

**Difficult Discourse and Critical Pedagogies:  
A Large-Scale Mixed-Methods Exploration of Faculty Practice**

Sarah Hurtado<sup>a</sup>

Allison BrckaLorenz<sup>b</sup>

Lesley Sisaket<sup>a</sup>

Sylvia Washington<sup>b</sup>

a. University of Denver

b. Indiana University Bloomington

**Abstract**

Using critical pedagogy as our framework, this study's purpose is to explore faculty members' ability to engage in difficult discourse with their students and their use of related critical pedagogies. The findings come from a large-scale multi-institution mixed-methods study to provide guidance for faculty to participate in this work.

*Keywords: faculty, critical pedagogy, difficult discourse*

### DIFFICULT DISCOURSE3

Given recent events in the United States related to the COVID-19 pandemic and the uprising of protests against racial injustice, higher education institutions cannot ignore how faculty are or are not prepared to support students and have conversations about difficult topics. By difficult topics we are referring to topics that might be considered by some as controversial, emotional, or challenging to navigate such as conversations about power and privilege (Watt, 2007). Education is constantly impacted by the socio-political climate that surrounds it; continuously contributing to the dividing perceptions of the field and influencing the construction and perpetuation of traditional pedagogical approaches within educational classrooms (Taylor, 2011). Unable to predict the trajectory of socio-politically influenced discourse from entering into educational classrooms, faculty members are often on the frontlines of navigating difficult conversations that push against systems of power and oppression that are embedded into the fabrics of higher education. With the increasing presence of diversity in classrooms, being aware of your identity and positionality as a faculty member, and being prepared to facilitate tough conversation around sensitive topics such as systematic oppression and personal disclosures of abuse, health, immigration, and sexual identity are clear and pressing challenges. In turn, how faculty members navigate such discourse has proven to have an impactful contribution to the educational experiences of their students, both positively and negatively (Sax et al., 2005; Delucia & Iasenza, 1995; Linder et al., 2015).

The purpose of the current study is to examine what challenging topics are being discussed and what strategies faculty use in navigating these conversations. This mixed-methods study utilizes large-scale multi-institution quantitative and qualitative survey responses to provide evidence for the following research questions:

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE4

1) How prepared are various faculty for dealing with challenging teaching situations and what strategies do they use?

2) How prepared are various faculty to support students facing intimately personal sociopolitical concerns?

3) How frequently, and about what kinds of topics, do faculty engage in these examples of difficult discourse?

The goal of this study was to highlight the emerging literature on faculty capability to handle difficult discussions in the classroom, and to showcase strategies employed, while addressing challenging teaching situations. We include a positionality statement to emphasize our relationship as students and faculty members who have encountered challenging discourse. With the emerging themes produced from the study, the data includes quantitative and qualitative national survey responses from different disciplines, stress faculty engagement, and strategies used to navigate challenging discourse.

### **Literature Review**

#### **Difficult dialogues**

Watt (2007) defines *difficult dialogue* as “a verbal or written exchange of ideas or opinions between citizens within a community that centers on an awakening of potentially conflicting views of beliefs or values about social justice issues (such as racism, sexism, ableism, heterosexism/homophobia)” (p.116). Further, Quaye (2012) differentiates between debate, dialogue, and discussion as three approaches when engaging in difficult conversations in the classroom. A debate is “a situation where one party wins the argument, and the other party loses” (Quaye, 2012, p.212) by providing evidence to convince others of one’s viewpoint. Dialogue is “a way of being with another person” (Quaye, 2012, p. 212) that is grounded in mutual

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE5

understanding of different perspectives, while discussion breaks down the conversation into different fragments to examine each component. The goal of a discussion is to have closure and to develop one meaning on an issue. Faculty and students that engage in discussion aim to justify and defend their views by approaching sensitive topics from a holistic approach.

Discussions about social justice issues and white privilege can be uncomfortable for faculty and students, particularly when they have not received the proper training to direct these conversations in the classroom (Watt, 2007). Many faculty members have reported that engaging in sensitive or difficult conversations produces an emotional atmosphere that can be challenging while teaching (Watt, 2007). Watt (2007) notes that faculty and students can both engage in and withdraw from difficult dialogues. Studies have shown that engaging in dialogue can be an essential tool in raising consciousness and exploration of personal identity (Coomes & Debard, 2004; Watt, 2007). It is through the engagement in challenging conversations that extends critical consciousness and encourages one to confront their privileges (Watt, 2007; Love-Gaynor, 2011). Yet, those who have gained experience navigating difficult conversations still encounter unexpected “hot moments” in the classroom. Without adequate training, faculty are underprepared to facilitate sensitive conversations and lack the technique to prepare their students for challenging discussions (Stornaiuolo, 2016; Merryfield, 2000, 2003), which might actually be causing more harm.

### **Faculty Preparedness for Difficult Dialogues**

Love, Gaynor, and Blesett (2016) state faculty are often unprepared and have a lack of training to facilitate tough conversations around sensitive topics while maintaining an inclusive environment for their students. Without training, “college professors are often ‘thrown into the fire’ of teaching without adequate pedagogical preparation, and what little training is received is

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE6

unlikely to address facilitating dialogue around sensitive topics while fostering an inclusive classroom culture” (Love & Gaynor, 2011, p.229). The result is that faculty usually respond to difficult conversations by “ignoring an incident, changing the subject, or adjourning without addressing the source of tension” (Harper, 2014, p. 218). This approach places students, often those who hold marginalized identities, in a vulnerable and unsettling classroom atmosphere. Further, some students have difficulty separating instructor teaching practices from how they feel about the course content (Watt, 2007). As a response, establishing rapport has been found to be useful in having difficult discussions and resolving classroom conflicts (Meyers et al., 2006).

Still, Perry, Moore, Edwards, Acosta, & Frey (2009) found that college professors who teach diversity courses are not prepared to facilitate challenging conversations that focus on sensitive topics. Failure to appropriately handle and navigate such situations raises questions around the kinds of implicit messages that faculty members are sending to their marginalized students, as well as raising concerns around how such under-preparedness perpetuates the institutional practice of taxing faculty and staff of color to facilitate these more challenging conversations (Ackar, 2006). Furthermore, the rejection to engage in difficult conversation around sensitive topics only highlights the acceptance of colorblindness in academia (Love et al, 2016).

### **Impact on Student Learning**

Whether or not faculty are prepared to address challenging topics or hold difficult dialogues with students plays a role in student learning. DeLucia and Iasenza (1995) interrogated how faculty members often engage in discourse, uncovering that faculty members are hesitant to address disruptive behaviors that occur within their courses. Their findings illuminate how detrimental such hesitations can be to the learning experience of students, while also citing that

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE7

faculty members' hesitancy is due, in part, to their lack of understanding of institutional policies (DeLucia & Iasenza, 1995). Their work demonstrated the need for training on institutional resources and policies for faculty members (Delucia & Iasenza, 1995).

Sax, Bryant, and Harper (2005) found students who experienced intellectual, emotional, and career encouragement felt supported by their faculty. Further reporting that faculty support increased confidence around their students' "abilities as scholars, achievers, and leaders; an enhanced sense of emotional well-being; and greater satisfaction with faculty contact and with the campus community" (p.648). On the other hand, scholars have found that students who felt faculty members did not take their comments seriously in class or failed to address and navigate troubling conversations were less satisfied with the broader campus (Mayhew et al., 2005; Linder et al., 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

Emphasizing the importance of faculty engagement and their ability to facilitate challenging discourse within the classroom, our study utilizes critical pedagogy to explore faculty perceptions of their own levels of preparedness when handling challenging conversations, while also exploring strategies that faculty have utilized to aid them during such situations. Inspired by critical theories, "Critical pedagogy embodies notions of how one teaches, what is being taught, and how one learns" (Breunig, 2005, p.109). Critical pedagogy is meant to aid in students' abilities to challenge and critique the varying power structures that may exist within the classroom (Chege, 2009). The hope is that using critical pedagogy will guide students to a sense of liberation on individual and collective levels, as it pertains to their own lived experiences. The basis of critical pedagogy is that it acknowledges that humans, as beings and learners, exists within cultural contexts and serves to "challenge the assumptions, practices, and outcomes taken

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE8

for granted in dominant culture in conventional education” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 4), while also emphasizing that situations shape how human beings *are* and that their evolution of self can be shaped the more they critically reflect and act upon it (Freire, 1995). The level of criticality that is embedded within critical pedagogy considers belief claims as various parts of a system that, once all are combined, amount to a level of effect that fuel the power structures of our society (Burbules & Berk, 1999). In essence, critical pedagogy ponders the thought of who, exactly, do such power systems benefit. To unravel this, critical pedagogy remains persistent in centering social injustice and seeks to uncover and addresses inequitable, undemocratic, or oppressive institutions and social relations in praxis and discourse (Burbules & Berks, 1999).

Ira Shor (2012), a critical pedagogic educator, describes critical pedagogy as “habits of thought that go beneath surface meaning...to understand the deep meaning, root causes, social context, ideology, and personal consequences of any action, organization, or discourse” (p. 129). Zion, Allen, and Jean (2015) captured the international utilization of critical pedagogy in education indicating it has been used to promote and create opportunities that encourage students to examine oppressive practices and ideologies that often operate within the space (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015). Through its application, critical instructions have even emerged to address anti-racism in their education systems, but the authors (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015) warn that while there may be great rewards for educators who utilize critical pedagogies within the classroom, it is imperative that they also “learn and practice acting as agents of change against oppression in the educational system” (p. 915). This learning and practice includes understanding how to uphold the role of a change agent while navigating sociopolitical discourses with students (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015).

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE<sup>9</sup>

Partnered with educational institutions, critical pedagogy strives to raise questions around inequalities of power, false myths about the ideas of opportunity and merit, and how the belief systems that are engrained within educational institutions have become “internalized to the point where individuals and groups abandon the very aspiration to question or change their lot in life” (Burbules & Berk, 1999, p. 7). In utilizing critical pedagogy as our grounding framework, we sought to illuminate how educators attempt to approach teaching with a sense of neutrality, but the reality is that there will always be discourse and perspectives that are present within the classroom that should be centered and addressed which further emphasizes the importance of how faculty navigate such conversations and interactions.

### **Research Design**

The purpose of this study was to better understand faculty members’ ability to engage in difficult discourse with their students and their use of related critical pedagogies. This mixed-methods study used large-scale multi-institution quantitative and qualitative survey responses to provide evidence for the following research questions: 1) How prepared are various faculty for dealing with challenging teaching situations and what strategies do they use to do so? 2) How prepared are various faculty to support students facing intimately personal sociopolitical concerns? And 3) How frequently and about what kinds of topics do faculty engage in these examples of difficult discourse?

### **Data Source**

The data for this study comes from the 2020 administration of the Faculty Survey of Student Engagement (FSSE) in which 13,000 faculty from 94 four-year degree-granting colleges and universities responded. FSSE asks faculty about their use of educational practices that are

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE10

empirically linked to student learning and development. Participating institutions were similar to the profile of U.S. bachelor's-granting colleges and universities with an underrepresentation of part-time faculty (FSSE, 2020). In 2020, FSSE administered a special item set at 23 institutions that focused on challenging situations and topics of conversation that can develop in course discussions. Specifically, questions asked faculty how prepared they were to deal with these situations, how frequently they have challenging conversations with their students, and what strategies faculty have developed for handling difficult situations. Find the complete wording of items used in this study in Table 1.

The institutions in this subset were varied in terms of characteristics. Around half of the faculty in this study (51%) were employed at doctoral-granting institutions, close to two in five (38%) were employed at master's-granting institutions, with the remaining (12%) were employed at bachelor's-granting institutions. Over three-quarters (78%) of faculty were employed at publicly controlled institutions with the remaining (22%) employed at private not-for-profit institutions. One out of five (20%) faculty were employed at minority-serving institutions. Institutions were in the Mid East, Great Lakes, Southeast, Southwest, and Rocky Mountains regions of the United States.

There was quite a bit of diversity in terms of respondent characteristics. For disciplinary appointment, about a quarter of faculty were from Arts & Humanities. The next largest group was from Health Professions (15%). There were relatively equal proportions of faculty from Physical Sciences, Math, and Computer Science (10%), Business (10%), Education (12%) and fewer from Biological Science, Agriculture, & Natural Resources (7%), Social Sciences (1%), Communication, Media, and Public Relations (4%), Engineering (3%), and Social Service Professions (4%). In terms of rank, Full Professor, Associate Professor, and Assistant Professor

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE11

ranks each represented about a quarter of respondents with the remaining split between full- and part-time Lecturer/Instructor. Over half of the faculty members were either on the tenure-track or already tenured. Over half of the respondents identified as women (55%). With regard to race, the majority of faculty members identified as white (67%). For a full list of respondent characteristics see Table 2.

### **Data Analysis**

To answer our first question about how prepared various faculty are for dealing with challenging teaching situations, we created a scale to represent the aspects of faculty preparation asked about on the FSSE survey questionnaire: *Prepared*. See Table 1 for scale descriptives and properties. This scale represents how prepared faculty feel to effectively deal with things such as student incivility, conflict, or controversial events on campus. We used a linear OLS regression with *Prepared* as the dependent variable and all demographics and characteristics listed in Table 2 as independent variables. We considered *Prepared* and faculty age to be continuous measures and standardized them before entry into the model so that we could interpret coefficients as effect sizes. We used effect coding for the remaining multicategorical variables so that we could compare findings to the average score of faculty in the model as opposed to a predetermined reference category (Mayhew & Simonoff, 2015). To understand what strategies faculty use to do so, we analyzed the open-ended question *Describe a strategy you have used to deal with a difficult situation you encounter in your courses*. We used an inductive coding strategy to identify the different strategies and then identified themes.

To answer our second research question about how prepared various faculty are to support students facing intimately personal sociopolitical concerns, we first dichotomized the individual items so that we coded faculty responding *Very much* or *Quite a bit* as 1, and we

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE<sup>12</sup>

coded faculty responding with *Some*, *Very little*, or *Not at all* as 0. We then used a series of logistic regression models with the preparation items as dependent variables and all the demographics and characteristics from Table 2 as independent variables. We again standardized faculty age so that we could interpret coefficients as effect sizes.

To answer our final question about how frequently faculty engage in these kinds of topics, we ran a series of ANOVA analyses with post hoc Tukey tests to look at differences in the average frequency of individual items about discussions in different contexts by various faculty demographics and characteristics. To follow-up with the kinds of topics faculty engage in during these examples of difficult discourse, we used inductive coding to analyze the item *Please share examples of the topics of your challenging conversations with your students*.

### **Positionality**

All four of the researchers in this study have a vested interest in this topic. Two of the researchers (Sarah and Allison) serve as faculty members and have experience with experiencing challenging situations in the classroom or needing to support students facing sociopolitical challenges. Neither felt they were adequately prepared to engage in these efforts and had to learn by doing in many ways. Two of the researchers (Lesley and Sylvia) are current doctoral students who, in their own classroom experiences, have witnessed and personally experienced when a faculty member is ill-prepared to address difficult topics. As members of different marginalized groups based on our gender, sexual orientation, and/or race, we all know the feeling of not being adequately supported in the academy. We all know the important role faculty can play, positively or negatively, with regard to these issues. In all, our positionality shaped the survey items that were developed for this study and the research questions that we asked.

### **Limitations**

We had some faculty respondents that identified with a non-cisgender identity, but there were too few to include within statistical comparisons. We did not want to silence their responses entirely, so we included descriptives of their responses in Table 2. It is also important to note that there were no respondents in this study who identified as Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander so future studies should work to include these faculty. Again, due to small sample sizes, we combined several groups of faculty based on their racial/ethnic identification: American Indian, Alaska Native, Middle Eastern, North African, and those identifying with “another race or ethnicity” than those listed on the survey. We grouped these faculty together for statistical analyses, and results should be interpreted with caution. We separately, however, included descriptives for the responses of these groups in Table 2. Although we made choices to report on the experiences of subgroups when possible, we do not assume the experiences of these groups are monolithic and acknowledge that future research should better understand the variation of experiences for faculty within these groups.

## Results

See Table 2 for counts and percentages of faculty respondents by the various demographics and characteristics we used throughout this study.

**Preparation for dealing with challenging teaching situations.** In looking at descriptives, we see that faculty, in general, feel prepared to deal with challenging teaching situations. Several demographics and characteristics, however, serve as predictors for faculty to score higher or lower than the average faculty score on the *Prepared* scale. Faculty in Biological Sciences, Agricultural, and Natural Resources fields ( $B = -.321, p < .001$ ) as well as faculty in Physical Sciences, Mathematics, and Computer Science fields ( $B = -.314, p < .001$ ) report feeling less prepared than average. Faculty who identify as women ( $B = -.217, p < .01$ ) or as

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE<sup>14</sup>

White ( $B = -.124, p < .05$ ) also feel less prepared to deal with challenging teaching situations. Faculty in Social Service Professions fields ( $B = .368, p < .01$ ) or at institutions without a tenure system ( $B = .299, p < .05$ ) report feeling more prepared than average. Faculty who identify as Black ( $B = .348, p < .001$ ) also report feeling more prepared to deal with challenging teaching situations. See Table 3 for additional details.

**Strategies for dealing with challenging teaching situations.** Faculty reported that many of the strategies used to de-escalate “hot moments” in the classroom fall under the conflict resolution, emotion, and resource section. Faculty recounted using one-on-one, rapport building, and de-escalation approaches when dealing with challenging teaching situations. Overwhelmingly, faculty noted that creating a safe space for discussion of sensitive topics helped students to express their ideas and opinions. Some faculty reported that they chose not to engage in discussions pertaining to religion, politics, and social justice issues. Below are the primary themes identified from this analysis and some example comments from each.

*Pedagogical Approaches:* The pedagogical approaches included inclusive pedagogy, team-based approaches, and safe spaces. Faculty used rapport building with their students to build trust through student and faculty relationships. One faculty member shared, “By the nature of my course, many students have disclosed personal information. I thank them for trusting me and, depending on what is disclosed, let the proper groups on campus know (e.g., Title IX, Dean of Students).” Creating a safe space for students to share their thoughts, reportedly was expressed amongst faculty members as an effective approach. Also, faculty members utilized team building and learning opportunities in the classroom. Faculty members encourage students to build relationships with their peers to foster a safe and open space.

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE15

*Emotion:* Emotion focused on empathy and humor as the two sub-categories. Faculty reported employing the method of empathy to understand their student's feelings. To build emotional intelligence, a faculty member suggested using *I feel* statements to show a level of care. Sharing some form of empathy helps to build a trusting relationship where a student can feel safe sharing their ideas, beliefs, and feelings towards a topic. Faculty members expressed how taking the time to understand a student's emotions facilitated learning opportunities for all students in the classroom.

*Conflict Resolution:* Under conflict resolution three sub-themes included mediation, dialogue, and listening. Faculty noted that actively listening to students helped with creating a space where students are able to discuss their feelings openly. Being able to encourage open discussion in the classroom has helped to de-escalate emotional tensions regarding sensitive or challenging topics. Also, faculty reported approaching a student to have a private or one-on-one conversation after class to help resolve conflict. As an example, one faculty shared, "simply asked a student to wait and talk to me after class to deal with an interpersonal conflict between students."

*Conduct:* Conduct included suspension and dismissal or removal. Faculty rarely reported using suspension during classroom conflict. Whereas, faculty used dismissal or removal as a form of conduct only when a student became physical or verbally disruptive. One faculty shared, "Removed student from the situation and gave him time to cool down. Had a frank discussion about behavior and grades." This approach seemed to be used in more extreme cases to maintain order and control in a classroom.

*Resources:* This section was divided into four sub-themes which included following institutional policies or procedures, counseling-related, involving other institutional agents, and

health-related services. A faculty member simply stated, “Relying on help from those who are trained professionally, i.e., the counseling center.” Faculty reported that they would recommend students to additional resources to assist with maintaining a productive classroom environment. On the other hand, faculty would refer a student to a counseling related service to assist with their mental wellbeing.

**Preparation for supporting students with personal sociopolitical concerns.** Faculty feelings of preparation to support students with various concerns varied by disciplinary area as well as a variety of faculty characteristics. No differences were found in faculty perceptions of preparation by academic rank or tenure status. See details in Table 3.

*Predictors for more preparation.* Faculty in Arts & Humanities and Social Service Professions felt more prepared to support students with concerns about sexual assault and racism or racialized experiences. Faculty in Social Sciences and Health Professions fields felt prepared to support students facing mental health concerns. Faculty in Social Service Professions felt prepared to support students concerned about immigration issues. Faculty in Social Sciences and Social Service Professions feel more prepared to support students with a disclosure of sexual orientation or the upcoming presidential election. Additionally, faculty in Social Sciences fields feel more prepared to support students with a disclosure of a gender identity. Men feel more prepared to support students concerned about the upcoming presidential election. Asian faculty feel more prepared to support students with immigration concerns, Black or African American faculty are more prepared to support students concerned about racism, and multiracial faculty feel more prepared to support students with mental health concerns. Faculty identifying as LGBTQ+ feel more prepared to support students concerned with disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity.

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE17

*Predictors for less preparation.* Faculty in Physical Science fields feel less prepared to support students facing concerns about sexual assault, racism, mental health, or the upcoming presidential election. Faculty in Business fields felt less prepared to support students with mental health concerns and Engineering faculty felt less prepared to support students facing concerns with racism, disclosure of a sexual orientation, or the upcoming presidential election. Older faculty, women, and White faculty felt less prepared to support students concerned about immigration matters. Black or African American faculty and faculty who identify as straight felt less prepared to support students concerned with the disclosure of a sexual orientation or gender identity.

**Frequency of engagement in difficult discourse.** Across the different aspects of engagement with difficult discourse, faculty in Social Sciences and Communications fields are having more of these conversations. Faculty in Physical Sciences, Engineering, and Biological Sciences tend to have less frequent challenging conversations with their students. Part-time faculty and Full Professors tend to have fewer of these conversations than their peers. Hispanic or Latinx and Black or African American faculty tend to have more of these conversations while their Asian peers tend to have fewer. There weren't many notable differences in faculty engagement in difficult discourse by tenure status, faculty age, gender identity, or sexual orientation. See more details about these analyses in Table 4.

**Topics of difficult discourse.** In addition to exploring levels of preparedness and strategies used by faculty to aid them in navigating challenging conversations within their classroom, our study also sought to uncover topics faculty found to be challenging for them to address while in their teaching roles. Faculty shared a wide variety of topics, many of which were related to current issues students are facing including the COVID-19 pandemic, police

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE18

brutality, and the presidential election. Broadly, we identified the following themes: social justice, personal, violence, politics, and academics. Each of these themes is described in more detail below with some examples.

*Social justice:* Under this category we coded the various topics that were related to systems of power and oppression or how they are addressed in our society. As examples, racism, sexism, police brutality, LGBTQ+, religion, politics (e.g., how politics perpetuated systems of oppression). For example, a faculty member shared that they discussed “racial biases, blindness, inequities. Historical and institutional racism.” Another faculty member shared, “We live in the rural south. There are very strong beliefs related to gender identity, homosexuality, etc. I have had discussions with students who could not be swayed to consider that not everyone is the same and that differences are not something to be feared or judged, rather they should be embraced and accepted.”

*Personal:* Although there was some overlap with the types of topics addressed in the social justice theme, the comments in this area were more focused on personal student disclosure of these topics. Some of these personal disclosures included mental health, finance, LGBTQ+ (e.g., personal experiences), religion (e.g., personal beliefs), academic (e.g., student’s standing in the course), health, loved ones, death, substance (e.g., use or abuse of a substance or substances), and homelessness (e.g., personal experiences). Several faculty members shared they discussed students’ mental health and personal deaths in their family as difficult topics.

*Violence:* This theme involved student disclosure of experiences with violence including physical, mental, and emotional violence that may not involve or stem from sexual abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, or rape. One faculty member shared that, “Sexual assault and

harassment rank highest, but also discussions of food and housing insecurity -- I find students more willing to reveal the traumas and problems they face than I was at their age.”

*Politics:* Politics included discourse addressing leadership at the institutional, state, federal, or global level, or addressed immigration, abortion, climate change, religion, and science. “Politics certainly come up, but I remember most vividly the student who came to me after handguns were legalized on campus. He talked about how absolutely scary that was, that now someone could just potentially shoot him just because he is black and walking next to them.”

*Academic:* The academic theme captured conversations where students critiqued institutional leadership, other faculty performance, or institutional policies and procedures. As an example, one faculty member shared they discussed “when a student has angrily disagreed with the information I was teaching.”

### **Discussion**

Students bring so much into the classroom—they hold a multitude of identities and experiences that shape who they are and how they are able to engage in learning. Yet, faculty are not necessarily prepared to incorporate these identities and experiences into the learning process. Instead, faculty are urged to be neutral and objective—to teach disciplinary canon. The act and approach of neutrality in higher education not only lacks consideration for its diverse student body, but can also subject marginalized identities to additional harms within the academy by calling upon students to utilize their lived experiences and traumas as a teaching tool for their peers. To relieve students of this labor, it is imperative that faculty members understand and are aware of how to navigate and facilitate challenging conversations that may arise within their

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE20

courses. Additionally, for faculty who find their engagement to be limited or done with hesitation, it is equally important to identify the kinds of support that may be needed in order to aid in faculty competency and comfort when navigating challenging conversations.

The findings of this study demonstrate a couple of different trends that may not be much of a shock for many. On the individual level, faculty who state they are more prepared and more frequently engage in these difficult conversations or topics are those who are from historically marginalized identities. Our findings support previous research about who carries the weight of bringing up difficult topics in the classroom (Linder et al., 2015). This demonstrates that some faculty see doing this work as more of their responsibility than others. On the disciplinary level, we also see a trend. Faculty from hard science field are doing this work less frequently and feel less prepared. This also aligns with previous research about which faculty believe this work to be relevant to their students' learning. Addressing personal concerns or those related to identity are frequently viewed as not related to STEM disciplinary content (Favero et al., 2019). However, this brings up concerns about the experiences of the students in these courses and disciplines and whether they are feeling adequately supported by their faculty members.

The findings from the open-ended questions also demonstrated an interesting trend about how faculty address certain topics or issues in the classroom. There was a tendency by faculty members to remove challenging conversation from the classroom to be addressed outside of the classroom space. While this might be beneficial in some cases, this approach does not necessarily address what was experienced or witnessed in the classroom by the other students in the room. This approach might negatively influence the perceptions of the students in the courses, because they are left with the situation or conversation being unresolved.

Overall, these findings related to student disclosures, campus controversies, and conflicts between students demonstrate two potential issues. First, not all faculty see this work as part of their responsibility—these are issues better handled by others on campus. This possibly comes back to the historic bifurcation of responsibility between faculty and student affairs—with student affairs viewed as responsible for issues and topics deemed more personal and less academic (Bourassa & Kruger, 2001). The second issue is that faculty members are not being prepared to address these issues whether they see it as their responsibility or not. This likely is due to graduate programs being more focused on disciplinary content rather than pedagogy and student development. In either case, by not attending to the myriad of issues students may be facing, faculty are doing a disservice to their overall learning and development.

### **Implications**

In thinking about implications for practice, we believe that Centers for Teaching and Learning should think about the ways they are preparing and providing resources for addressing difficult topics and situations in the classroom. This year in particular, there has been increased attention paid to certain issues (racism, police brutality, etc.), but that does not necessarily mean that faculty are handling this work well. In particular, Centers for Teaching and Learning might specifically cater programmatic efforts to the faculty from privileged identities or in disciplines that do not necessarily see this as their responsibility. The challenge, of course, is that many faculty are already overwhelmed and overworked, which makes requiring any new training particularly challenging. But that does not mean that we can ignore these issues in the classroom right now either, because of the impact on students and their learning. Finding the right balance seems tricky, but institutions should do what they can to ensure that faculty are prepared to respond to and address difficult discourse in their classes.

One way to engage faculty in training or preparation about incorporating difficult topics into the classroom is to focus within disciplines. Faculty are most influenced by their disciplinary peers and colleagues and their disciplines play a significant role in socialization (Nelson Laird, 2011). Therefore, focusing within the disciplines might be a helpful way to both cater to the faculty needs and make this training more accessible to them. This approach would also address the concern in our findings that some disciplines see this as less of their responsibility than others.

Further, institutions should ensure they are protecting faculty members who engage in teaching about difficult topics in the classroom. Teaching about issues such as privilege, oppression, and identity is already difficult. Teaching on these topics is made even more difficult when this work is vilified by various organizations and even the federal government. Although Trump's executive order [Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping] is focused on eliminating the use of Critical Race Theory in federal contracts (Cineas, 2020

### **Conclusion**

We recognize that all members of the campus community, faculty included, have a responsibility for fully participating in all aspects of student learning. Engaging in difficult discourse and facilitating learning about systems of power and oppression should not be ignored within the course context. Rather, faculty can and should play an important role in these areas. The findings of this study highlight where faculty feel unprepared, which gives entrance for faculty development and training programs to develop strategies to help faculty feel more prepared. Additionally, faculty in this study offer suggestions for how they have engaged in this labor. These examples can serve as a starting point, and institutions should consider how they support and reward these behaviors.

### References

- Acker, J. (2006). Inequality regimes. Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender & Society*, 20(4), 441-464.
- Bourassa, D. M., & Kruger, K. (2001). The National Dialogue on Academic and Student Affairs Collaboration. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 116, 9-38.
- Breunig, M. (2005). Turning experiential education and critical pedagogy theory into praxis. *Journal of experiential education*, 28(2), 106-122.
- Burbules, N. C., & Berk, R. (1999). Critical thinking and Critical Pedagogy: Relations, differences, and limits. *Critical theories in education: Changing terrains of knowledge and politics*. Routledge.
- Chege, M. (2009). Literacy and hegemony: Critical pedagogy vis-à-vis contending paradigms. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 21(2), 228-238.
- Cineas, F. (2020). Critical race theory, and Trump's war on it, explained. *Vox*. September 24, 2020. <https://www.vox.com/2020/9/24/21451220/critical-race-theory-diversity-training-trump>.
- De Lucia, R. C., & Iasenza, S. (1995). Student disruption, disrespect, and disorder in class: A seminar for faculty. *Journal of College Student Development*.
- Faculty Survey of Student Engagement. (2020). *FSSE Overview*. Center for Postsecondary Research, Indiana University Bloomington. [fsse.indiana.edu](http://fsse.indiana.edu).

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE24

- Favero, T. G., & Van Hoomissen, J. D. (2019). Leveraging undergraduate research to identify culturally relevant examples in the anatomy and physiology curriculum. *Advances in physiology education, 43*(4), 561-566.
- Freire, P. (1995). *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. Continuum.
- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). The best of both worlds: A Critical Pedagogy of place. *Educational researcher, 32*(4), 3-12.
- Harlap, Y. (2014). Preparing university educators for hot moments: theater for educational development about difference, power, and privilege. *Teaching in Higher Education, 19*(3), 217-228.
- Linder, C., Harris, J. C., Allen, E. L., & Hubain, B. (2015). Building inclusive pedagogy: Recommendations from a national study of students of color in higher education and student affairs graduate programs. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 48*(2), 178-194.
- Love, J. M., Gaynor, T. S., & Blessett, B. (2016). Facilitating difficult dialogues in the classroom: A pedagogical imperative. *Administrative Theory & Praxis, 38*, 227-233.
- Mayhew, M. J., Grunwald, H. E., & Dey, E. L. (2005). Curriculum matters: Creating a positive climate for diversity from the student perspective. *Research in Higher Education, 46*(4), 389-412.
- Mayhew, M. J. & Simonoff, J. S. (2015). Non-White, no more: Effect coding as an alternative to dummy coding with implications for higher education researchers. *Journal of College Student Development, 56*(2), 170-175.

## DIFFICULT DISCOURSE25

- Laird, T. F. N. (2011). Measuring the diversity inclusivity of college courses. *Research in Higher Education, 52*(6), 572-588.
- Perry, G., Moore, H., Edwards, C., Acosta, K., & Frey, C. (2009). Maintaining credibility and authority as an instructor of color in diversity-education classrooms: A qualitative inquiry. *The Journal of Higher Education, 80*(1), 80-105.
- Quaye, S. J. (2012). White educators facilitating discussions about racial realities. *Equity & Excellence in Education, 45*(1), 100-119.
- Quaye, S. J. (2012). Think before you teach: Preparing for dialogues about racial realities. *Journal of College Student Development, 53*(4), 542-562.
- Sue, D. W., Lin, A. I., Torino, G. C., Capodilupo, C. M., & Rivera, D. P. (2009). Racial microaggressions and difficult dialogues on race in the classroom. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 15*(2), 183.
- Watt, S. K. (2007). Difficult Dialogues, Privilege and Social Justice: Uses of the Privileged Identity Exploration (PIE) Model in Student Affairs Practice. *College student affairs journal, 26*(2), 114-126.
- Zion, S., Allen, C. D., & Jean, C. (2015). Enacting a critical pedagogy, influencing teachers' sociopolitical development. *The Urban Review, 47*(5), 914-933.

Table 1. Select Questionnaire Items and Descriptive Information

Select Questionnaire Items	Measure Descriptives
<b>How prepared are you to effectively deal with the following in your courses?</b>	
<i>Response options: Very prepared, Prepared, Somewhat prepared, Not at all prepared</i>	
a. Student incivility	<i>Prepared</i>
b. Conflict between students	Range: 1-4, Mean: 2.9, SD: .68
c. Controversial or disruptive events on campus	Cronbach's $\alpha$ : .91, ICC: .05
d. Student disclosure of sensitive information during class	
e. Student disclosure of sensitive information in course assignments	
f. Differing beliefs or opinions between you and students or among students	
<b>Describe a strategy you have used to deal with a type of difficult situation you encounter in your courses. [textbox]</b>	
<b>Whether course-related or not, how prepared are you to support a student facing concerns with the following:</b>	
<i>Response options: Very much, Quite a bit, Some, Very little, Not at all</i>	
a. Sexual assault or misconduct	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.75 SD: .97
b. Racism or racialized experiences (harassment or discrimination based on race, etc.)	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.76 SD: .94
c. Mental health	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.70 SD: .98
d. Immigration status	Range: 1-5, Mean: 2.91 SD: 1.15
e. Disclosure of an LGBTQ+ sexual orientation	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.54 SD: 1.10
f. Disclosure of a non-binary gender identity	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.39 SD: 1.15
g. The upcoming presidential election	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.45 SD: 1.10
<b>How often have you had challenging conversations in the following circumstances?</b>	
<i>Response options: Very often, Often, Sometimes, Rarely, Never</i>	
a. Intentionally with students in your courses	Range: 1-5, Mean: 3.07 SD: 1.12
b. Unintentionally with students in your courses	Range: 1-5, Mean: 2.81 SD: .95
c. With students outside of your courses in group settings (committees, student groups, etc.)	Range: 1-5, Mean: 2.42 SD: 1.03
d. With students outside of your courses in smaller private settings (office hours, etc.)	Range: 1-5, Mean: 2.73 SD: 1.09
<b>Please share examples of the topics of your challenging conversations with your students. [textbox]</b>	

# DIFFICULT DISCOURSE27

Table 2. Select Respondent Demographics, Characteristics, Response Descriptives, and Model Coefficients

		<i>Prepared</i>					
		N	%	M	SD	Unstd. B	Sig.
Disciplinary Appointment	Arts & Humanities	355	24.4	2.9	.68	.022	
	Bio Sci, Agric, & Nat Rsrchs	107	7.4	2.7	.71	-.321 ***	
	Phys Sci, Math, & CS	141	9.7	2.7	.70	-.314 ***	
	Social Sciences	146	1.1	3.1	.65	.165	
	Business	142	9.8	2.9	.71	.023	
	Comm, Media, & PR	62	4.3	3.1	.53	.179	
	Education	172	11.8	3.0	.63	.095	
	Engineering	48	3.3	2.8	.72	-.267	
	Health Professions	221	15.2	2.9	.71	.050	
Social Service Professions	58	4.0	3.2	.63	.368 **		
Academic Rank	Full Professor	310	21.3	2.9	.69	.012	
	Associate Professor	330	22.7	2.8	.68	-.093	
	Assistant Professor	366	25.2	2.9	.67	-.035	
	Full-time Lecturer/Instructor	280	19.3	2.9	.69	-.054	
	Part-time Lecturer/Instructor	166	11.4	3.1	.66	.169	
Tenure Status	No tenure system	60	4.0	3.1	.78	.299 *	
	Not on tenure track	621	41.1	2.9	.69	-.109	
	On tenure track, not tenured	279	18.5	2.9	.68	-.031	
	Tenured	551	36.5	2.9	.67	-.159	
Years of Teaching Experience	4 or less	255	16.7	2.9	.68	-- --	
	5-9	268	17.5	2.9	.72	-- --	
	10-19	450	29.4	2.9	.70	-- --	
	20-29	345	22.6	3.0	.65	-- --	
	30 or more	211	13.8	2.9	.69	-- --	
	(Continuous age in model)					.051	
Gender Identity	Man	621	40.4	3.0	.68	-.025	
	Woman	839	54.6	2.9	.69	-.217 **	
	Another gender identity	10	.7	3.0	.50	-- --	
	I prefer not to respond	66	4.3	3.1	.65	.242 *	
Racial/Ethnic Identification	Am Indian or AK Native	2	.1	2.5	.71	-- --	
	Asian	76	4.9	2.9	.69	-.056	
	Black or African American	204	13.2	3.2	.62	.348 ***	

DIFFICULT DISCOURSE28

	Hispanic or Latino	36	2.3	2.8	.74	-.061
	Middle Eastern or N African	13	.8	2.6	.93	-- --
	White	1,035	66.9	2.9	.68	-.124 *
	Another race or ethnicity	13	.8	3.2	.86	-.137
	Multiracial	49	3.2	2.9	.69	-.056
	I prefer not to respond	119	7.7	3.0	.65	.088
Sexual Orientation	LGBQ+	87	5.6	2.9	.73	.041
	Straight	1,316	85.1	2.9	.68	.044
	I prefer not to respond	144	9.3	3.0	.70	-.084

Note: No respondents identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander; LGBQ+ consists of respondents identifying as bisexual, gay, lesbian, queer, questioning, or another sexual orientation. Although we include faculty identifying with another gender identity than those listed, we did not include them in further statistical analyses due to the small sample size. Similarly, we combined faculty identifying as American Indian, Alaska Native, Middle Eastern, North African, or another race or ethnicity than those listed into one group for further statistical analysis. \* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ .  $F = 4.065$ \*\*\*,  $R^2 = .083$ , model constant = .220\*

DIFFICULT DISCOURSE29

Table 3. Significant Predictive Characteristics, Exp(B), and Significance for Faculty Preparation to Support Students Facing Select Concerns

Faculty Characteristics	Sexual Assault	Racism or Racialized Experiences	Mental Health	Immigration Status	Sexual Orientation Disclosure	Gender Identity Disclosure	Upcoming Presidential Election
Arts & Humanities	1.480**	1.431**				1.670***	
Phys Sci, Math, & CS	.521*	.532***	.508***				.526***
Social Sciences		1.619*	1.810**		1.684**	1.685**	2.143***
Business			.663*				
Engineering		.479*			.493*		.392**
Health Professions			1.503**				
Social Service Professions	2.691**	1.890*		1.805*	2.353**		2.461**
Age (continuous)				.834*			
Man							1.391*
Woman				.718*			
Asian				2.140**			
Black or African American		1.901**			.675*	.611*	
White				.662**			
Multiracial			1.934*				
I prefer not to respond		.567*					
LGBQ+					2.768***	2.081***	
Straight					.528***	.651**	

\* $p < .05$ , \*\* $p < .01$ , \*\*\* $p < .001$ . No significant ( $p < .05$ ) results for Biological Sciences, Agriculture, & Natural Resources; Communication, Media, & Public Relations; Education, any academic rank or tenure status, Hispanic or Latinx, or faculty who prefer not to respond with a gender identity or sexual orientation.

DIFFICULT DISCOURSE30

Table 4. Post Hoc Tukey Results for Differences in Frequency of Challenging Conversations

		In Courses	In Intentional Courses, Unintentional	Outside Class, Group	Outside Class, Private
Disciplinary Appointment	Arts & Humanities	3.25 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.94 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.49 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.93 <sup>b,c</sup>
	Bio Sci, Agric, & Nat Rsrscs	2.74 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.63 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	2.31 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.72 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
	Phys Sci, Math, & CS	2.36 <sup>a</sup>	2.33 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.12 <sup>a</sup>	2.45 <sup>a,b</sup>
	Social Sciences	3.63 <sup>d</sup>	3.07 <sup>d</sup>	2.58 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.98 <sup>c</sup>
	Business	2.96 <sup>b,c</sup>	2.74 <sup>b,c,d</sup>	2.48 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.80 <sup>b,c</sup>
	Comm, Media, & PR	3.25 <sup>c,d</sup>	3.05 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.67 <sup>b</sup>	2.80 <sup>b,c</sup>
	Education	3.01 <sup>b,c</sup>	2.76 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.33 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.52 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
	Engineering	2.39 <sup>a</sup>	2.27 <sup>a</sup>	2.13 <sup>a</sup>	2.28 <sup>a</sup>
	Health Professions	3.17 <sup>b,c,d</sup>	2.88 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.41 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.68 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
	Social Service Professions	3.32 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.95 <sup>c,d</sup>	2.32 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.55 <sup>a,b,c</sup>
Academic Rank	Full Professor	2.98 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.77 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.43 <sup>b</sup>	2.77 <sup>b</sup>
	Associate Professor	3.23 <sup>b</sup>	2.95 <sup>b</sup>	2.54 <sup>b</sup>	2.86 <sup>b</sup>
	Assistant Professor	3.13 <sup>b</sup>	2.85 <sup>b</sup>	2.49 <sup>b</sup>	2.87 <sup>b</sup>
	Full-time Lecturer/Instructor	3.10 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.85 <sup>b</sup>	2.55 <sup>b</sup>	2.85 <sup>b</sup>
	Part-time Lecturer/Instructor	2.86 <sup>a</sup>	2.56 <sup>a</sup>	1.99 <sup>a</sup>	2.11 <sup>a</sup>
Tenure Status	No tenure system	2.93	2.60	2.19 <sup>a</sup>	2.41 <sup>a</sup>
	Not on tenure track	3.05	2.78	2.33 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.60 <sup>a,b</sup>
	On tenure track, not tenured	3.11	2.83	2.49 <sup>b</sup>	2.83 <sup>b</sup>
	Tenured	3.09	2.85	2.50 <sup>b</sup>	2.85 <sup>b</sup>
Years of Teaching Experience	4 or less	3.00	2.68	2.21 <sup>a</sup>	2.43 <sup>a</sup>
	5-9	3.11	2.82	2.43 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.75 <sup>b</sup>
	10-19	3.15	2.89	2.45 <sup>b</sup>	2.78 <sup>b</sup>
	20-29	3.11	2.86	2.51 <sup>b</sup>	2.85 <sup>b</sup>
	30 or more	2.94	2.74	2.43 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.75 <sup>b</sup>
Racial/Ethnic Identification	Asian	2.61 <sup>a</sup>	2.49 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.36	2.44 <sup>a</sup>
	Black or African American	3.30 <sup>b,c</sup>	3.06 <sup>c</sup>	2.72	2.87 <sup>a,b</sup>
	Hispanic or Latino	2.44 <sup>c</sup>	3.11 <sup>c</sup>	2.63	3.14 <sup>b</sup>
	White	3.06 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	2.80 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	2.38	2.73 <sup>a,b</sup>
	Multiracial	3.06 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	2.85 <sup>b,c</sup>	2.31	2.65 <sup>a,b</sup>
	Another race or ethnicity	2.81 <sup>a,b</sup>	2.31 <sup>a</sup>	2.35	2.42 <sup>a</sup>
I prefer not to respond	3.03 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	2.71 <sup>a,b,c</sup>	2.28	2.67 <sup>a,b</sup>	

Note: Superscript letters indicate group membership for significant ( $p < .05$ ) differences in ad hoc Tukey tests. No superscripts indicate no significant differences between groups. There were no significant differences for any of the items by gender identity or sexual orientation.