

NEWS | STUDENT LIFE

## With pamphlets and student volunteers, University aims to start conversations on race



NATALIE GUERRA / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Lisa Davis, GS '19, looks through a Campus Conversation guide, which students can receive a copy of at one of the two upcoming facilitator training sessions hosted by University Life.

BY [KHADIJA HUSSAIN](#) | FEBRUARY 28, 2018, 1:09 AM

The Office of University Life will attempt to promote difficult conversations between students regarding race at Columbia with Campus Conversation packets, an initiative unveiled this week.

In part because of Columbia's politically correct culture, critical discourse about race and identity can be inhibited by students feeling [uncomfortable with or unprepared to initiate](#) these conversations on their own.

According to Associate Vice President for Student Life Ixchel Rosal, the idea for Campus Conversations arose as an effort to foster such dialogue.

"[These conversations] are not easy, but they are so essential. And I think nine-tenths of the time, people are just too scared, they become too timid, and they don't know where to start," Rosal said. "So here's where you start."

First proposed by the office's Race, Ethnicity, and Inclusion Task Force in its [2016-17 report](#), these Campus Conversation materials aim to encourage students to engage with issues of race, identity, and inclusion by offering them a comprehensive guide to starting such conversations. The task force, which is comprised of students, faculty, and administrators, was formed by University Life in 2015 to develop strategies to address issues related to students' identities.

The packets, each around a dozen pages long, guide students through various exercises, from icebreakers to specific discussion topics, that serve as a starting point for productive conversation.

To supplement these guides, students are also able to sign up for facilitator trainings hosted by University Life that prepare them to lead these conversations. Students who take part in a three-hour-long session will be asked to host a 90-minute conversation this semester either in class, in a student group, in a residence hall, or among friends.

According to Rosal, the number of students registering for these trainings has increased each week. However, while the trainings have proved popular among graduate students, Lisa Davis, GS '19, also a University Life fellow, said she hoped more undergraduates would get involved in the process.

In a university-wide email, Executive Vice President for University Life Suzanne Goldberg announced the facilitator training, inviting students to join her office in conversation.

The guide outlines a series of activities to help students initiate conversations about their identities, such as an exercise in which all participants go around and explain the story behind their name. Some activities are similar to those that happen at Under1Roof, Columbia's inclusivity workshop that all first-years must complete during the New Student Orientation Program. However, while Under1Roof is mandatory, Campus Conversations requires students to sign up on their own.

"What the university is trying to do is get students involved in the stakeholder process and get them engaged in creating a community that is more encouraging," Shyamolie Biyani, CC '18 and a University Life fellow who contributed to the development of the conversation packets, said.

While Biyani acknowledged that the initial participants are likely to be students who have experience with conversations about race and inclusion, she predicted that the initiative will soon reach those who do not actively engage with these issues.

"There might even be a snowball effect, where it starts off with very, very dedicated students," she said. "If they hold a conversation and five people come, and even one of them is interested and excited, it can move from there."

Furthermore, the facilitator training prepares students to approach subjects that they may be familiar with in a way that is sensitive to students who may not be as educated.

"I think that is sometimes a barrier—you can be so educated on perspectives on identity, and people of color, and gender issues, but how do you really speak to someone who is not so knowledgeable without putting them off or making them feel uncomfortable?" Davis said.

While the conversation packets offer a structured, step-by-step approach to starting conversations, students who took part in the training were encouraged to be flexible in their application of its guidelines.

"This is a guide, it's not an instruction manual, it's a jumping off point, so we really want people to use it flexibly."

Students can receive copies of the guide at one of the two upcoming facilitator training sessions, which will take place on Wednesday, Feb. 28 from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. or on Thursday, March 8 from 4 p.m. to 7 p.m.