

Talking About Race: What Makes It Possible and Productive?

The following notes summarize participants' reflections during the *Talking About Race: What Makes it Possible and Productive?* event, held on September 8th, 2025. The conversation Davidson students, faculty, and community members to explore what makes discussions about race both challenging and meaningful.

Section 1: Understanding the Challenges of Conversations About Race

Participants began by examining why conversations about race often feel difficult to begin or sustain. They discussed the emotional, historical, and social factors that shape people's willingness, or reluctance, to engage.

Participants noted that conversations about race can be challenging because:

- They are deeply personal and connected to one's identity, so the stakes feel high.
- These conversations tend to bring out strong emotions.
- People may experience guilt, defensiveness, or discomfort when addressing racial issues.
- Many fear they might offend others or say the wrong thing.
- The topic carries a charged historical legacy, which can make discussion feel heavy or intimidating..
- Some feel they are imposing their views or overstepping boundaries.
- Many simply don't know how to start these conversations or what language to use.
- Race remains a "taboo" topic in many spaces, so there is little modeling of how to discuss it constructively.
- Lack of education or preparation leaves people unsure how to begin or sustain these conversations.
- Others believe talking won't lead to real change, making the conversations seem futile.
- Disagreement can be upsetting or alienating, making participants hesitant to engage.

Section 2: Identifying the Conditions That Shape Meaningful Dialogue

Participants reflected on the conditions that make conversations about race more possible and productive, as well as those that make them more difficult to sustain.

Participants emphasized that meaningful conversations about race are more successful when:

- The environment encourages authenticity and openness.
- There are clear goals or shared intentions guiding the conversation, ensuring it feels purposeful rather than performative.
- Participants enter the conversation with a sense of unity or a shared desire for understanding.
- People have had time to get to know one another, helping to establish comfort and familiarity.
- Trust has been built among participants.
- The focus remains on ideas and perspectives, not on judging specific individuals.
- Participants recognize that mutual understanding is a long-term process, not something achieved in a single exchange.
- The group actively values and welcomes diverse backgrounds and experiences.

However, participants noted that these conversations can become more difficult when:

- The atmosphere feels competitive - either politically, socially, or intellectually.
- People assume agreement, particularly with those who share their racial identity.
- There is a lack of historical awareness or context.
- Participants feel they cannot change their minds or express uncertainty.
- People sense that they are not truly seen or understood within the group
- There are sharp differences in background or experience without shared effort to bridge them
- The conversation is introduced abruptly or without context, making it feel forced.
- People worry that the discussion could endanger personal relationships or friendships.
- The exchange takes place online or anonymously, where accountability and empathy are weaker.
- Participants are unwilling to be authentic or to share their true thoughts and feelings.
- There is a belief that it is impolite or inappropriate to talk about race at all.

Section 3: Deliberating on How to Foster a Culture We Think is Important

Participants reflected on how familiarity and existing relationships influence the way we engage in difficult conversations about race. Whether speaking with close friends or with strangers, they emphasized the importance of intentionality, self-awareness, and empathy.

When engaging in conversation with people you may know well, participants suggested:

- Acknowledging shared invested - recognizing that both people have a shared personal stake in the relationship and in the conversation.
- Admitting that familiarity can complicate things - you may know each other too well to separate personal feelings from the topic at hand.
- Avoiding assumptions about how the other person will respond.
- Recognizing that these discussions may be revealing, and being ready for moments of vulnerability.
- Reflecting on how the other person handles conflict, and adjusting your approach accordingly.
- Being mindful of power dynamics - if you hold more power in the relationship, try to make yourself more open and vulnerable.
- Clarifying boundaries by identifying topics you may not wish to discuss.
- Assessing emotional investment and deciding whether the conversation is worth pursuing at that time.
- Setting clear goals for what you hope the discussion will accomplish.
- Creating a supportive environment where everyone feels physically and emotionally comfortable.

When engaging in conversations with people you don't know well, participants recommended:

- Finding a common ground or shared experiences to build connection.
- Recognizing that connection takes time, and that openness may not happen immediately.
- Starting with an icebreaker or lighter exchange to establish rapport before diving into deeper topics
- Accepting that early conversations may remain more casual, and that deeper dialogue may develop gradually as trust grows.

Section 4: Generating Strategies for Engaging in Conversations about Race

In the portion of the deliberation, participants reflected on practical strategies for fostering meaningful, ongoing, and productive conversations about race. They emphasized that intentionality, mutual respect, and a willingness to embrace discomfort are essential to making these discussions successful.

Participants recommended several strategies, including:

- Engaging in intimate, small-group conversations where people feel safe to share openly.
- Recognizing that it is okay to be selective about when and with whom you engage, especially to ensure the discussion remains constructive.
- Ensuring that the level of emotional investment is balanced between all participants.
- Be willing to listen fully, rather than rushing to respond or defend.
- Avoiding defensiveness and approaching disagreements with curiosity rather than hostility.
- Establishing clear goals or intentions for the conversation.
- Choosing a comfortable, inclusive environment where everyone feels heard and respected.
- Continuing the dialogue over time, understanding that progress often comes from repeated engagement rather than a single exchange.
- Developing habits for openness and tolerance for discomfort, as these moments often lead to growth.
- Encouraging those with greater social or institutional power to model vulnerability and humility.
- Educating oneself about historical and current racial dynamics to engage more responsibly and knowingly.
- Starting with icebreaker or lighter topics to build rapport before moving into deeper issues.