

# THE DECISION DIALOGUES

An Interactive Guide for  
Peer Mentors & Partners

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The Carnegie Mellon Community Think Tank  
Carnegie Mellon University  
[www.cmu.edu/thinktank](http://www.cmu.edu/thinktank)

# The Decision Dialogues: A Guide for Peer Mentors and their Partners.

You are looking at is the Fall 2015 Beta version of the *Decision Dialogues*. Each section was independently designed by its team of writers to test out alternative ways of supporting your personal inquiry and an engaging dialogue between Mentors and Partners. Thanks for giving it a try. We appreciate your response.

*So which of these situations have you experienced? Which one makes you curious about what other students say? Rank your choices. Then try a Dialogue.*

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# dialogue FITTING IN

*For many students here at CMU, being “different” in some way can make a person feel out of place or socially uncomfortable. In the Think Tank’s research done with Independent students and administrators on campus, we heard students describe the experience of trying to fit in different ways:*

- *“I often find it hard to balance both school and work responsibilities. Sometimes I miss out on being social—I don’t get to hang out with my friends because I have to work.”*
- *“I’m probably not the only \_\_\_\_\_ student at CMU, but I assume I’m the only one of my friends who’s in my situation.”*
- *“Being an \_\_\_\_\_ student makes me different than other students, and many times I don’t want to feel different. I just want to fit in.”*

*We invite you, as a mentor and a partner, to use the following scenarios as a way to start your own conversation about fitting in as you experience it.*

# Scenario 1: Competing Social Norms

Try reading this scenario (based on real experiences) out loud.

**Characters** Madeline, independent student  
Suzy, group member  
Lee, group member  
John, group member

**Setting** At the Gates Center in the Spring Term, four students (who have recently started working as a team on a class project) are studying together for the next week's midterms. Amid their study group discussion the conversation slowly shifts to talking about their Spring Break plans.

## Dialogue, Version 1:

**Madeline:** I'm so tired of studying...

**Suzy:** Me too. I can't wait for Spring Break. What are you guys' plans?

*[Madeline suddenly tries to avoid eye contact by looking at computer.]*

**Lee:** I'm so excited to go home for the week! I haven't been home since Christmas. It will be nice to veg around for a while. My brother will be there, too. What are you guys doing?

**Suzy:** My parents rented a condo at Hilton Head for the week. They're flying me down to meet them in South Carolina. Can't wait to get to the beach!

*[Madeline begins typing, suddenly refocused on her notes.]*

**John:** I'm sticking around this year because I really need to work on the research project I'm doing for my professor. But I'll probably try to make it down to Ohiopyle or something just to get away for a bit with some friends.

**Suzy:** *[Asks again]* Where are you going, **Madeline**?

**Madeline:** *[Begins to look nervous]* Uh...I...I think we should get back to work.

**Suzy:** Aw c'mon, we deserve a break. Aren't you ready for vacation?  
*[Now Suzy begins to look uncomfortable.]*

**Madeline:** Yeah, I am. *[Offers best attempt at a smile.]*

**John:** If you don't have plans, you should come down to Ohiopyle for rafting with

me and a few others! It'll be nice to take a break from working. Everyone should do something fun for Spring Break.

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**There seems to be some tension here. What is the problem? How would you read this situation?**

*Jot notes if you like. And compare your own different readings.*

**In your experience at CMU, what parts of this experience could you relate to? What did the problem of 'fitting in' look like in your situation?**

*Compare your experience with your partner's.*

## Dialogue, Version 2 (with *thoughts*):

*Below you will see a second version that gives a glimpse at what Madeline and Suzy were thinking. Would knowing this change how you read this social interaction?*

**Madeline:** I'm so tired of studying...

**Suzy:** Me too. I can't wait for Spring Break. What are you guys' plans?

*[Madeline tries to avoid eye contact by looking at computer.]*

**Madeline:** *[Thinking] Oh man, I didn't mean to open that can of worms. I don't want them to know I have to stay here to work at my job over break.*

**Lee:** I'm so excited to go home for the week! I haven't been home since Christmas. It will be nice to veg around for a while. My brother will be there, too. What are you guys doing?

**Suzy:** My parents rented a condo at Hilton Head for the week. They're flying me down to meet them in South Carolina. Can't wait to get to the beach!

**Madeline:** *[Thinking] Hilton what? I've never even heard of that place. [Begins typing, suddenly refocused on her notes.]*

**John:** I'm sticking around this year because I really need to work on the research project I'm doing for my professor. But I'll probably try to make it down to Ohiopyle or something just to get away for a bit with some friends.

**Madeline:** *[Thinking] Okay, now I'm getting nervous. I'm the only one who hasn't said where I'm going. They're probably going to ask me next, but I can't go anywhere because I have to make money instead of spend it.*

**Suzy:** Where are you going, **Madeline**?

**Madeline:** *[Thinking] Shoot. My turn. Should I tell them that I can't afford to leave town? Uh...I...I think we should get back to work.*

**Suzy:** Aw c'mon, we deserve a break. Aren't you ready for vacation?

*[Suzy begins to look uncomfortable.]*

**Suzy:** *[Thinking] I think I said the wrong thing. Did she think I was bragging, or...*

**Madeline:** Yeah, I am. *[Offers best attempt at a smile.]*

**Madeline:** *[Thinking] Gosh I wish they would stop asking me. I don't want to explain my situation and be 'outed.'*

**John:** If you don't have plans, you should come down to Ohiopyle with me and a few others! It'll be nice to take a break from working. Everyone should do something fun for Spring Break.

**Madeline:** *[Thinking] Why won't they let it go? It's not like I don't want to do something fun for break, but I can't because I can't afford to. Maybe I should just tell them the truth. But if I do that, then they might ask more questions about why I have to work, and then I'd have to explain that my family doesn't have money, which would be embarrassing. I don't want them to see me as "the poor kid." What should I do?*

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**How would you have acted in Madeline's situation? What options do you see?**

*Take a look at the table on the next page for more.*

## Some Options

*What can Madeleine do?*

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### **Agree to go to Ohiopyle...**

Madeline decides that she might be able to take a day off work. She wants to fit in with this group of people, so she decides to sacrifice some income so she can fit in.

## Outcomes

*What might happen if she does that?*

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### **Agree to go to Ohiopyle...**

Madeline would lose some money, which could mean she needs to work more after Spring Break, when school is back in session. She would get to spend time with John and his friends.

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*Another option...*

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*A good rival might be...*

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## Competing Social Norms: The Story Behind the Story

*Now, listen to what each of these people were thinking.  
Do you see more options?*

### **What is Madeline thinking?**

I didn't mean to bring up Spring Break when I said I was tired of studying. I'm actually really worried about the break. Am I the only one who's going to be staying on campus? I need to stay here and work. I'm really worried about the break because I don't even know if the University Center will be open, or if I'm allowed to stay in my dorm room, since it seems like everyone there is leaving town.

I'm not sure if I should tell my friends what I'm really thinking. I don't want them to know that I can't afford to go anywhere—then they would see me as “the poor kid,” a stereotype I've tried so hard to avoid. I already feel so different from my friends—I'm the only one who has to work to pay for my own expenses, and I can't hang out with them as much as I want to.

### **What is Suzy thinking?**

I don't know what's wrong with just taking a break for a minute to talk about Spring Break. I'm so excited for vacation! I get the feeling that Madeline feels awkward about Spring Break, but I don't know why. It sounds like she doesn't have plans. Maybe I should invite her to come with my family to Hilton Head.

### **What is Lee thinking?**

Spring Break with my family will be really fun. I wonder why Madeline isn't going to go home... maybe she doesn't have a good relationship with her family. I guess I've never talked with her about her background.

### **What is John thinking?**

It would be fun if Madeline joined us at Ohiopyle. It seems like she feels awkward about staying in Pittsburgh for break, but I know what it feels like to be the only one who isn't going home, and I don't want her to feel left out. I think she works a lot. I do, too. I try to make it seem like I'm just doing a lot of research as a resume-builder, but really it's to pay the bills

## Options

*What can Madeleine do?*

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### **Stay silent and evade questions...**

Madeline has a persona that she wants to maintain so she doesn't seem like "the poor kid" who can't do fun things because she doesn't have the money. She feels embarrassed about her situation because she feels different from her friends.

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### **Tell the truth about her situation...**

Madeline could take advantage of this situation to explain to her friends that she has to pay for college on her own.

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*Another option...*

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*A good rival might be...*

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## Outcomes

*What might happen if she does that?*

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### **Stay silent and evade questions...**

Madeline would feel flustered, and her friends would think that she's hiding things from them. The longer she evades revealing her true challenges, the more difficult it may be to tell her friends the truth in the future.

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### **Tell the truth about her situation...**

Suzy might take pity on her (not so good) or see her differently (good). Lee might have an increased admiration for her and all her responsibility and challenges. John might be willing to disclose that he is in a similar situation, and that he also does research (paid work) because he needs the income.

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Have you ever had a *Fitting In* experience like this?

What was the problem?

How did different people read it?

What are the different options you saw then vs what you see now?

What are some possible outcomes of an option?

## Advice from the ThinkTank:

*Here is some advice for Independent (1st generation and working) students that came out in the Think Tank discussions. Which of these apply to you?*

- It's normal to feel "culture shock" at CMU. Everyone comes from different backgrounds, but that doesn't mean that yours is less interesting or defining.
- Be proud of who you are—people will respect that you have to earn your living.
- Use your position as a marketing tool—you have some unique skills because of your financial challenges or your family's educational background.
- Employers value the students that don't leave campus for breaks. This is a great opportunity to build relationships with your coworkers and to be seen as a very valuable member of the team.
- Even though you might feel like you're the only student who has to work and pay for your own school, you're not! Just remember that you are never alone in your challenges.
- There are also plenty students at CMU who don't feel uncomfortable about being a first generation or self-supporting student. They've figured out who they are.

## Scenario 2: Dealing with Stereotypes

CMU students tell us that sometimes people assume that you do fit in—into a group, an image they hold, or even a stereotype they project on you. But it just isn't you. The problem, however, is that is a part of you. So there you stand caught in this borderland.

- Aamira, who moved from India to Connecticut in the 4th grade, still goes back to India every summer. But whenever she returns, she is perceived as “too American.” Yet at CMU, she is assumed to be “Indian.” She says she feels caught in this strange “middle ground.” She isn't sure she wants to risk alienation from Indian student by denying that identity. What if she followed that old advice “just be yourself,” and ended up being considered a “loner”? Maybe it's just easier to be a chameleon; to fit in with whichever culture she's currently around.
- Missy is a cute, short blond. She can't help it. Why was it so hard to get invited into an engineering study group with the “serious” students?
- Ren thought the Asian Culture Club would feel like the “safe place” he wanted. So why did it feel like everyone there was one of the “popular Asians,” somehow more sophisticated or mature. Should he just leave?

Below is a more detailed scenario about someone caught in that “middle ground.” There is a lot of friendly laughing going on here, but real tension too. And there are no easy answers.

*Try dividing who will play the roles of Amanda, Davinah, Bradley, and Caylee. Then read or act out the scenario.*

**Characters** *Amanda, independent student  
Davinah, member of the Black Student Union  
Bradley, member of the Black Student Union  
Caylee, member of the Black Student Union*

**Setting** *Amanda is a first-year, independent African-American student from Compton, CA. She grew up in a predominantly black neighborhood, but attended schools in suburban neighborhoods for the majority of her primary education. Due to these disassociated existences, she begins to associate “white speech,” music, and cultural expression with upward mobility and financial and spatial privilege. Once at Carnegie Mellon, she attempts to find multiple networks of support, one being the Black Student Union.*

*In this scene, Amanda walks into the BSU office for the first general body meeting. She is early, and the room is occupied by seven black students,*

setting up for the meeting and listening to Future's "Stick Talk." She feels uncomfortable.

## Dialogue:

**Davinah:** Hey! What's up? Welcome to the BSU. Are you here for the GBM?

**Amanda:** Uh, yes I am. I know I'm really early though.

*[Bradley dances around the room to the music, interacting with the other students mulling about.]*

**Bradley:** I love this song!

**Amanda:** Uh... so do I!  
*[Thinking] Why did I say that?*

**Bradley:** *[Excitedly]* You Future hive?! My n\*gga!

*[Bradley reaches to "dap" Amanda, extending his right hand.]*

**Amanda:** *[Thinking] Oh God, I know I'm gonna do this wrong. Why can't we just high-five? And I really wish he wouldn't call me that word. I can't say it back. I know I'm going to pronounce the -er or something and just sound crazy. I just can't relate. Why did I say I like this song?? I hate Future.*

**Amanda:** *[speaking to Bradley]* Haha, you know it! My ni.. Guy!

*[Amanda reaches her hand to meet Bradley's in an awkward hand-shake.]*

**Amanda:** *[Thinking] Everyone saw me mess that up. They know I'm not like them.*

**Davinah:** **Bradley**, get out of here with your Future hive, n\*gga. I'm more into Kendrick and J. Cole to be honest. What else do you listen to, **Amanda**?

**Amanda:** *[Thinking] Does everyone in this group use the N-word? Is that how I fit in?*

**Amanda:** Uh well... Other than Future, who I love, I don't really listen to hip-hop. I like EDM a lot... I listen to country, too. Do you guys like Luke Bryan?

*[The room is quiet for a moment. Bradley laughs.]*

**Bradley:** *[Stops laughing]* Wait, are you serious?

**Caylee:** *[laughing]* When we have parties, we're definitely not playing Luke Bryan. We just can't turn up to that.

**Amanda:** *[Thinking] I need to save this somehow.*

**Amanda:** Aw, come on, you guys! Luke Bryan is great! He's one of the best country artists of our generation! He's, I don't know, I just like it.

- Bradley:** I guess I respect that?  
*[Laughingly]* I see you **Amanda**, I never would have guessed you liked banjo music.
- Caylee:** *[Looking Amanda over]* Are you sure this is the organization for you?  
*[Everyone busts out laughing.]*
- Amanda:** *[stunned, silent, thinking to herself]* I know they're just joking, but Of course It's not. It's like high school all over again: too white for the black kids and too black for the white kids. Story of my life.
- Davinah:** *[sensing Amanda's hurt feelings]* Aw we're just teasing, girl. We mess with all of our friends. Look, the meeting is about to start. Are you trying to stay to find out how to join?

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**Can you relate to this sort of dilemma? If so, what's your version of the story?**

*If this feels outside of your experience, can you imagine or predict how the people in it are feeling or thinking? That may be equally important!*

**What do you think Amanda should do? What are her options? What are possible results from those choices?** *Brainstorm in the chart below.*

## Options

*What can Amanda do?*

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**Be yourself upfront; do not perform stereotypical blackness...**

Instead of pretending to listen Future and being comfortable “giving dap,” and using the n-word, Amanda had the decision to remain in BSL and express her true personality, not bending to projected racial identity.

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*Another option...*

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*A good rival might be...*

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## Outcomes

*What might happen if she does that?*

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**Be yourself upfront; do not perform stereotypical blackness...**

If Amanda chooses to resist the performance of stereotypical blackness, she risks isolating herself and not being accepted by her target network of support. At the same time, if she remains true to her own identity and doesn't compromise herself for social acceptance, she may be labeled as “white-washed,” or not cool enough.



## Scenario 2: The Story Behind the Story

*Here is a little bit more background information—the “Story Behind the Story.” Does it suggest why this could be a complicated problem?*

### What is Amanda thinking?

Amanda is developing her own understanding of her racial identity. Because of her upbringing in a predominantly black neighborhood as well as her schooling in a predominantly white system, she has witnessed both the limited opportunities and violence of the “hood,” and the resources and perceived upward mobility of the suburbs. She begins to affect “whiteness” in her speech, associating these behaviors with a gateway to a superior lifestyle.

Amanda is also a complete person, outside of her racial identity. She enjoys music and cultural phenomena that go against the socially accepted norms of blackness.

Caught between these two worlds, Amanda has always felt “too black for the white kids” at her school, and “too white for the black kids” in her neighborhood. Although she feels strongly about the social issues impacting American minorities, she fears that she will never be accepted by the “cool” black kids that listen to hip-hop, dress in urban fashion, and dance well. She is being stereotyped as well as stereotyping others.

### What is Davinah thinking?

Davinah initially sees Amanda and automatically believes that they would have no cultural barrier or differences due to her appearance.

Amanda states that she loves this song, even though she does not, to fit in and Davinah, like the rest of the students in the office, believe her.

As the conversation goes on between Amanda, Bradley, and Caylee, it becomes more and more apparent that Amanda is very culturally different from what the rest of the students believed to be in the first place. Davinah thinks that Amanda is very different from the black students in BSL.

Davinah does sense that Amanda also feels that she does not belong and that she does not feel welcome. In order to make her feel more welcome and comfortable, he lies to her that Bradley and Caylee just talk in that way to their friends.

### What are Bradley and Caylee thinking?

Bradley and Caylee initially see Amanda and automatically believe that they would have no cultural barrier or differences due to her appearance.

When Amanda states that she likes Future, Bradley and Caylee think that she would fit in. This perception stops when Amanda states that she likes other music, especially Luke Bryan, which is very different than what majority of students listen to in this group.

Bradley and Caylee become increasingly confused with Amanda's preferences as the conversation goes on and believes that Amanda does not fit in with this group because she is so different.

Bradley and Caylee feel very strongly that Amanda is not usually the type that would join their club because she is not the type of black student that would be interested. Bradley and Caylee are very vocal about this to Amanda, despite she might have hurt feelings.

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**With this "Story Behind the Story" in mind, did your partner provide any alternative interpretations of the scenario that you could add to your options?**

## Advice from the ThinkTank:

*Here is some advice for Independent (1st gen and working) students that came out in the Think Tank discussions. Which of these might apply to you?*

- Many students on campus feel like they don't fit in because of their racial or ethnic identity. Talking about it with other people can be an important first step in facing some of the challenges associated with feeling dissimilar to others.
- However, it's also important to be aware that some students might not think there is a racial/ethnic stereotype problem on campus.
- Always be yourself! It's difficult when you feel like you don't "fit into" a racial group that you value and would like to be a part of, but don't limit yourself or the group. Continue be proud of your culture and yourself, hold your values close to you, and you will find people of all races, including your own, that will relate to you and appreciate your true identity.
- Know your resources. There is not only one group on campus or in Pittsburgh that relates to who you are and what you value. Talk to your advisor, RA, or whomever, and get connected with other groups and resources. The same way that Amanda walked into the first BSU meeting, you can walk into tons of meetings until you find an organization that feels like home. If you can't find one on campus, you can create one or look at organizations in the greater Pittsburgh area.

## Looking Ahead

As we've walked through these scenarios, our hope is that you have seen there are many ways to handle decisions regarding stereotypes and fitting in. In the future, when you take the time to evaluate your situation, you may begin to see that you have more than one option, and each option has different outcomes. Your personal needs and values might influence which outcomes you want to pursue. When you consider the "story behind the story"—what underlies the actions of the people around you—you might realize you are not alone in your situation and your desire to fit in.