
- [Charlottesville Syllabus: Readings on the History of Hate in America](#)
- [3 Angles to the Confederate Monument Controversy](#)
- [Teachers Share Resources for Addressing Charlottesville Hate Rally in the Classroom](#)
- [Lee, Slavery and His Opinions on Confederate Monuments](#) (NY Times)
- [Why do these confederate monuments fall apart so easily?](#) (Video)

The CTLE website (ctle.vcu.edu) has numerous additional resources faculty can explore.

- See [Inclusive Teaching](#)

Who You Can Contact

- [Division for Inclusive Excellence](#)
- [Center for Teaching & Learning Excellence](#) (CTLE)
- [Division of Community Engagement: Service Learning](#)
- **If you feel unsafe in your classroom or on campus. [VCU Police](#); 828-1234**
 - *As a faculty member, you have the right to dismiss class if you or your students do not feel safe.*

Statements from President Rao and Kevin Allison, Ph.D. are below:



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Statement from President Rao

To the VCU and VCU Health Community,

We are profoundly saddened at the deaths and injuries resulting from this weekend's tragic events in Charlottesville. We abhor the racism, antisemitism, and bigotry that spawned the demonstrations and condemn the violence that once again has senselessly shattered lives. We stand firmly with the growing chorus of voices that condemn all acts of intolerance.

Our response to the tragedy must be strong and sure, grounded in our core values. It is critical to remind ourselves of what we stand for, especially as the new academic year begins and we return to campus and our university community.

We will strive for intellectual truth with responsibility and civility, respecting the dignity of all individuals. We will work with focus, intention and a steadfast commitment to strengthen our campus community and deepen a climate of honesty and integrity where all people are valued.

Individually and collectively, we are responsible to be the best people we can be to each other.

Sincerely,

Michael Rao
President, VCU and VCU Health System

Statement from Kevin Allison, Interim Vice President for Inclusive Excellence

As we begin the 2017-18 academic year, we are struck by the deep and profound need to live up to VCU's core mission – by supporting a welcoming, inclusive and equitable learning and working environment where we honor, respect and engage with the differences of others. The tragic events at the University of Virginia underscore how important this work continues to be.

We echo President Rao's commitment to denouncing antisemitism, homophobia, racism, sexism, xenophobia and discrimination in all of its forms. We commit to working together to support VCU as an inclusive community where all voices can be heard.

We also express our profound appreciation to our colleague [Dr. Wanda Mitchell, who passed this summer and served as the inaugural Vice President for Inclusive Excellence](#). Dr. Mitchell was an exceptional leader whose work supported the development of a solid foundation on inclusion nationally and at VCU. We miss her and appreciate her many significant contributions.



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Diversity and inclusion are fundamental to VCU's educational, research, and service mission as well as its provision of high-quality health care. We have the opportunity to learn among one of the most diverse communities within the Commonwealth. We are engaged in research that deepens our knowledge and understanding of culture, gender, religion, differences in abilities and political perspectives. Our academic medical center provides care to a broad range of individuals from across the mid-Atlantic. We collaboratively integrate our teaching, discovery and scholarship with community partners to improve the lives of residents of the Commonwealth and the globe.

Last year, the campus community, led by the Council for Inclusive Excellence and Equity, completed the university's new diversity inclusion strategic action plan, which was approved by VCU's Board of Visitors in May. This fall, we will begin the implementation of the plan and integration across the institution. [Click here for a full version of the plan.](#)

This fall, the university community will also have the opportunity to continue its ongoing work and discussion on critical university, national and global issues that were raised in last year's President's Forum on Social Justice and to engage around other issues that continue to emerge across our nation and across the globe.

As the new academic year kicks off, please check the [events calendar](#) on our website for upcoming events. Many members of the campus community have worked diligently over the summer on a number of initiatives to strengthen VCU's climate across both the Monroe Park and MCV campuses. The goal of these efforts has been to focus our collective talents, concerns, skills and commitment to the critical inclusion, equity and social justice issues faced by the members of VCU community. Note in particular the upcoming [Equity and Inclusion Leadership Symposium on August 18](#), where members of our university community will share their expertise in our efforts to continue building an excellent and inclusive institution.

VCU has incredibly important work ahead this year, and we each have significant contributions to make to our university. We look forward to our collective work supporting VCU's continued progress and development as an inclusive, diverse, just and welcoming community.