**Notes from the “Difficult Conversations” Brown Bag (10.30.19)**

**Moderated by Dr. Maura Belliveau, UB Center for Diversity Innovation**

The discussion started by identifying certain key difficulties often involved in discussing sensitive topics:

* Students resisting speaking because they are afraid of saying the wrong thing.
* Students resisting speaking because they are afraid of playing into or contradicting a stereotype.
* Students saying offensive things in class that may upset other students.

**Start with the Syllabus**

* Establish ground rules for civility and respect in the classroom.
* Make clear from the outset that students’ ideas/arguments (not their personhood) will be challenged in this class, and that being uncomfortable is part of the learning experience.
* Discuss stereotype threat and make clear that no student is representative of any group, whether in terms of gender, sexuality, race, ableness, national origin, etc.
* Make clear that making mistakes is part of the process: commit to acknowledging that and moving on.
* Encourage students to speak from their own experience (“I” statements) rather than generalizing except in the case where there are generalizeable facts which can be shared and objectively assessed (e.g., cities in the U.S. which have experienced higher rates of immigration do not experience increased crime).
* Ban cell phones: some faculty reported students texting one another or students inside the class as a way to avoid engaging in difficult conversations. Make clear the importance of everyone engaging in the same conversation which includes listening to others without using electronic devices.

**How to Elicit Comments in Class**

* Communication exercise: ask students to collaborate on lists of what makes them feel safe speaking and what makes them feel unsafe or unwilling to share. Emphasize that *everyone* has something that makes them feel vulnerable speaking. Have the students put the lists on a board so that the group can reflect on those items before discussing challenging topics.
* Have students do a writing reflection in class; this enables you to call on anyone and ask them to share what they wrote.
* Alternatively, have students write response papers before class that they can then be asked to share in class.
* Use small group work to get the conversation going. You can then ask individual students to ask what the group discussed without forcing them to own their own opinions.
* The consensus was that while some faculty can “cold call” on students, female faculty, in particular, may be perceived as hostile or bullying if they do so. In general, when tackling topics in which identities are implicated, it may be advisable not to cold call.

**Handling Potentially Offensive Comments**

* Separate the student from the statement. When a student makes a statement (e.g., “women get lower pay because they want jobs that happen to pay less; they are getting what they want”), reframe the statement so that the discussion can proceed by more dispassionately addressing the remark without appearing to criticize the student who raised it. A way to reframe is to take the comment to a higher level, pulling out the underlying causal argument—or inviting the original speaker or other students to do so, for example (e.g., “So you are essentially leading us to consider one school of thought on the causes of women’s salary attainment and workforce participation—choice”) and eliciting other possible arguments (e.g., “What might be alternative explanations for what we observe—women, particularly women of color, earning lower wages than white men?”).

Some faculty reported problems with particularly confrontational students. There is a reporting system, but there was also a sense that meeting with those students early on can help head off certain kinds of problems. One reason to do so is because when a student engaging in a confrontation with a faculty member—through their speech in class or other behavior—they may, in fact, regret that yet lack the means to initiate a constructive conversation with the faculty member about their behavior. Having an outside-of-class conversation can give the faculty member the opportunity to “coach” the student and retain their class engagement in a way that is more productive for the student/class and less hostile for the faculty member—both of which are important positive outcomes.