The UMass Amherst Institute for Teaching Excellence and Faculty Development (TEFD) is pleased to support the 2015 Common Read Program and the campus discussion of *The True American: Murder and Mercy in Texas*, by Anand Giridharadas. *The True American* challenges readers with depictions of violence, despair, racism, xenophobia, and classism. In doing so, however, it also supports the core mission of the UMass Amherst Diversity Strategic Plan by encouraging critical thinking on topics of social justice and inclusion:

By embracing diverse people, ideas, and perspectives we create a vibrant learning and working environment. Breaking down barriers to meaningful participation fosters a sense of belonging and treats all individuals with dignity and respect. In this environment we work toward an equitable society in which all enjoy equal rights and opportunities... UMass Amherst has a profound legacy of and commitment to social justice, extending across generations and spanning disciplines. We accept for ourselves and instill in our UMass Amherst students the ongoing commitment to creating a better, more just world.

*The True American* may not be an easy book to read, but it gives students, faculty, and staff an opportunity to have fundamental discussions about the kind of community we want to live in – one defined by empathy, forgiveness, justice, and opportunity.

The following pages contain important information about the context of your discussion session, tips for leading effective and inclusive discussions on challenging topics, as well as a range of sample teaching activities.

**Possible Learning Outcome Goals**

- Provide students with a positive small-group discussion experience.
- Help students deepen their connection to other new students, faculty, and staff.
- Engage students in a discussion of *The True American* that compliments the other campus activities surrounding the book.
- Encourage students to reflect on racism, justice, forgiveness, inclusion, and the American Dream.

**Things to Consider When Planning for your Discussion Session:**

**Context**

- Discussion sessions happen a few weeks into the semester.
- Discussion sessions occur in the evening.
- The book involves approximately 319 pages of summer reading – prepare for the possibility that some students will not have completed the book.
Facilitating inclusive classroom discussions on challenging topics requires skill and careful forethought. Before you lead a discussion on *The True American*, we strongly encourage you to consider the following:

- **Your goals for the conversation.** You are more likely to have a successfully inclusive discussion if you have a clear understanding of your learning outcome goals and how they relate to your discussion activities. For information on designing activities to match goals and more, see Dr. Mathew Ouellett and Dr. Christine Stanley’s “[Strategies to Engage and Sustain the Diverse Classroom](#).”

- **Your own background and how it affects the conversation you plan to lead.** The truth is, our individual identities impact how we interact with others. For more information on how to consider our social position in preparation for leading an inclusive discussion, see “[Positionality: How Does ‘Who We Are’ Affect ‘What We Do’](#)” by Dr. Jesse Tauriac.

- **Preventative Measures.** There is a lot you can do ahead of a discussion to ensure it goes well, including arranging co-facilitation, getting to know your discussion participants and their social identifies from the outset, allowing enough time for students to process information, establishing guidelines, and more. For more information, see TEFD’s tip sheet “[Facilitating Difficult Discussions](#)” or Dr. Tasha Souza’s presentation on “[Difficult Dialogues and Stereotype Threat](#).”

- **How you will respond in the moment.** Numerous strategies exist for moderating difficult discussions, including increasing your attention to nonverbal communication, asking follow-up questions to better understand heated responses, managing time appropriately, and promoting an environment that allows for openness and risk-taking. For more information, see Dr. Jesse Tauriac’s presentation on “[Approaches to Engaging Today’s Students in Conversations about Racialization, Microaggressions, & Societal Oppression](#)” and TEFD’s tip sheet “[Facilitating Difficult Discussions](#).” For a very practical framework on how to respond to difficult discussions and sample response language, see Dr. Tasha Souza’s presentation on “[Difficult Dialogues and Stereotype Threat](#).”

- **The role of reflection and summation.** When leading complicated discussions, it can be extremely beneficial to give participants time to process new information, “cool down” from charged moments, capture their feelings in individual writing prompts, and hear a summary of the topics discussed. For specific examples for all of these strategies, see the links listed above and below.

More information:

- [Difficult Dialogues](#), Center for Teaching, Vanderbilt University
- [Teaching Controversial Issues](#), School of Education, University of North Carolina
- [Teaching Challenging Materials](#), Graduate School, University of Oregon
- [Managing Hot Moments in the Classroom](#), Lee Warren, Harvard University
- [Classroom Conflicts and Controversial Issues](#), University of California Davis

And of course, if you would like individual help planning your discussion, feel free to contact TEFD.
Other Pedagogical Tips

- **Bring your discipline/experience into the conversation!** Use your knowledge to customize your approach to the book.
- **Offer tangibles!** Consider introducing concepts using tangible objects (for example, simple items we may take for granted but which are unavailable in prison).
- **Divide your session into distinctive chunks!** Consider dividing the session into multiple activities to keep your participants engaged and to offer multiple forms of interaction. Some options appear on the following pages.

Sample Activities

What follows is a range of activities you may choose to use in your session. There are obviously more options than you will need, so choose only the activities that appeal to your interests and teaching style.

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**Introductions**

**Goals:** Establish rapport; begin to get to know each other’s names and model appropriate participation; begin building a connection to the text.

- **Introduce Yourself:** Be sure to mention your role at UMass, your interests, background, and perhaps some anecdote that relates to the book. *(Approx. 5 minutes)*

- **Basic Student Introductions:** Ask students to introduce themselves by stating their name, hometown, and one thing they’ve already learned since arriving at UMass. *(Approx. 10 minutes)*

- **Two-Step Interviews:** Encourage students to introduce themselves to a partner. Then, each student should introduce their partner to the rest of the class. *(Approx. 15 minutes)*

- **3 Details and 1 Wrong Turn:** Ask students to list three details about themselves, and one choice they made that easily could have resulted in a wrong turn in life. *(Approx. 15 minutes)*

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**Discussion Strategies**

**Goals:** Bring the book “into the room” and evoke the tenor of it for everyone whether or not they have read the book. In general, writing exercises help shy students gather their thoughts in preparation for further group interaction. Small group discussions help students develop their ideas and build connections with their peers. Large-group discussions encourage students to communicate their thoughts as well as learn from a variety of perspectives. Reflection exercises allow students to bring closure to the discussion and process learning at a deeper level.
A Taste of the Text: Read aloud a brief paragraph from the book that you found particularly memorable and say how it resonated with you. (Discussion Starter, Approx. 10 minutes)

Provocative Idea: Introduce a provocative question, anecdote, or current event that relates to the book. Model the type of intellectual activity you’d like present in the session. (Discussion Starter, Approx. 10 minutes)

Question Posting: Ask students to share one aspect of the book they’d like to know more about. Write topics on the board and see if students can answer other students’ questions. (Discussion Starter, Approx. 15 minutes)

Memorable Moments or Themes: Ask students to write for 5 minutes about a specific moment in the book, or a general theme from the book. Then ask them to get into pairs and describe the moment/theme they chose to write about. (Writing Exercise, Approx. 15 minutes)

Small Group Passages: Count students off so that they form small groups of 4 or 5 participants. Pass out short passages from the book written on slips of paper – one per group. Ask students to read and comment on the passages. Do they recall the context of the passage? What issues are raised? What connections can be made to other parts of the book? What connections can be made to their lives and current events? (Small Group Exercise, Approx. 15 minutes)

Small Group Questions: Count students off so that they form small groups of 4 or 5 participants. Explain that you want to give them time to talk both about the book and how it relates to their own experiences. Sample questions: How would you describe your personal relationship to immigration? When have you experienced intolerance? (Small Group Exercise, Approx. 30 minutes)

Large Group Synthesis Activity: Ask each small group to report on the things they learned or will take away from their discussion. (Large Group Exercise, Approx. 20 minutes)

Letter to Self: Have students write a letter to themselves responding to one or more of the following questions: How will your first semester of college influence the way you make daily decisions? What new things do you hope to learn and/or accomplish this semester? What sort of impact do you want to make on the world? You might encourage students to seal the letter in an envelope and open it at the end of the semester. They will be able to read what was on their mind in September and may be surprised at how much they have changed. (Reflection Exercise, Approx. 10 minutes)

Wrap Up

Goals: Bring the discussion to a formal close and suggest how the topics in The True American can be further explored at UMass.

Solicit Final Thoughts: Provide students with a final opportunity to comment on the content or theme of the book, or to build on a point made earlier in the session. (Approx. 5 minutes)
• **Review:** Help students find common ground by summarizing the discussion. *(Approx. 5 minutes)*

• **Strategies for Success on Campus:** Mention that these are complicated issues and students do not need to figure out how they feel about everything right here and now. All they need to do is be respectful, thoughtful members of the UMass community. They’ll keep learning! Encourage them to reach out and connect with their teachers, fellow students, and other resources on campus. *(Approx. 2 minutes)*

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**Additional Resources for Discussion Facilitators**

_**Logistical support:**_ The Student Affairs Common Read webpage offers further details about the program: [http://www.umass.edu/studentlife/commonread](http://www.umass.edu/studentlife/commonread)

_**Pedagogical support:**_ Institute for Teaching Excellence & Faculty Development consultants are available all summer. You can reach us at 545-1225.