

## ABSTRACT

We live and work in diverse environments. To that end, ACEJMC professional values include two that pertain to acknowledgment and sensitivity of diversity:

- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications;
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.

These competencies are expected of our journalism and mass communication graduates; however, recent [literature](#) indicates they do not understand complexities associated with diversity, particularly privilege.

As an educator, I find it challenging to have a productive conversation about diversity, specifically privilege, without it sounding “preachy,” but the following exercise illuminates the point while engaging my students.

## WHAT THE IDEA IS

### Rationale

Generational research shows that some millennials prefer [not to talk](#) about “it”, whether “it” refers to [race](#), [class](#), [gender](#), etc. Professional journalists have [attempted](#) to create conversations about diversity, including privilege, even identifying words such as ‘[white fragility](#)’ to describe this general reluctance to engage.

The problem extends to faculty too. Current scholarship that surveyed more than 6,000 faculty members across disciplines [indicated](#) that prospective graduate students perceived to be white men were more likely to receive guidance than their peers.

### Exercise Parameters

Can be executed in ANY class — doesn’t matter the context (media theory, production, criticism) or level (freshmen, senior, etc.). I have utilized this exercise in a smaller, lab-oriented course but also in a larger, lecture-style setting.

I conduct the exercise and facilitate the ensuing conversation in a 50-minute class session; however, a more robust discussion could result from longer class durations.

## HOW IT WORKS IN THE CLASSROOM

### Implementation

I first ask students how they have been previously taught about diversity. Some say it's not covered enough — a diversity 'day' or week allotted in the course. That it seems like a checkmark in the syllabus. Others, generally the white men, say that they feel like they are being told that they "haven't had to work hard" to get where they are. So they indicate certain dread having a conversation about diversity and privilege. Sometimes they express that outright; others times, I notice nonverbal cues, e.g., eye rolling.

I then ask them to identify basic demographics typically associated with conversations about diversity, and they almost always name race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation and class. Rarely, though, do students remember other factors that further qualify diversity: able-bodiedness, citizenship status, education attainment, property ownership, religious (non)affiliation. And there may be others.

Sometimes I will overtly offer these before the exercise, but in some instances, those missed can be woven into the exercise itself, as demonstrated below.

Finally, I ask all students to grab a sheet of paper they can discard — doesn't have to be big — just something that can be crumpled. I ask 1-2 students with which arm they typically throw, asking them to hold a tennis ball, keeping it lodged between that throwing arm and their body at all times. I have a handkerchief that I use to blindfold another person. I take 3 different students into the hallway, keeping the door to the classroom open so they can see into it from their position outside. Two students, and I try to choose 2 men or 2 women, are given paper 'hearts' that I ask them to wear through the exercise. I ask the remaining students to spread out around the room, standing wherever they wish.

Then I pull the recycle bin toward the center of the room.

Their objective: Make the bucket. Throw their crumpled paper into the recycle bin, regardless of their proximity near/far from it or their personal situation.

Of course, some make it; others miss. I try to keep track of that. Then we begin our discussion, which leads into a reflexive assignment about personal privilege.

## **Results**

Immediately after students take their shot, I draw the parallels: The recycle bin is supposed to represent success in life, and some, based on their aggregate privilege, may be closer than others at "making it".

Typically, those closer to the bin have a higher percentage chance to make their shot, but some in close proximity do miss. That represents an opportunity to remind them that, even with certain privileges, people can struggle. For somebody

physically close to the bin who misses, you could say that they hypothetically struggle with a drug addiction or a learning disability.

For those with assigned physical limitations, e.g., blindfolding, holding a tennis ball, I use that as an opportunity to remind them of able-bodiedness.

The students in the hallway almost never make their shot. Some of them hit the doorframe, which can symbolize a physical border, reminding them that citizenship status is a privilege. I also use this as an opportunity to alert others to their limited resources — now outside the classroom, these students no longer have access to their notebooks in order to crumple another sheet of paper and take a second “shot” at success. They got just the one chance.

I also ask the 2 men (or 2 women) with the ‘hearts’ if their labeling as gay men or lesbian women put more or less pressure on them to “make” their shots.

After our discussion, I ask students to reflect on their aggregate personal privilege. We identify which receives the most social privilege in each demographic category, e.g., race (white), gender (male), sexual orientation (straight), etc.

I want them to reflect on three major themes:

1. Where do they (not) have personal privilege based on components of diversity?
2. What might that mean in terms of opportunities they (do not) have?
3. Where can they identify current examples in media where privilege is reinforced? Challenged?

## **STUDENT REACTION**

Anecdotally, students have favorably mentioned it in my end-of-semester evaluations, and I have been alerted to students’ reactions to this exercise via social platforms — posts, tweets and pictures, which indicates that they are willing to publicly share this experience with others.