

Workshop activity to understand ‘privilege’

BACKGROUND ON THE DIVERSITY EDUCATION TASK FORCE: This activity was adapted by the Diversity Education Task Force. The purpose of Diversity Education Task Force (DETF) is to educate, advocate, and celebrate diversity including making recommendations to the college administration to create a more inclusive campus environment. The DETF works to fulfill this purpose in many ways; such as, offering period staff training on diversity-related issues; offering diversity-focused student events, including the nationally-recognized celebration months; and implementing new campus diversity initiatives, such as the Safe Zone training for faculty and staff who wish to be identified as an ally to the LGBT community.

PURPOSE OF THE ACTIVITY: This activity is part of a unit surrounding the essential question: Does everyone have implicit bias? This workshop has been designed to provide students with an opportunity to understand the intricacies of privilege and to explore the ways that we enjoy privileges based on being members of social identity groups in the United States. Please note that this exercise is not meant to make anyone feel guilty or ashamed of her or his privilege or lack of privilege related to any social identity categories. Rather, the exercise seeks to highlight the fact that everyone has SOME privilege, even as some people have more privilege than others. By illuminating our various privileges as individuals, we can recognize ways that we can use our privileges individually and collectively to work for social justice. The purpose is not to blame anyone for having more power or privilege or for receiving more help in achieving goals, but to have an opportunity to identify both obstacles and benefits experienced in our life.

***NOTE:** This is a very “high risk” activity that requires trust building and safety for participants; introducing this activity too early in the year or before building trust risks creating resentment and hurt that can inhibit further sharing and openness.

Supplies Needed:

- List of statements related to privilege or obstacles
- Space large enough for participants to form a straight line with an arm’s length between them and the person on their left; there should be space in front of the line to move forward 10 steps or behind to be able to move back 10 steps.

DIRECTIONS FOR THE ACTIVITY:

- 1** Have participants form a straight line across the room about an arm’s length apart, leaving space in front and behind.
- 2** Read the Purpose from above, to help provide context for the exercise.
- 3** **State the following:** Listen to the following statements, and follow the instructions given. For example, when I read, “If you have blue eyes, take one step forward,” only people with blue eyes will move and everyone else will stand still. Each step should be an average length step. This activity should be done in silence and if anyone feels uncomfortable stepping forward and backward on any statement I read, then please stay where you are, but remember the statement read. This is an introspective exercise and it’s important for you to understand how privilege affects your life, but it is not designed to make you share things which you don’t wish to share.



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CCSS

L.1
Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

L.3
Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning or style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening.

SL.6
Adapt speech to a variety of contexts and tasks, demonstrating a command of formal English when indicated or appropriate.

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Read the following statements one at a time allowing time for participants to take a step.

1. If your parents worked nights and weekends to support your family, take one step back.
2. If you are able to move through the world without fear of sexual assault, take one step forward.
3. If you can show affection for your romantic partner in public without fear of ridicule or violence, take one step forward.
4. If you have ever been diagnosed as having a physical or mental illness/disability, take one step back.
5. If the primary language spoken in your household growing up was not English, take one step back.
6. If you came from a supportive family environment take one step forward.
7. If you have ever tried to change your speech or mannerisms to gain credibility, take one step back.
8. If you can go anywhere in the country, and easily find the kinds of hair products you need and/or cosmetics that match your skin color, take one step forward.
9. If you were embarrassed about your clothes or house while growing up, take one step back.
10. If you can make mistakes and not have people attribute your behavior to flaws in your racial/gender group, take one step forward.
11. If you can legally marry the person you love, regardless of where you live, take one step forward.
12. If you were born in the United States, take one step forward.
13. If you or your parents have ever gone through a divorce, take one step back.
14. If you felt like you had adequate access to healthy food growing up, take one step forward
15. If you are reasonably sure you would be hired for a job based on your ability and qualifications, take one step forward.
16. If you would never think twice about calling the police when trouble occurs, take one step forward.
17. If you can see a doctor whenever you feel the need, take one step forward.
18. If you feel comfortable being emotionally expressive/open, take one step forward.
19. If you have ever been the only person of your race/gender/socio-economic status/ sexual orientation in a classroom or workplace setting, please take one step back.
20. If you took out loans for your education take one step backward.
21. If you get time off for your religious holidays, take one step forward.
22. If you had a job during your high school and college years, take one step back.
23. If you feel comfortable walking home alone at night, take one step forward.
24. If you have ever traveled outside the United States, take one step forward.
25. If you have ever felt like there was NOT adequate or accurate representation of your racial group, sexual orientation group, gender group, and/or disability group in the media, take one step back.
26. If you feel confident that your parents would be able to financially help/support you if you were going through a financial hardship, take one step forward.
27. If you have ever been bullied or made fun of based on something that you can't change, take one step back.
28. If there were more than 50 books in your house growing up, take one step forward.
29. If you studied the culture or the history of your ancestors in elementary school take one step forward.
30. If your parents or guardians attended college, take one step forward.
31. If you ever went on a family vacation, take one step forward.
32. If you can buy new clothes or go out to dinner when you want to, take one step forward.
33. If you were ever offered a job because of your association with a friend or family member, take one step forward.
34. If one of your parents was ever laid off or unemployed not by choice, take one step back.
35. If you were ever uncomfortable about a joke or a statement you overheard related to your race, ethnicity, gender, appearance, or sexual orientation but felt unsafe to confront the situation, take one step back.

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When all the statements have been read, process the activity using the following questions. Start the question/answer session by going around the room, and have each student share one word that capture how they are feeling right now. If they do not want to share, have them say, "pass."

- How did it feel to be one of the students on the "back" side of the line?
- How did it feel to be one of the students on the "front" side of the line?
- Did anyone think they had experienced an average amount of privilege, but it turned out to be more or less than they thought?
- If anyone was alone on one side, how did that feel?
- Was anyone always on one side of the line? If yes, how did that feel?
- Were there certain sentences that were more impactful than others?
- What are you aware of now that you weren't necessarily aware of before this exercise?

In my experience, this exercise helped students become aware of things that impact the daily lives of their peers and themselves. In relation to the implicit bias unit, students used this exercise to cite situations that came to mind when they had to step forward or backwards during the exercise and the feelings they had about what biased opinions might be shed on them during their time in line. At the end of the year in their reflections, students said that this activity had a profound impact on them and asked that we do more activities like this throughout the year.