

How to Support Students of Color

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I am a white tenure-track faculty member, and I consider myself a progressive. I want to be an ally to my students of color, but I'm not sure how. I don't want to make mistakes and offend anyone. Is it **better for me to say nothing, if I'm not an expert on race? I feel so helpless. Do you have any advice?**

I will answer this as best I can, with the goal of opening up further dialogue. I want to be clear that I am a white person addressing this column to other white people who are teaching. I do not mean to exclude anyone, or to claim authority about the experiences or needs of people of color. It is my firm conviction that the time has come for white people to speak up about racism, and to educate one another about anti-racist activism, and not leave the burden of this work on the shoulders of people of color. I am drawing inspiration here from a group I am involved with, [Showing Up for Racial Justice](#), a national organization dedicated to mobilizing white people in anti-racism work. You can probably find a local chapter in your town, and I urge you to do so, as SURJ is not only a resource for training and information but also a location to connect with like-minded people, which is essential at a time when faculty are increasingly called upon to protect vulnerable students.

The following list of suggestions is by no means exhaustive, and I am sure it has many gaps. I want to be transparent that, in my work now running [The Professor Is In](#), I am not currently teaching and so the advice below is based on the work I did in my previous academic career, on suggestions of friends who are currently teaching, and on my reading of the important work by scholars such as [Tressie McMillan Cottom](#), [Eric Anthony Grollman](#) and the writers at the [Fight the Tower](#) blog.

Finally, a prefatory note: if you are employed on a contingent basis, you may not feel safe taking many of these actions. All faculty are increasingly vulnerable to surveillance and attacks by right-wing watchdog groups. One

contingent faculty member I know wore a Black Lives Matter shirt to class, which infuriated some students, who then retaliated on her teaching evaluations. She was not rehired. It is incumbent on tenured professors to take the lead on this work, and to protect the contingent faculty members who do as well.

Don't tell students of color not to worry. Your students of color may well feel traumatized right now, and may have trouble focusing in class in the same way that they did prior to the election. If they communicate that to you directly or indirectly, the most important thing you can do is listen. Don't talk over them or tell them not to worry. If you are white, you are not experiencing the same level of psychic and physical aggressions upon your safety and well being as your students may be feeling. Let them be the experts of their own experience. Your first, and most important, job is to listen and acknowledge their fear, distress, and anxiety.

Be visible in your support of students of color. Put a Black Lives Matter sign on your office door, or wear a Black Lives Matter T-shirt or pin to teach. Put flyers up about anti-racism activism on your office door, and make sure to announce the events in class. [Safety pins are OK](#) as far as they go, but that is not far enough. Invite speakers into your class who can help students know their rights. The multicultural-affairs office on your campus might offer in-class speakers, so avail yourself of them.

On a more administrative level, if your institution has a training program to become a "certified" safe-space faculty member, do the training. When you get a certificate or sticker, put it on your office door or wall. It sends a signal. Get involved with the multicultural center on campus and go to its talks or dialogues. Yes, all of that takes time. This is the moment to invest that time.

Encourage a mix of views. People of color are not one single undifferentiated group. Having an inclusive classroom doesn't mean calling on one brown face and moving on. It means allowing for a whole spectrum of competing perspectives to interrupt and enrich the flow of discussion. It will get complicated and [intersectional](#). People used to simple categories and binaries may get impatient and frustrated. Please don't make one student of color speak for his or her entire race or culture.

In any actual classroom situation, different students will have different viewpoints, based on gender, class, sexuality, place of origin, and so on. Your international students will have a different experience than your American students, for example. International students from Muslim countries are under increasingly immediate threat of harassment and deportation. Educate yourself about the issues so that you can be a source for accurate, fact-based information.

Make your syllabus inclusive. Does your syllabus prominently include works by people of color? It's very easy to fall back on outdated, exclusionary custom when choosing readings, and it takes conscious effort to break away from it. Do that work. It matters. Nobody will trust you as an ally if the readings you assign thoughtlessly recenter white voices and white academic authority.

Invite speakers of color to your class to speak on any pertinent class topic. Students benefit from seeing scholars of color working in their fields as role models, and may rarely get that opportunity. However, also be aware that scholars of color are routinely overburdened with such requests for "extra" (uncompensated, uncredited) service, so make such requests in a sensitive, professionally appropriate way, acknowledging that it is a request for their extra labor. You may have to ask several people, and when you do ask, think about ways you can make the event professionally meaningful for your speaker as well.

Support students of color in classroom discussion. That can take a variety of forms. Most of your students are probably white but make sure they don't dominate discussion to the exclusion of others. That often requires classroom-management techniques, and if you need to work with your campus teaching center to learn those strategies, do it.

When students of color speak up, recognize that they may be attacked for voicing challenging opinions, and use your authority in the classroom to back them up. Students of color routinely feel silenced by the white majority in

college classrooms, and depend on leadership from the front of the room to be heard. That doesn't mean automatically agreeing with everything they — or any students — say. It does mean making sure they are not verbally assaulted by defensive white students who assume their opinions and comfort will always have primacy. Is that easy? No. It's awkward and difficult. Acknowledge that as well.

Don't be defensive. Students of color may be critical of newly energized, anti-Trump activism from white people. The Women's March on Washington gave new visibility to a lot of excellent and very accessible writing on intersectionality and the ways that white activism sidelines the voices and concerns of people of color. Read such work and educate yourself. [Here is one](#). If your feelings are hurt that students express skepticism about your beloved protest or liberal political opinion, stop and ask yourself why that is, and why your feelings are more important than their critique. This [reactivity](#), known as “white fragility,” is one of the primary ways that white privilege operates, and it takes hard and dedicated work to stop making yourself, your needs, your opinions, and your feelings the most important element of all your interactions.

The work ahead of us is hard and long. Alliances are essential but difficult. You will make mistakes and feel bad. People will get mad at you. You will get called on your racism. This doesn't make you a bad person. If you've read this far, you're trying to do better, and that's an important step. As an instructor or a graduate student on a college or university campus, you have an invaluable role to play in building bridges among the communities who are resisting Trump and his dangerous, authoritarian agendas. Now is the time.

Share your additional thoughts, experiences, and suggestions in the comments below. The most important thing for any instructor is to educate yourself. Here is [a good list of books](#) to start.

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[Karen Kelsky](#) is a career consultant who runs the website The Professor Is In. She's been a tenured professor at two public universities (Oregon and Illinois) and has advised many undergraduate and graduate students, as well as mentored junior faculty. She answers reader questions as a contributor to Vitae.



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