Talking about the Election

The events and circumstances occurring in our country and within our educational community present us with tremendous challenges. The 2020 Election is occurring at a time that is already stressful. We are dealing with the stresses of COVID 19 and a national confrontation of racism. All of us are being asked to do more in a constantly shifting environment due to necessary COVID protections:

- Faculty members are asked to educate, mentor, and provide college service while continuing their research programs. In addition, some are educating young children at home, some working to support aging and/or ill parents and family members of choice

- Students are being asked to continue their education and research while striving toward their professional goals. Some have been asked to take on childcare responsibilities at home; some are working from less than ideal tech settings; and some are living in unsafe homes

- Members of our staff and administration are finding ways to support and maintain some sense of normalcy in our community while preparing for and responding to unprecedented challenges. Many also have young children at home whose education they are facilitating and/or parental responsibilities.

And, as noted above, many in our community do so while facing the emotional toll brought on by the challenges of racism while also facing an election during deeply polarizing political times.

While these challenges often feel insurmountable, they also present new opportunities for creating coalitions, building bridges, and forming relationships rooted in social justice and care. These relationships are needed to help individual members who are facing numerous difficulties and to build/sustain true community. As we move through the next few weeks please try to remember:

- For many of our students this is the first election in which they will participate. We need to acknowledge that and work to make it as positive an experience as we can.

- A significant part of our population may not able to vote and so it may seem their fate in this country is in the hands of others. Try to reassure them that they are valued members of the community and help them understand the political process if they desire to know more. Point them to resources.

- For community members who are Black, Indigenous, and non-Black People of Color, the past several months have meant living with heightened racial tensions, having to endure continued violence against communities of color, and the disproportionate impact of COVID 19 on BIPOC communities.

- Many of us are struggling to maintain and negotiate relationships with neighbors, friends, and families in a time of social distancing with increased political polarization.

Below are some suggestions meant to help our community negotiate the wide range of reactions, concerns and needs.

Engaging about the Election

Check in with yourself to make sure you are in the right space to engage others about the election.
- If you are angry, scared, exhausted, or unable to be empathetic honor that. You need to be honest with yourself and others about your ability to be the right support or resource for others in a particular moment. This honesty is more likely to be well-received and humanizing than simply "going through the motions" or appearing dismissive.
- Empathy needs to be a two-way street - if you can't be empathetic to the other person or they are not being empathetic to you then you should consider finding a respectful way to indicate you can't continue to engage them on the topic.

Respect people's boundaries regarding the election.
- Students may be unable to address election dynamics in class. Offer them the ability to disengage, perhaps suggesting additional ways to clarify their thoughts and feelings -- journaling, poetry, personal time.
- Avoid putting people in a position where we are debating their humanity
- People may be feeling too impacted by the uncertainty or outcome of the election to have a productive conversation or to talk about differences, even in small group settings outside of class.

Utilize Facilitation Skills
- Set ground rules/group agreements about the conversation(s). Even in one-on-one conversations or small group discussions, establish agreements about how to discuss and how to indicate you need a break
- Encourage active listening and respectful inquiry, share "talk" time, and let others speak to one another
- Raise questions, identify group patterns while trying to say less than your participants.

For the time Focus on Supporting Rather than "Fixing"
- Educators tend to try to "fix/solve" problems, but this is not a typical moment and many of the dynamics at play are not immediately "fixable." There are institutional responses that can be taken to preserve human rights but structural power is real and the fears of many BIPOC LGBTQ folk are rooted in reality.
- Finds ways to actively listen if someone is coming to you for support and know resources you can offer individuals who need support beyond that which you can offer

Intragroup discussions are just as important as Intergroup discussions
- Hold **intragroup** discussions when possible
  - People who share identities may need to have intragroup discussions to offer each other support or better understanding about what they are experiencing.
  - Not everyone who is placed under a given "identity umbrella" shares similar experiences or views.
    - Consider creating spaces that permit *processing of similar views* as well as those that permit exploration of a *range of views* among individuals who are sometimes perceived as a homogenous political block.

- **Intergroup** discussions are likely to be different at this historical point -- less about talking out differences and more about how to find common ground with each other.
  - A topic like "Support for Voting" is something that most people support and can serve as common ground. Interrupting efforts to suppress the vote or generating ideas to help get people safely to the polls is something many can support, whatever their positions.
  - A topic like "Free speech" is more likely to establish common ground when individuals take responsibility for their words and are open to addressing their origins and consequences.
  - A topic like "Violence" is more likely to establish common ground when individuals unpack contemporary constructions of what even constitutes "violence", whose violence is deemed "acceptable," who is expected to tolerate/absorb various forms of violence, and what agreement, if any, can be reached about a commitment to non-violence.

Honor Safety - emotional/psychological and physical safety
- People experience safety in very different ways in our communities.
  - Some may live in areas where they don't feel a need to lock their doors, others face physical and verbal harassment as they go about their daily business. It's important to respect those personal understandings.
- Don't minimize people's fears and needs. Listen to them and work to support the individual.
- If people report concerning behaviors, make sure to follow up on it, getting information to appropriate people

Be Mindful of your Social Media Regarding the Election
- Consider the role of context in your life. You have many social roles and occupy different social contexts. Who has access to what forms of your social media? What you say and do on social media has a real impact on those around you in the community.