

# How to Handle Objectionable Speech

## Considerations and Steps for College Instructors

### A student said something problematic in class. What do I do next?

#### Is the statement relevant to the class topics?

- Make it a teachable moment: Start a class conversation about different perspectives or views related to the statement
- Provide relevant counter-examples, facts, and evidence to demonstrate the value of multiple, alternative perspectives
- Ask the student to provide additional clarification and evidence to foster discussion
- Invite other students to provide alternative information and perspectives
- If the statement is irrelevant, explain that the statement is off-topic, and ask the student to address it outside class with you instead

#### What not to do:

- Do not ignore the statement if it's central to class content and can help everyone learn
- Do not engage in email exchanges with the student about it
- Do not ignore the student's right to express views based on their personal beliefs or opinions without punishment
- Do not ignore the student's right to reasoned exception and to critically challenge course content

#### Do other students (or you) feel extremely distressed or angry at the statement?

- Consider carefully if the statement is relevant, valid, and part of students' right to listen critically and challenge a professor's opinions
- Emphasize the value in listening to and discussing a range of relevant viewpoints, even when one perspective is distressing
- Reiterate the CSU [Principles of Community](#) and student responsibilities inside and/or outside class
- Discuss the impact of the statement as a class discussion, perhaps waiting until the following week or class session
- While protecting the student's privacy, address one-on-one with concerned class members as needed
- Outside class, discuss the situation with a trusted faculty member in your department for feedback and other perspectives and review the [CSU Student Conduct Code](#)

#### Is there threatening, abusive, discriminatory, or harassing language or behavior? Or are there disruptive/concerning statements consistently over time?

1. In class, stop the conversation and explain that the [CSU Student Conduct Code](#) and the [CSU Discrimination Policy](#) has policies against these types of language and behavior
2. After class, discuss the situation with a trusted faculty mentor or member of the Open Door Pedagogy Network in your department for feedback and other perspectives
3. Inform your chair about the behavior in an email to be sure you document the situation well
4. Schedule a meeting with the student one-on-one (in person or voice/video) to discuss why the behavior is disruptive/concerning. If the incident could result in university sanctions for the student or for you, invite a colleague to the student meeting with you as witness
5. Document your account of the meeting afterwards in an email to file
6. If needed, meet with your chair and the student after the initial meeting to follow up
7. If the issue is still unresolved, you can work with [Student Conflict Resolution](#) to identify next steps

### It is biased speech against a group protected by CSU bias policy?

- Stop the conversation in class.
- After class, consider if the speech is “any conduct, speech, or expression, motivated in whole or in part by bias or prejudice that is meant to intimidate, demean, mock, degrade, marginalize, or threaten individuals or groups based on that individual or group’s actual or perceived identities.”
- Consult a trusted colleague or member of the Open Door Pedagogy Network to get additional perspectives and review the [CSU Discrimination Policy](#) and the [CSU Student Conduct Code](#)
- If the speech was biased, report the it as an [Incident of Bias](#)

### Are you concerned about the student’s mental or physical well-being?

- After class, refer the student to [Student Case Management](#), (970) 491-8051
- Or refer them to the [CSU Counseling Center](#), (970) 491-7111

### Are you concerned about other member(s) of the campus community?

- After class report to [Tell Someone](#) or contact the CSU Police non-emergency line at (970) 491-6425

- If you or others are in **clear, imminent** physical danger:
- Call **CSU Police by calling 911**
  - Ensure the physical safety of the class. Dismiss the class and exit the classroom space
  - Inform your chair as soon as possible
  - Follow up with [Tell Someone](#)

### Learn more about related CSU policies

#### CSU Policy

- [First Amendment, Free Speech Protections and Limits on Campus](#) - Gateway for free speech on campus
- CSU Policy: [Free Speech and Peaceful Assembly](#)
- CSU Policy: [Freedom of Expression and Inquiry](#)
- CSU Policy: [Inclusive Physical and Virtual Campus](#)
- CSU Policy: [Discrimination, Harassment, Sexual Harassment, Sexual Misconduct, Domestic Violence, Dating Violence, Stalking, and Retaliation](#)

#### CSU Professional Manuals

- [CSU Academic Faculty and Administrative Professional Manual](#)
- [CSU Student Conduct Code](#)

# Can I say *that* in class?? Best practices for college instructors

CLA supports you in teaching and speaking on controversial issues as appropriate.

**Situation:** You want to address a controversial political, inflammatory, or sensitive topic in front of your class.

