

# Mizzou tensions spark conversations, concerns at MSU

[Jackie Rehwald](mailto:JREHWALD@NEWS-LEADER.COM), JREHWALD@NEWS-LEADER.COM 6:18 p.m. CST November 11, 2015



Dozens of students packed a room in Strong Hall at Missouri State University for a "Tough Talk Table Talk" about the recent events at Mizzou and Yale on Wednesday, Nov. 11, 2015. The talks are designed to give students and staff an opportunity to have difficult conversations about race, bias, inclusion and social class. (Photo: Nathan Papes/News-Leader)Buy Photo

What can I do to help?

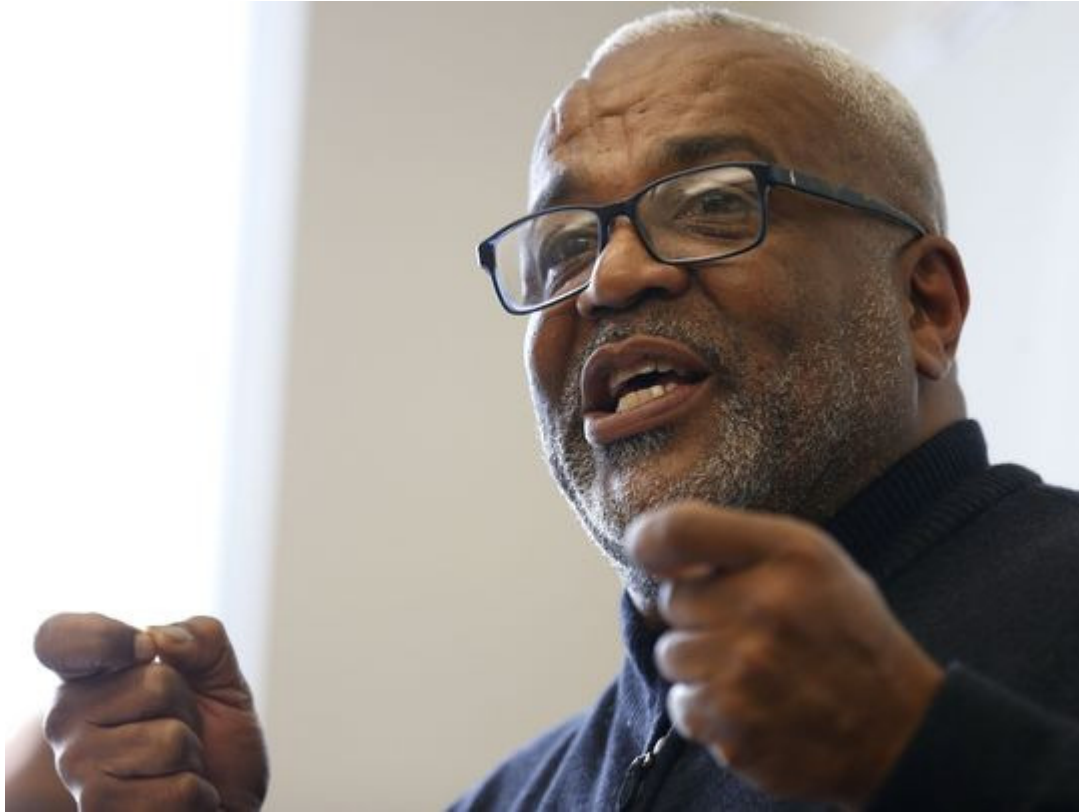
A white student asked that of black classmates and professors during the "Tough Talk Table Talk" discussion at Missouri State University on Wednesday. "I would never purposely make someone feel less than or oppressed. But I feel as though I'm not doing anything to change it as well," she said. "What do I do?"

Jasmine Newman, a black freshman sociology major, spoke up.

"I think the fact that you are even here right now is you wanting to know more about it and you want to be informed. I applaud you for that," Newman said. "That, to me, is you doing something right now."

MSU instructor Lyle Foster said about 15 to 20 students normally attend the Tough Talk Table Talk sessions, which are designed to give students and staff an opportunity to have difficult conversations about race, bias, inclusion and social class.

But recent race-related events at Missouri University and Yale University seemed to have piqued interest, and about 35 people showed up. With the chairs full, people found spots on the floor.



(Photo: Nathan Papes/News-Leader)

Foster started the conversation by explaining the one rule at Tough Talk Table Talk: mutual respect for people, even if they ask or say something that seems outlandish. "It's OK. Please ask. We'll talk. We'll share. We don't want to be combative," Foster said. " We just want to give students a place to talk."

Some students said they had friends at Mizzou who are afraid to leave their homes or dorm rooms.

"They are all scared," one girl said.

"I feel like there's a presumption that this is a Mizzou issue," another girl said. "It's happening at Mizzou right now, but we are dealing with the same issues here. People need to understand that this has to do with systematic issues of what is going on at this campus and how the students feel about their environment. And they don't feel like they are being welcome or being listened to."

One man who is white said he didn't believe the Mizzou protesters had the right to demand the president step down because people's feelings were hurt.

"It wasn't just feelings hurt," a black student called out from the crowd. She said the university president had allowed a climate where students did not feel safe.

At one point, the conversation shifted to what it's like to be a black student at MSU.

One black student talked about a time when an instructor asked the class why black people didn't vote, and several of his white classmates said because "black people are lazy."

The instructor didn't say anything, he recalled.

"The faculty don't even do anything to combat things like that," he said. "It's not just students."

When Foster asked how that incident made him feel, the young man said, "I didn't want to come to class."

Another black student shared her story.

"Most of my classes, I am the only black student. I don't get eye contact from the teachers sometimes, and I sit in front on purpose just to see if they will look at me," she said. "That makes me uncomfortable."

One man, who is white, said he felt "insulated" and didn't know much about the events at Mizzou and Yale. A white student said he wasn't sure why the MU protesters demanded the university president step down.



(Photo: Nathan Papes/News-Leader)

Newman spoke up again.

"A lot of the students were upset because of all the racial incidents that happened there, and the administration wasn't really handling it as quickly or efficiently as they should have," Newman said. "Then the president did say a couple comments when addressed by students that weren't the best comments. He kind of made it seem like the systematic oppression that they were going through was their fault."

One white student asked which is preferred — black or African American. Several in the room responded that both are OK.

Foster suggested asking people what they prefer, adding that "colored" is a no-no.

Another black student said using the phrase "the blacks" is offensive.

The Black Lives Matter movement was debated, with some white adults wondering what was wrong with saying "All Lives Matter" or "Black Lives Matter, too."

"We all know that all lives should matter, but all lives don't matter to everybody," one black student said.

"People perceive that in order to bring someone up, you have to bring someone else down," another black student explained. "You don't have to bring the white man down."

Foster weighed in, referencing a New York Times editorial that questioned why people seemed more upset about the killing of Cecil the lion than shooting deaths of black people.

"How did we get to this place in society where we see people being killed and we just switch the channel?" Foster said. "Have black lives particularly become so taken for granted? Because of all the media stories and media hype and the pervasive violence, we don't even have the sensitivity anymore? I think that is part of the genesis of the movement to say our lives do matter. And the condition of our lives matter."

As the session wrapped up, one black student offered advice to the white students.

"You guys want to help? Help us by starting these conversations with your friends," she said. "You are here and being educated. Now go forward and pass it on."

Tough Talk Table Talk is a pilot program that started in September and is sponsored by MSU's Department of Sociology and Anthropology. To learn more about the bi-weekly meetings, visit [calendar.missouristate.edu](http://calendar.missouristate.edu) or email [LyleFoster@Missouristate.edu](mailto:LyleFoster@Missouristate.edu).