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Real Talks encourage respectful conversations on tough topics

By Sara Ornelas, Marketing Content Strategist

Five minutes of scrolling through social media and it is easy to see that civil discourse is becoming the exception instead of the rule. Wichita State University's Office of Diversity and Inclusion (ODI) is working to change that through Real Talk discussions to promote respectful dialogue among people with varying viewpoints.

"It's teaching the art of being able to have a good conversation, where I don't have to agree or be an echo chamber, but I can actually — if I truly want to understand a different ideology or a culture or a person — respond in a respectful manner," said Danielle Johnson, assistant director of ODI.



Dr. Selena Jackson



Danielle Johnson

Real Talk discussions are held on the first Wednesday of each month. Talks encourage participants to engage in meaningful dialogues around various topics that impact identity, diversity, inclusion, equity and society. Recent topics of discussion included insurrection at the Capitol in Washington, D.C, racial unrest, and the effects of COVID-19.

"Real Talk dialogues were created when we decided to look at bringing people together to teach them how to have dialogue with discourse with respect and bringing people together from different walks of life, different viewpoints on varying topics," Johnson said.

Real Talk discussions are currently facilitated through Zoom but were in person prior to COVID-19. Johnson said there are benefits to both formats.

“In person, you can see someone’s body language better to know how they’re feeling about the discussion,” she said. “But the Zoom format is more accessible and convenient for a lot of people, too.”

Real Talks are open to anyone who would like to join, but participants must register before the event. Discussions are limited to 30 people, allowing the conversation to be more intimate and flow easily.

To register for the next Real Talk event, visit the [ODI events page](#) on the Wichita State website.

Participants are asked to follow what’s called Vegas-style conversational expectations:

- Facilitators have the right to halt the discussion and maintain order.
- Be present and respectful in the space.
- WAIT: Why Am I Talking? Or why am I not talking?
- Lean into discomfort: “Be sure you’re actually listening and being in that space of discomfort for a little bit so that you can dialogue and understand more,” Johnson said.
- Land the plane, or get to your point.
- Assume good intent: “You can’t expect people to be perfect,” Johnson said. “Not everybody knows all the up-to-date pronouns. People know what they know, and so we want people just to comfortably speak and then be open for correction. When you’re having a candid dialogue, you can become offended if someone says something off-putting. We want to give room for assuming good intent.”
- What happens in the discussion stays in the discussion. “The space is often intimate where people share personal experiences, and we never want to use what we hear in that space as gossip or to tell on someone.”
- Respect. Respect. “Agree to disagree. This is an opportunity to hear and learn from an interesting perspective, whether you agree with it or not.”

Johnson said she hopes Real Talk participants leave the conversation with a better understanding of other people’s viewpoints and experiences.

“We want those things to have that discourse with respect,” she said. “This is how you do it in a way where we both walk away with learning from each other. We might not agree at the end of the conversation, but now I have some better insight on your culture, your background and why you choose to stand up for a particular belief.”

ODI partners with Counseling and Prevention Services (CAPS) to make Real Talk participants aware of the resources available to help them further process any of the emotions or trauma that might result from some of the conversations.

“We want to give everyone a space to process and debrief, and we also want to decrease the stigma against mental health care,” said Dr. Selena Jackson, staff psychologist for CAPS. “As we connect with students through Real Talks, we’re making mental health a part of the conversation.”

It’s vital for all points of view to be represented to have a truly rich discussion, Jackson said.

“Having people with diverse points of view is something we want more of. We want to be able to have conversation in a respectful and safe space. We want to learn how to have those hard conversations with people who might have very opposing views.” she said. “We hope that people can see that maybe there are more similarities than differences, and maybe there's a different way of looking at a situation or understand why someone has the opinion that they do have — regardless of where it falls on the continuum.”