

Inclusive Conversations

Fostering Equity and Understanding in Tense Times by Mary-Frances Winters

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Engagement period: June 9 – July 15, 2026 · **Sessions:** Three, held via Zoom · **Report date:** July 31, 2026

OVERVIEW AND STRUCTURE

This ACS summer reading group convened three cross-institutional sessions on Mary-Frances Winters' *Inclusive Conversations*. Rather than march chapter by chapter, we chunked the book into three thematic movements, each built to stand on its own so participants who missed a session could still join the next productively. Every session opened by re-anchoring on shared ground rules — stories stay and lessons leave; make space and take space; lead with curiosity — and closed with a personal commitment question rather than a group consensus. Below is a brief overview of each session:

- **Session 1 — The Argument and the Moment.** Winters' claim that declining civility is itself slowing progress on inclusion, set against generational change in the workplace and the current higher education climate of DEI rollbacks and legislative pressure.
- **Session 2 — Power and Fragility.** Three chapters centered on the themes of: seeking equity and power, moving through fear and fragility, and extending grace by calling people in rather than out.
- **Session 3 — Trust, Empathy, and Belonging.** Trust and empathy as preconditions for honest dialogue, the distinction between inclusion and belonging, and whiteness as the unnamed default against which belonging is measured.

This reading group was convened pursuant to a proposal for a cross-institutional ACS staff learning collaborative. That proposal was motivated by staff's often-overlooked role in shaping student belonging, engagement, and campus climate through daily interactions — a role distinct from, but as consequential as, the faculty-centered focus of most inclusive pedagogy work — and by the observation that staff-focused professional development on belonging, accessibility, and inclusive communication remains limited, particularly in cross-institutional settings. The timing was tied to evolving student needs, including increased attention to mental health, neurodiversity, and navigating differences on campus, and the cross-institutional format itself was grounded in the shared commitment ACS campuses hold to residential liberal arts education and student-centered learning.

Inclusive Conversations was selected for a few concrete reasons. Winters wrote the book for practitioners doing this work day to day rather than as an academic text, making it usable for a staff audience without specialized background. Its central argument — that avoiding hard conversations is itself a form of harm — speaks directly to the environment named in Session 1: declining civility, generational change, and active DEI rollback pressure in higher education. Each chapter also pairs a concept with built-in reflection questions, which is part of why the group could chunk the book into three thematic movements rather than proceeding chapter by chapter. Finally, concepts such as the inclusion/belonging distinction, psychological safety, and naming unnamed defaults gave participants from different campuses a shared vocabulary, which is exactly what a cross-institutional collaborative depends on.

ATTENDANCE

Session	Focus	Date	Attendance
Session 1	Framing the argument: civility, generational change, and the political moment	June 9, 2026	8
Session 2	Power & Fragility: equity and power, fear and fragility, grace and forgiveness	June 25, 2026	7
Session 3	Trust, Empathy & Belonging: trust, belonging, and naming whiteness	July 15, 2026	6

Attendance held steady at six to eight participants per meeting. The consistency mattered more than the size: a stable small group let trust accumulate session over session — precisely the dynamic Winters describes — which made the later, harder conversations on fragility and whiteness possible.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Trust is built, not assumed — and the burden falls on those with power.** Trust accumulates through repeated behavior over time, and the responsibility to extend it first sits with those holding positional or social power, who carry less personal risk in doing so. This reframed the work for several participants in leadership roles.
- **Being invited is not the same as being valued.** The group returned repeatedly to the inclusion/belonging distinction: inclusion is a social act, the invitation; belonging is a psychological need met after someone accepts and stays. Many institutions achieve the former without the latter.
- **Psychological safety is a precondition, not an amenity.** People will not engage honestly if they fear judgment or retaliation. The practical indicators — whether people ask questions, admit mistakes, disagree, and share differing views without fear — gave participants a concrete diagnostic for their own teams.
- **Leadership shapes belonging through behavior, not messaging.** Modeling the behavior, encouraging participation, responding constructively to conflict, and recognizing contributions across difference did more to build belonging than any stated value statement, in participants' experience.
- **Naming whiteness is a condition for change, not an accusation.** Belonging is always measured against some assumed default. Naming that default makes previously invisible dynamics discussable and shifts accountability from individual intent to systems. The property framing traces to Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," Harvard Law Review (1993).
- **Equity is operationalized through three concrete moves.** Participants worked with a framework of defining equity (meeting people where they are rather than treating everyone identically), recognizing power dynamics, and giving people agency, translating an abstract commitment into practice.
- **Moving through fear is a practiced skill, not a fixed trait.** The group named facing fear directly, talking it through with trusted others, resisting stereotypes, and staying open to unfamiliar experience as concrete moves, alongside recognizing when to lean in and when resilience means stepping back.
- **Grace and accountability are not opposites.** Winters' "call people in, don't call them out" framing prompted the most contested conversation of the summer — productively so.
- **This capacity is now a professional skill.** Participants agreed with Winters that navigating political difference and advocating for equity is no longer optional for practitioners, while acknowledging the real institutional risk that carries in the present climate.

WHAT THE GROUP FOUND MOST COMPELLING

- **The political moment was named out loud.** Naming where higher education actually is right now — rollbacks, legislative threats, institutions making very different choices — generated the most candid exchange of the series. Participants came from institutions with sharply different latitude, and we deliberately let that tension sit unresolved rather than facilitating toward consensus.
- **Roots of mistrust as rational, not personal.** Framing mistrust as a reasonable response to inherited and lived experience — traced through the colonial era, slavery, Jim Crow, and anti-LGBTQIA+ discrimination — changed how participants heard hesitation from colleagues.
- **The everyday behaviors.** Acknowledge, invite, credit, use names, stay curious. That belonging is built through small repeatable actions available to anyone regardless of position was the most immediately actionable idea in the book.
- **The cost of going first.** "What would it cost you to extend trust first?" proved the most revealing question of the summer, particularly for senior participants.
- **The sequential logic.** No trust, people go silent. No belonging, people leave. No naming, systems stay invisible. Participants found this framing — three conditions in sequence rather than three separate initiatives — the clearest articulation of the book's architecture.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS USED

Fourteen of the questions that anchored the three sessions:

1. What does it mean to create a workplace culture that genuinely considers the needs of workers from all generations — and what does that require of us?
2. In your current context, what parts of this work would fly on your campus, and what would not? What does it mean that some of it would not?

3. In what ways do you hold power, and how do you use it to dismantle inequitable systems?
4. How can you stay resilient while attending to the toll this work takes? How are fear and fragility affecting your work right now?
5. What are your thoughts on cancel culture, and has it changed in recent years? How do you encourage grace in a polarized moment?
6. What impedes trust on your team, and what would it cost you to extend trust first?
7. When have you felt a true sense of belonging — and what signals to someone that they do not belong?
8. Describe a time someone did not feel they belonged even though everyone assumed they were included.
9. What is a group you have been part of where you held more power than you realized at the time?
10. Why does leaving whiteness out actually protect it rather than protect the conversation — and who benefits when organizations talk about diversity without ever naming it?
11. Share a time you saw someone use their power to foster inclusion.
12. What does resilience mean to you?
13. Are there groups held to a higher standard, for whom grace should not be extended?
14. How do you build your capacity for empathy?

PULLING IT TOGETHER

Across three sessions, the group worked through Inclusive Conversations thematically rather than chapter by chapter, moving from naming power and equity, through confronting fear and extending grace, to examining trust, belonging, and the defaults that often go unnamed — arriving at the sequential logic captured above: no trust, people go silent; no belonging, people leave; no naming, systems stay invisible. Read together, the sessions moved the group from naming difficult dynamics in the abstract to identifying concrete, everyday behaviors — extending trust first, naming what usually goes unnamed, practicing the small actions that build belonging — that participants can carry back into their own institutional roles.