

How to Foster Identity Safety in Three Election-Related Scenarios

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An *identity-threatening incident* is an event that makes an individual feel unsafe as a result of their membership in a particular identity group, or one that provokes *social identity threat* -- the worry that one will be viewed and treated negatively because of their group memberships. The 2020 Election can be an identity-threatening event to students in many ways. In the classroom, students may be anxious to have conversations with classmates and instructors about the election because they fear biased comments, being asked to speak for their identity group, or having their lived experiences and concerns minimized.

Identity-threatening events can also occur on campus or in the community and involve individuals making derogatory statements, harassing or threatening harm, or exhibiting symbols that convey prejudice against particular identity groups. Students may also worry how the election results can directly impact their lives based on their social identities. Although these incidents may not occur within the classroom, their effect on students' mental health and ability to concentrate can extend into it by impacting learning and performance. Therefore, instructors should address these events in the classroom so that they do not impair students' success.

Key things to consider when responding to an identity-threatening event:

- Do not make it overly complicated.
- Acknowledge the incident.
- Say explicitly that it was hurtful and harmful and affirm that it is not unusual for this incident to lower one's sense of belonging, feelings of safety, concentration, etc.
- Connect students with campus resources for support, and if you feel equipped to do so, offer yourself as a resource if students want to talk about it after or outside of class.
- Reiterate your support for students as an ally and a partner in their academic success, and if applicable, communicate what you are doing to address the incident further.

Below are three possible scenarios that you might encounter leading up to the election and after it and how you can integrate the key considerations above into a response to students.

1. **An election-related event occurs on campus or in the community that likely affects your students.** For example, a candidate running for office may praise or welcome as a speaker an individual or group who disparages different identity groups or seeks to limit their rights. This could occur at a local campaign event or on an online platform. As another example, a student organization may

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sponsor a panel or open discussion that becomes an avenue for individuals to express harmful statements about different identity groups.

How could instructors respond to an event like this?

A response, like the one below, can be included in a written announcement to the class, short recorded video shared with students, or spoken in synchronous or in person class meetings. Be sure that you focus on what you can say to ensure identity safety in the course (i.e., students feel welcomed, valued, respected, and recognized as having the potential to succeed), particularly for students from the identity groups most affected by the identity-threatening event. Although many people are feeling anxiety and stress around the upcoming election, this message should focus upon supporting those who are more directly impacted by the event. Also, carefully consider how you might acknowledge the identity groups affected; you should note what occurred, but care should be taken not to put a spotlight on students from those identity groups in your course.

Example response: "I am aware that on Monday, [identity threatening incident] happened [on campus/in another course/in the community/etc.]. This event has caused fear, anger, stress, and pain for members of our campus community, especially individuals from [impacted identity group(s)]. When this type of situation occurs, especially when tied to an election like this year's, it is normal to feel overwhelmed or anxious and to have difficulty concentrating at times. I have posted links to some of the resources [University name] provides to our course website. If your health, well-being, or school work are being impacted by this event, I encourage you to make use of these resources. If you need someone to talk to about this event, please reach out to me and/or the listed resources. I am here to support you in your learning and growth."

- The election comes up in your course.** For many instructors, this situation may be one that provokes the most anxiety, especially if the course content is not directly linked to the election. If a student's comment is a general statement about the importance of the election, validate the student's civic interest and commitment. If students are making connections from the course to the election, applaud this application of their learning to real-world events. If the discussion includes concerns about identity safety, communicate a similar message as in the previous section. However, what if a student makes an insensitive or hurtful comment? Below is an example response, integrating the considerations from above, to address such a comment.

How could instructors respond to insensitive or hurtful comments?

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When an insensitive or hurtful comment related to the election occurs in class, it is important to focus on maintaining an identity-safe environment over holding a seemingly objective “academic” conversation about it. Critical thinking is a valuable skill for our students to hone, but what is key in this moment is to encourage active listening and self-reflection.

Example response: “I want for us to pause for a minute. It is important to understand that we view the world through our own lenses based on our backgrounds, and that these lenses can lead to blindspots in our understanding of others’ lived experiences, particularly the bias and disadvantage they might have experienced or continue to experience. Please consider that this issue or policy can have a profound impact on others’ lives. Just because we have not experienced it ourselves does not mean that we should discount others’ experiences. If anyone would like to discuss this further, please come to my drop-in hours. I’m here to support everyone’s learning and growth in our course.”

If a course topic or assignment has the potential to bring up the election, note that discomfort is possible, remind students of the course conduct and university freedom of speech policies, and provide a model response before the discussion or an online forum opens for students to post. For asynchronous online forums, regularly review students’ posts to one another, and respond as quickly as possible to insensitive or hurtful comments. Also, consider how prepared students are to engage in exercises like reflecting upon identity-threatening events and responding to others’ reactions before including such exercises in course forums, breakout groups, or class discussions.

- A student emails you asking for flexibility due to the election.** Identity-threatening events can affect students’ mental health and ability to concentrate, thereby potentially impacting their learning and performance in class. A student may reach out to disclose how an election-related event has or is impacting them and ask for an extension. As another example, a student may email with discomfort about completing an election-related assignment and ask for flexibility in how they complete it. Below are ways that instructors can respond in these situations.

How can instructors respond?

One thing that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the forefront in higher education is the importance of extending grace and flexibility in these times and also beyond them. As such, many instructors have built in forms of flexibility for students already: grace periods for late work, dropping the lowest quiz score or re-taking an exam opportunities, and a technology glitch restart. Students can be encouraged to utilize these opportunities and not feel obligated to denote why they are

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utilizing them. Additionally, you can proactively build in flexibility for coursework for the whole class around Election Day. This could involve moving back assignment deadlines, an exam, or cancelling class. If you have a synchronous online course component, you can let students know that it is okay for them to have the webcam and audio off or participate as they are able. Lastly, consider whether an assignment needs to be about the election. Offer other topics for students to complete the same requirements or allow leeway for the perspective and/or form that the assignment can take.

Example response to a student's message: “[Student Name], thank you for sharing this with me. I understand that this election is deeply affecting many of us, and it can be difficult to learn and perform our best under these circumstances. I have posted links to some of the resources that [University name] provides to our course website. If your health, well-being, or school work are being impacted, I encourage you to make use of these resources. If you need someone to talk to about what you are experiencing, let’s set up a time to chat to make sure that you are connected to the resources that you need. Importantly, for our course, I have [provide the flexible options that you have made available] to help provide a buffer for students so that this event does not deter from their success in this course. I am here to support you in your learning and growth.”

If multiple students reach out to you, consider sending a similar message out to the whole class to remind them of points of flexibility, share resources, and ensure that these are equally available to all students, not just students who reached out to you.