COVID-19 & Cultural Biases: A Cultural Competency Quick Guide

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As colleges and universities navigate COVID-19 responses, their community members rely even more on resources that prioritize speed. When significant events happen, students pick apart what they heard, how they felt, and what others should do. When there’s conflicting information, their instinct is to compare sources. Today, that list is nearly endless: newspapers, cable, Google, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Buzzfeed, Instagram, TikTok … all with varying degrees of commitment to provide reliable information.

The longer students are kept off campus, the longer they stay in close quarters with self-identified “experts” planted in family trees and social or professional networks. Many have life experiences or knowledge that can nurture a student’s development. But odds are they unwittingly or intentionally share information that is unreliable and detrimental to our communities.

College staff — faculty, administrators, and others — encourage students to put what they’ve learned in classes and leadership opportunities to work: fact-check, engage in civil discourse, prioritize facts over convenience, and recognize their decisions affect those around them. While physical campuses remain closed, tactics for engagement have to be more creative. Everyone needs to feel equipped to challenge inaccurate or discriminatory information. Failure here could mean mental, emotional, or physical harm for racial, immunocompromised, and other intersectional identities.

At eye level, it takes less than a minute to read and repost helpful information. In a broader context, it’s a collaborative opportunity for student affairs, academic affairs, and campus media relations to respond to fears and biases that harm the community.

Some practitioners already succeed at remote engagement; others must retrofit their positions for this new normal. Everyone can and should be coaching students on productive intervention in these situations. Most of the time, they will simply fill in blanks. The speaker may not know what a college has already done to minimize risk. Assumptions stated in a conversation may come from a lack of exposure to other cultures. Well-intentioned attempts to find a silver lining for themselves may lack the foresight to contemplate the immediate and longer-term impact on others.

Campus departments, particularly ones focused on student engagement and development, will affirm they have heard similar things. Some will read this because they anticipate that they’ll be asked to help with response to reports of these biases. Reliable resources are out there for
responding to the community and providing guidance. Four commonly shared opinions students should be able to address are:

1. *My friend/professor/relative studied abroad, and now I need to avoid them.*

Many campuses assembled a process for handling the return of faculty and students who were traveling or studying abroad. Senior leadership should strongly consider informing their campus community about both the protocol and the mindset they had in developing it. It normalizes the concern felt in the community and role models thoughtful response.

Most experts in online education support putting information for students in multiple places, in multiple formats. Presidents may post their updates to a university webpage, but not every student or faculty member looks there before tweeting about how the college has yet to tell them anything.

Sometimes students and staff who feel the school lacks transparency simply do not access the spaces their senior leadership typically use to provide updates. They may, however, engage with campus social media challenges or listen to campus media channels. These are great opportunities to reach them with this important information.

2. *Being near an Asian person or eating Asian food will make me sick.*

Despite assurances from various health professionals, many people struggle to abandon the implicit biases, microaggressions, and patently discriminatory opinions that serve as the framework for their worldviews (Escobar, 2020). Challenges to this should be done delicately and from an informed place. Personal safety should also be factored into deciding to speak up against these statements.

When thinking about the impact of repeating xenophobic sentiments like these, it’s important to recognize the role students play to help each other avoid repeating the mistakes we know to be detrimental to entire populations (Escobar, 2020). If the speakers distrust certain news sources, point to generally trusted source like the Centers for Disease Control, which says that COVID-19 does not discriminate (Gstalter, 2020).

3. *It’s not wrong to call COVID-19 the “Wuhan virus” or the “Chinese virus.”*

The short answer — YES, it is wrong. If there are Asian people around, this signals they might be in an environment that’s unsafe for them (ABC News, 2020; CBS This Morning, 2020). If there are none
and no one says anything, the speaker sees no reason not to repeat the statements elsewhere — silence is interpreted as affirmation, which can be very dangerous.

If someone says they don’t know of a time when we did anything different, kindly remind them of 2009. The H1N1 virus was sweeping the United States, and the CDC deemed it a pandemic. Its roots were traced to American pig farms, thus the social label “swine flu” (Gstalter, 2020). However, many media and government leaders referred to it primarily as H1N1 following the request of American pig farmers (Welch, 2020). To this day, almost no one calls it the “American virus.” While some cared about the origins, it was more important to get it contained. That same communal commitment to concentrate on the end goal should be foremost now.

4. I’m healthy, so there’s no need for me to take precautionary measures.

Spoiler alert. Yes, there really are. Many people, including congressional leaders and healthy people under 65, are testing positive. Not all exhibit symptoms. But the impact of their engagement with others is very real and very scary to those with compromised immunity. Scientists are still learning so much about COVID-19, like how long it survives in air and on surfaces and how it’s transmitted between people (National Institutes of Health, 2020; WHO-China Joint Mission, 2020). This virus is dangerous to the visibly and invisibly sick (Cleveland Clinic (2020), and people carrying COVID-19 cannot fathom how far their germs can spread (Centers for Disease Control, 2020; Tectonix GEO (2020).

The obligation to be a good, informed neighbor is at the core of many student oaths. Students seek higher education for opportunities and guidance to develop into thoughtful leaders. Leaders who will make positive and culturally competent contributions wherever they land, personally and professionally. We must make that obligation an instinct for our next generation of leaders.

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