

Teaching in Times of Political Tension

Many members of our community, whether faculty, staff, or students, are experiencing considerable anxiety (and other emotions) during this election season. Faculty will need to consider a number of issues that may arise in their classrooms in the upcoming week.

Prepare in advance: A college education helps to prepare students to be informed and engaged citizens in a participatory democracy. In many classes, the election may already be a topic of discussion, or students may expect for it to come up as a topic. If you haven't already, it may be helpful for you to think in advance about what you would like to say about the election (or even what kind of activity or assignment might be relevant for students to do), including how you might respond to students' questions or comments on the topic.

Consider acknowledging the event: If you are wondering about what you might say to your students in the days following the election that might be helpful, consider this sample statement from Brown University:

I understand that this is likely a challenging day to be thinking about [subject]. I also imagine that by being here today, like me, you find some reassurance in observing this moment as a community. In a minute, I will turn to the topic in the syllabus, but I do understand that it may be difficult to focus, and so I will both record the session and be available later this week in office hours to support your learning and well-being ([Harriet W. Sheridan Center for Teaching and Learning, 2020](#)).

Be compassionate: If you have scheduled exams, quizzes, or project deadlines during the next week or two, please do your best to be compassionate and flexible. Students may be distracted by stress and anxiety about the election, and may legitimately have difficulty completing work, or producing their best work. Attendance may be spotty when large numbers of students are experiencing anxiety, suspense, grief, or other disruptive emotions.

Address in-class disruptions: Unfortunately, hate speech and other biased and discriminatory actions are more likely to occur in our classrooms in times of political tension. As faculty and instructors, we are responsible for maintaining the conditions in which all students are able to learn, so we must monitor classroom interactions and preserve a classroom environment of mutual respect as well as freedom to express opinions. Although some students may wish to argue that racist or anti-Semitic, etc., language should be allowed," we have the responsibility to protect our students from hostile learning environments. Students may not use our courses as platforms for hostility or discrimination. We must redirect students who exhibit harmful language to the learning goals of our courses and help them to abide by the boundaries established in our syllabi and by our university. Students who cannot maintain civility may need to be counseled, muted, or in some cases, reported for concerning behavior. Although we may not always feel properly prepared to negotiate difficult conversations, it is important to know that ignoring or failing to address discriminatory or hurtful speech gives it your tacit approval. Ultimately, students must be able to trust that their instructor will protect them in the classroom.

For support in thinking through handling difficult conversations or maintaining positive conditions for learning, contact the Center for the Advancement of Teaching at pro-teaching@fsu.edu.