

April 2019

## **How Can Higher Education Research Guide Faculty Development to Create Equitable Access to Learning?**

Emily Sommer  
*Boise State University*

---

## How Can Higher Education Research Guide Faculty Development to Create Equitable Access to Learning?

### Abstract

With an increasingly diverse college-going population, the predominately white, middle-class faculty need more support facilitating discussions around controversial content. Faculty can facilitate or impede discussions, which impacts students' access to learning. Research on conscious pedagogies, instructional strategies that focus on facilitating discussions to challenge existing norms, claim that faculty need support to develop capacity to create equitable access to learning. This research examines faculty members' perceived barriers to engaging students in discussions around controversial content at one transitional Hispanic Serving Institution. Better understanding their concerns over student engagement will help universities better support faculty in creating equitable access to learning.

# How Can Higher Education Research Guide Faculty Development to Create Equitable Access to Learning?



By Emily Sommer

## ABSTRACT

With an increasingly diverse college-going population, faculty need more support facilitating discussions around controversial content. Faculty can facilitate or impede discussions, which impacts students' access to learning. Research on conscious pedagogies, instructional strategies that focus on facilitating discussions to challenge existing norms, claim that faculty need support to develop capacity to create equitable access to learning. This research examines faculty members' perceived barriers to engaging students in discussions around controversial content at one transitional Hispanic Serving Institution. Better understanding their concerns over student engagement will help universities better support faculty in creating equitable access to learning.

**Equitable access entails more than ensuring that all people have the means and opportunities to go to college, but also that all students have opportunities to learn within it.**

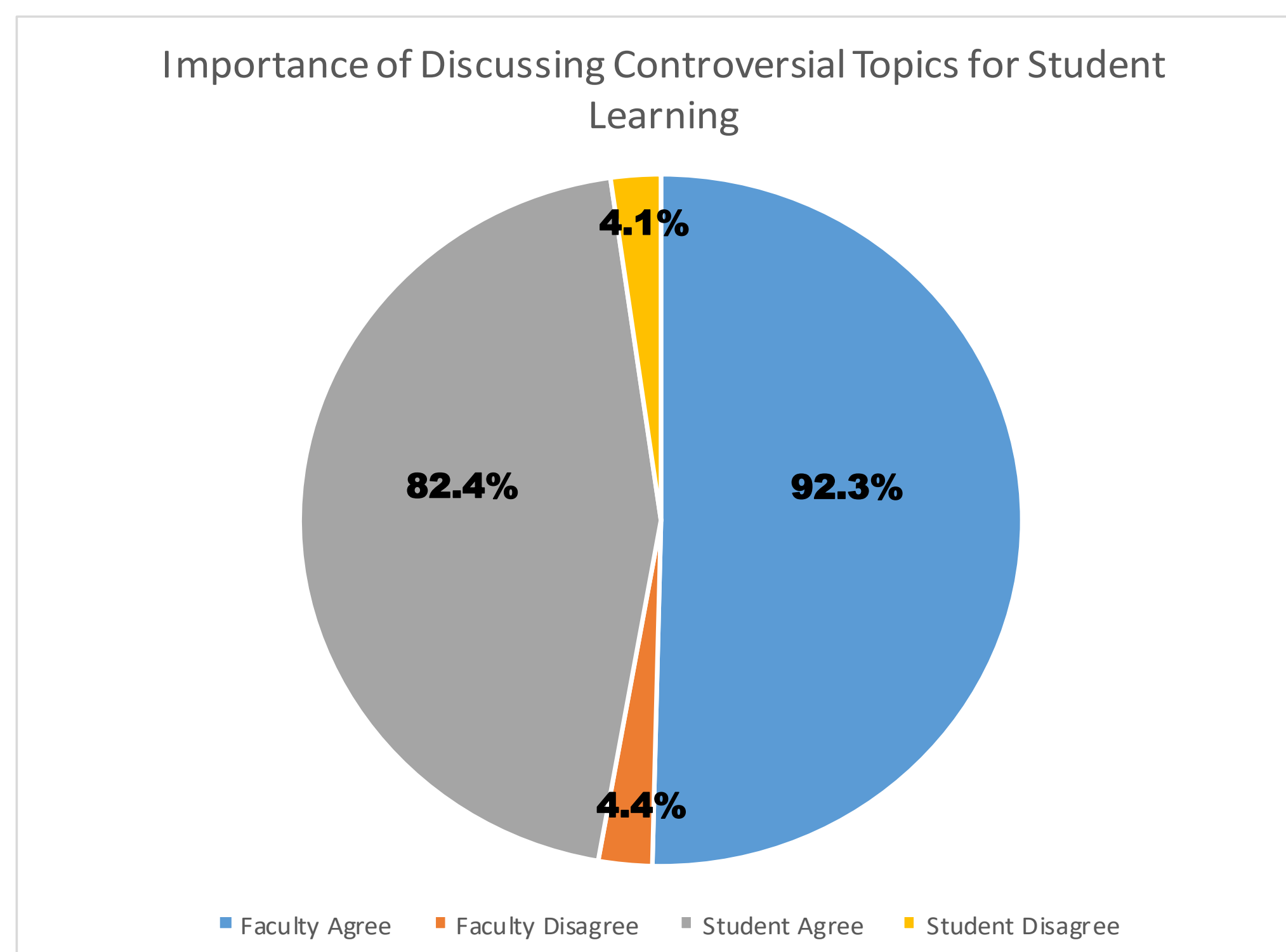
Castillo-Montoya, M. (2013).

## QUESTION 1

*What are faculty and student perceptions on the importance of student participation in difficult dialogue for learning?*

## FINDINGS

Survey indicated 92.3% of faculty and 82.4% of students agree on the importance of discussing controversial topics for student learning.



## QUESTION 2

*What do faculty perceive as influences for students to not participate in difficult dialogue?*

## FINDINGS

Faculty perceptions consisted of a variety of influences for student participation which were student-focused. These were organized into the following four categories and subcategories:

### Fear

conflict, stereotype threat, judgement, safety, tokenism, etc.

### Student Factors

power, apathy, communication apprehension, experience, etc.

### Student Perception of Contextual Topics

relevance to subject, comfort, knowledge, opinion, language, etc.

### Contextual Characteristics

class size, campus climate, grades, etc.

## Knowledge Required by Competent Teachers

**Content Knowledge** - the knowledge base that defines the discipline

**General Pedagogical Knowledge** - those broad principles and general strategies of classroom management and organization that appear to transcend subject matter

**Curriculum Knowledge** - the materials and programs that appear to transcend subject matter

**Pedagogical Content Knowledge** - that special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional knowledge

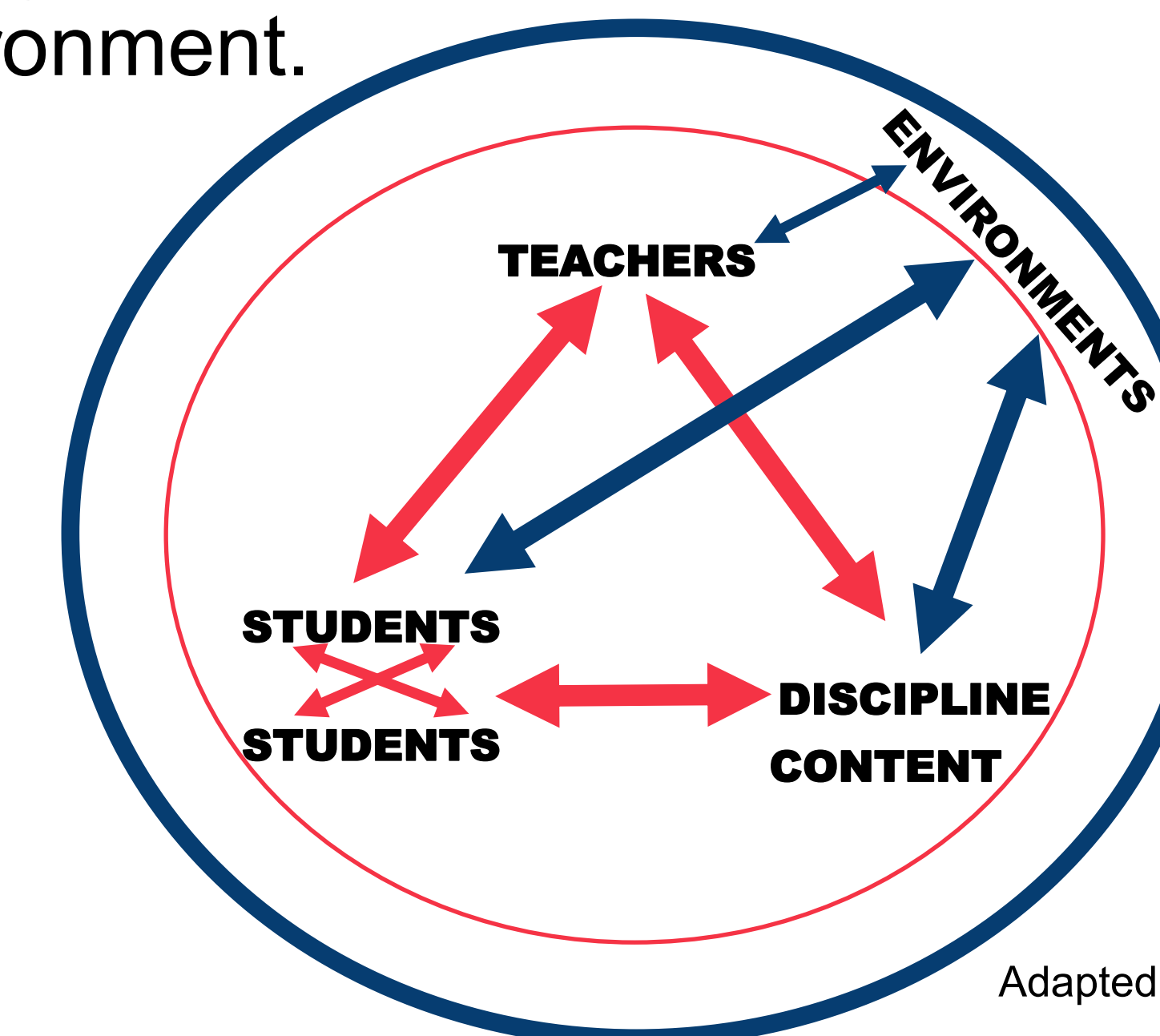
**Knowledge of Learners and Their Characteristics**

**Knowledge of Educational Contexts** - ranging from the workings of the group or classroom, the governance financing of school districts, to the character of communities and cultures

**Knowledge of Educational Ends, Purposes, and Values and their Philosophical Historical Grounds**

Shulman, L. (1987). Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard educational review*, 57(1), 1-23

Shulman's competent teacher requirements reinforce the need for knowledge across several components including knowledge about students and their characteristics. Tuitt, Haynes and Stewart (2016), also emphasized the importance of faculty to "consider who their students are and use their prior experiences to engage their identities within classroom learning" to create an equitable learning environment.



Adapted for higher education from Enright, E. (2016).

Illustrates the complexity of interactions between teachers, content, students and environments that influence classroom participation and learning.

## CONCLUSION

This research suggests that while the majority of faculty and students agree open discussion on potentially controversial topics is important for student learning, faculty struggle with facilitating difficult dialogue. Faculty perceptions of the influences that inhibit student engagement were limited to a practice-focused approach. Further research is needed to raise critical consciousness of instructors to develop the transdisciplinary lens by which an equitable learning environment is created. By engaging in this self-work with vulnerability and courage, faculty can transform the classroom into a richly dynamic environment where all can learn (Tuitt, Haynes & Stewart, 2016).

Acknowledgements: Dr. Esther Enright and Dr. Tasha Souza

References: Bolitzer, A., Castillo-Montoya, M., Williams, L. A. (2016). Pursuing equity through diversity. In F. Tuitt et al. (Eds.), *Race, Equity, and the Learning Environment: The Global Relevance of Critical and Inclusive Pedagogies in Higher Education*. (1st ed.). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing; Castillo-Montoya, M. (2013). A Study of first-generation African American and Latino undergraduates developing socio-political consciousness in introductory sociology classes (Doctoral dissertation, Teachers College, Columbia University); Enright, E. (2016). Adapted from instructional triangle. Cohen, D.K., Raudenbush, S. W., & Ball, D. L. (2003) Original image. Shulman, L. (1987); Knowledge and teaching: Foundations of the new reform. *Harvard educational review*, 57(1), 1-23.