

# The Elephants in the Room

Facilitating Conversations around Sensitive Issues

January 12<sup>th</sup> Flex Day

# Starting with the “Why”

Why is equity becoming such a prominent topic in community colleges?

# 2007 CSM Demographics

- African American: 3.8%
- Asian: 15%
- Asian Indian: 1.2%
- Filipino: 6.5%
- Latinx: 19.7%
- Native American: 0.5%
- Pacific Islander: 2.2%
- White: 38.7%
- Other: 13.4%

# 2016 CSM Demographics

- African American: 2.8%
- Asian: 21.8%
- Filipino: 7.3%
- Latinx: 28.8%
- Native American: 0.1%
- Pacific Islander: 2.0%
- White: 29.2%
- Multi-race: 5.6%
- Unknown: 2.4%

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# The Elephants in the Room

- Race and racism
- Misogyny, sexism, and sexual harassment/assault
- Homophobia and transphobia
- Ableism
- Ethnocentrism and nativism
- Islamophobia
- Anti-semitism
- Ageism
- What else??

# Possible Responses

- Ignore it
- Lecture at the student(s)
- Engage in dialogue
  - At that moment
  - In the following class

# Engaging with the students

- Addressing a topic or comment is beneficial for many reasons. It not only makes the classroom more engaging and dynamic but it also shows that you are caring and compassionate.
- Ignoring an inappropriate comment would suggest that you condone it, and ignoring a comment about a sensitive topic would either make you look unknowledgeable or uncaring.



# Composure

What if the comment or topic catches you off guard?

- Ask the students to write about it. They should write down their reactions, how it made them feel, and why they believe they feel that way.
- Collect the free-writes and use them to create a plan for addressing the issue in the next class.

# Example

- After handing back the grades for a particularly difficult test, one student says, “that test raped me.”
- A few students chuckle, several don't notice the comment, but a couple look mortified or annoyed by the comment.

# Strategies

- Acknowledge the comment. In this case, let the student know that his comment was inappropriate and that it likely made some students uncomfortable.
- Do not attack the student who made the comment and remind the rest of the class that we all have different upbringings and lived experiences.
- Ask the students to write about it and either let them out early or continue the lesson (which is often difficult after such an incident).
- Review the free-writes and plan the next class. After a couple of days, you will likely be more equipped to speak about misogyny, rape culture, and sexual assault.

# General Strategies

- Don't attack the student
- Ask questions
- Engage the entire class
- Don't spread misinformation
- Be available outside class for students
- Respect the students' lived realities

# Conflict Management

- Mediation
- Partner with your dean

# Scenarios & Discussion

# Scenario 1

During a conversation that involves politics or the federal government, a student says to the class, “Donald Trump is racist.” How do you respond?

# Scenario 2

While reading from a novel, a student reads prose that includes the n-word. Instead of replacing it with the “n-word,” he actually says it. What do you do?



# Scenario 3

Before class, your students are chatting and joking around. One black student loudly calls another black student the n-word. How do you respond?

# Small Group Role-Playing

# Debrief

What was your scenario?

What strategies did the teacher use to discuss the topic?

What would you do differently next time?