

Taking on Neo-diversity on Campus  
Cooperating Raleigh Colleges Consortium Workshop  
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**Narrative description:** Today, working on a college campus is a high wire act. Colleges and universities are no longer segregated to only one type of student with one type of background. College students today are a neo-diverse mix of backgrounds and experiences. With little training, staff of these colleges and universities are expected to have productive interactions with people, that is students, who are "...not like me." That can cause an anxiety about how to interact. That neo-diversity anxiety can get in the way of the professional work staff are trying their best to do. This workshop is designed to give participants strategies for dealing with their own neo-diversity anxiety in order to do their jobs living up to the high standards for productive social interactions they set for themselves.

**Learning outcomes:** After participating in this workshop, you will leave with:

A clear definition of neo-diversity

A clear understanding of neo-diversity anxiety and its effects on social interaction

Five tips for interacting well in neo-diverse social encounters

What is neo-diversity? Neo-diversity is not about "who." Neo-diversity is a "what." Neo-diversity is the interpersonal situation we all live and work in, in which we have to encounter and sometimes interact with people from many different groups.

Neo-diversity is the (new to America) interpersonal situation in which we all have to encounter and interact with people "...not like us" on some group dimension. The neo-diversity situation means we all must sometimes interact with persons who do not look like, sound like, believe like or love like "...us."

And the interpersonal situation of neo-diversity ...can cause interpersonal-anxiety. Anxiety about who are among the 'we' and who are among the 'they?' Anxiety about how to interact with "...them." Anxiety that can activate bigotry.

That is why it is important to practice incorporating the Five-Tips into all of your everyday social interactions, but especially your professional social interactions with whomever might be your clients. Dr. Nacoste offered his five tips saying:

"To be an ally requires first and foremost, self-examination. No matter who you are, no matter how you are trained, you are not alright.

You are not alright because of the way you were socialized to be part of this American culture. Somewhere during your socialization, you were given ideas about some group; maybe race, maybe religion, maybe sexual orientation, maybe...

The poet, W. H. Auden, put it this way:

Evil is unspectacular and always human.  
Shares our bed and eats at our own table.

Whoever you are, to be an ally in your role requires genuine self-examination and acceptance of the fact that, you are not alright when it comes to having to interact with all kinds of people. There are no innocent.

That is why, to be an ally requires first and foremost, self-examination of your intergroup feelings on all fronts. If you think “I’m good when it comes to black people” and then a black, transgender woman comes in as a client, will you really be alright? Will you be alright when a Hijab Muslim woman sits down in front of you?

In my new book, “To Live Woke,” there are two chapters in which I offer tips for how to interact well in our neo-diverse world. Chapter 33 is, “Evoke the forms: Nine tips to help you live woke.”

A shorter version of those tips is in Chapter 44, “Heralding Neo-diversity.”<sup>1</sup> In that chapter I describe my interactions with first year students at Shippensburg University. In those interactions, I put the nine tips into five points for having productive social interactions. Those five are:

1. *Never try to interact with a person as a representative of a group.* The (Shippensburg) students agreed with me that this was the most basic starting point.
2. *Go slow.* When I let those (Shippensburg) students know that my approach to all that is going on is interpersonal, I informed them of one of the discoveries from social psychology is that in social interaction, (a) self-disclosures should come slowly as if peeling an onion, and (b) self-disclosures should be asked for slowly. That adds up to the “...go slow” rule for coping with neo-diversity anxiety. The students liked that.
3. *Live with the anxiety.* Too often, we talk about, we try to get past our anxiety and that’s when we “...make it worse.” We blurt out an inappropriate question, like “...What are you?” Instead, it’s better to acknowledge to yourself you are feeling anxious and then remind yourself to follow rule 2: go slow and live with the anxiety for a while.
4. *Agree to disagree.* Meeting new people means encountering people with different approaches to living life in the social world; for example, different political beliefs. Other people have their own social histories and experiences. From their experiences, those “other people” have already

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<sup>1</sup> Nacoste, R. W. (2020). To Live Woke: Thoughts to carry in our struggle to save the soul of America. (Loyola University Maryland: Apprentice House Press).

come to some of their opinions, just as you have. Agree to disagree without being competitive, without feeling threatened, without attacking the other person. In other words, expect to encounter disagreements; expect to be surprised.

5. *Learning conversations.* Since on campus, and in life, you will be meeting a mix of new people, make your conversations, learning conversations. How? (A) Avoid relying on stereotypes (and stereotyped questions; what do you do for a living?). (B) Go slow; interact with the intent to learn what the other person is willing to tell you. (C) Live in the moment, live with the anxiety. (D) Agree to disagree; no one is going to change anybody in the moment, so learn how people think without trying to change how they think or what they think.”