When a Tragedy or Controversy Overcomes Campus, How Can Faculty Respond?

When tragedies hit close to home, like the Keith Lamont Scott shooting in 2016, students may be looking to faculty for guidance, support, and understanding. Recognizing that all disciplines are different and all faculty are different, the comfort level for most instructors will vary greatly in how well-equipped they are in to handle these situations as an in-class, instructional exercise. We suggest thinking of possible responses as a continuum, realizing that not all strategies will work for everyone, nor is there a "one-size-fits-all" response for every situation.

What Everyone Can Do: Easy-to-Implement Ideas

Regardless of your discipline, personal teaching style, or philosophical bent, here are a few things that everyone should be able to do:

1. Direct Students to UNC Charlotte Campus Resources.
   a. If there is immediate danger call 911 or Campus Police at 704-687-2200
   b. Center for Counseling and Psychological Services, Atkins 158, 704-687-0311.
      Students can see a counselor immediately if in crises during business hours. After hours, call the Counseling Center at 704-687-0311 and they will be connected with a counselor over the phone.
   c. Multicultural Resource Center, Student Union 210, 704-687-7121, may offer programs or events to respond to events that give students a channel and agency for responding.
   d. Guide for Students on Negotiating a Complex World, UNC Charlotte Center for Counseling and Psychological Services Guide for students on how to cope in a complex world complete with links to student organizations and the Charlotte community resources.

2. Show Empathy.
   a. Acknowledgement of the situation can help. Consider emailing your students before class or making a brief verbal statement in class. Even if this is not your style, you can simply say something like, "I understand that the recent events regarding [the situation] are upsetting to many people. I want you to know that there are a number of campus resources available to you and that I recognize we each respond to and process tragic events in different ways."
   b. Consider course deadlines in light of the event. Some students may be affected in such a way that it could impact their ability to complete assignments or prepare for tests. Consider what reasonable accommodations you would be comfortable making without unduly penalizing such students.
Having a Class Discussion on the Topic

If you have the kind of teaching style or class that is very personal and engaging, where you feel a trusting relationship between you and your students and where open dialogue and discussion have already been well established, you may wish to use class time for a discussion of major events. However, if you and your student have not had a whole-group discussion before about your discipline during class time, we would not recommend you start with discussing a tragedy or controversial event. Some brief reminders:

- Decide whether you are ready and willing to engage with this topic right away.
- Quickly assess whether the class would like to spend time sharing views about the topic.
- Establish ground rules or guidelines for discussion (e.g., try to depersonalize).
- Provide a common basis for understanding the topic: find common ground.
- Create a framework for the discussion that maintains focus and flow.
- Include everyone.
- Be an active facilitator; when appropriate, clarify student comments.
- Acknowledge each student who raises the issue or example, and also acknowledge that students may vary in their responses and concerns.
- Summarize discussion and gather student feedback.
- Promote university and community resources to address concerns or places to discuss topic further.

Additional UNC Charlotte Resources

- **Guide For Faculty on How to Address Concerns for a Student’s Well-Being** from the Center for Counseling and Psychological Services
- Reporting students whose behavior is causing disruption or concern: contact the Office of the Dean of Students, 704-687-0345. They manage the NinerCare Network. Information about the NinerCare network and how to report an incident can be found on the NinerCare website.

Additional Teaching Resources

- **Facilitating Campus Dialogue: Dealing with the Aftermath of Tragedy**, this brief handout from Western Carolina University includes several ideas for how to address tragedy and difficult moments
- **Making the Most of “Hot Moments” in the Classroom**, this brief handout from the University of Michigan provides specific strategies for how to manage a sudden eruption of tension or conflict in the classroom or studio