Essays on Teaching Excellence
Toward the Best in the Academy

Academic Civility Begins in the Classroom
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Incidents of hate speech, physical and emotional harassment, and offensive communication via the Internet, regrettably, are far too prevalent on college campuses (Jensen, 1995; Leatherman, 1996). More subtle forms of intolerance toward controversial ideas, schools of thought, or various minority groups are also evident in higher education. Such breaches in academic civility may reflect conditions in the larger society. A *U.S. News and World Report* poll found that 89 percent of Americans believe that incivility is a major social problem (Marks, 1996). Even though acts of disrespect and harassment may reflect a trend throughout our culture, such insidious practices should be addressed forcefully on college and university campuses. Frequent reports of intolerant incidents in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the popular press demonstrate that incivility within the academic community is too damaging to ignore.

Recognizing this threat, some higher education institutions have tried to create a more civil atmosphere by imposing speech codes or other policies intended to regulate and humanize communication and other interpersonal relations. In many cases, these efforts have been struck down by courts or proven very difficult to enforce (Heinemann, 1996).

Such restrictive policies seem to attack the symptoms but not the sources of the problem. Some critics argue that such policies "may actually contribute to an atmosphere of intolerance, and to an impression that some basic rights can be short-circuited to protect others" (People for the American Way, 1995, p. 1).

The phenomenon of academic incivility is so complex that it demands to be addressed at numerous places within the academic community. Perhaps the most logical, but little used, point of intervention is the college classroom. This essay argues that promoting civility should be a universal goal of higher education that is addressed in every appropriate college course.

Sources of Incivility on Campus
Intolerant behavior on campus is not a new phenomenon. The "Politeness Movement" established at the University of Edinburgh during the Scottish Enlightenment tried to counter religious intolerance. Advocates of politeness "sought to establish ... civilized discourse and due regard for an opponent's point of view" (Nordin, 1991, p. 17). Many factors seem to account for academic incivility in the late 20th century. Increasing diversity on campus brings together persons who do not share the same mores, values, or modes of communication. Similarly, there seem to be growing gaps among students and faculty as disciplinary

elds become more specialized, narrowly focused, and esoteric. A sense of community is also diminished in rge and transient institutions where people often do not know, let alone respect and trust, persons who ork or live in close proximity (Leatherman, 1996)

ivility: A Core Academic Value

espectful discussion and debate are at the heart of the academic enterprise. Advocating civility does not ymbolize a retreat from passionate argument. On the contrary, it acknowledges that meaningful and onstructive dialogue requires a certain degree of mutual respect, willingness to listen, and tolerance for pposing points of view. Classroom discussions, like any academic debate, should follow norms of decency nd effective communication. Debaters should attack ideas but never individuals who hold opposing views Leatherman, 1996). Although these guidelines seem like common sense, evidence of incivility on campus uggests that they are not universally held or practiced. It appears that higher education must address the ssue of civility directly if it wishes to foster an environment conducive to discussion, debate, and learning.

romoting Civility in the Classroom

t is in the classroom that students first encounter treasured values of the academy (e.g., the critical review f ideas , support of opinions with evidence, openness to alternative viewpoints) and begin to practice them s apprentice scholars, emerging professionals, and good citizens. Classes that establish norms for respectful ialogue and reasoned debate can empower students to argue constructively, grow through rigorous ntellectual exchange, and prepare them for life in a complex, pluralistic world.

Jo simple formula or prescription for promoting academic civility can be applied to all college classrooms. /aried educational strategies are required to develop an atmosphere of civility within different disciplines, ducational levels, and among differing types of students. Educators may choose from several strategies that an foster civility in their classrooms and ideally across their campuses. These include:

- *Developing a statement of values and goals*. At the beginning of the term, it is beneficial to communicate how important civil behavior is to the success of a course. A verbal statement from the professor coupled with a section on respectful discussion and debate in the syllabus can clarify up front the critical role of civil discourse in the teaching and learning process. An explicit statement on the necessity of an environment tolerant of difference is especially important in subject areas that address controversial issues. Virtually no academic field is exempt. Courses in the arts and humanities, biological and physical sciences, social sciences, and professional fields all confront "hot button" issues that cause people to line up passionately on different sides.

- *Drafting ground rules for dialogue.* Ineffective efforts to impose speech codes on campuses illustrate the futility of rules that are implemented without a sense of ownership among the targeted groups. Some time invested early in the life of a course to discuss and develop ground rules for communication (oral, written, and electronic) among class members can enhance acceptance of guidelines designed to insure the respectful dialogue essential to open minded analysis and learning.

- *Selecting appropriate instructional strategies*. A variety of strategies can help students acquire the values, attitudes, and skills that underlie academic civility. They will be most effective when coupled with an explicit statement of classroom values and clearly defined guidelines for respectful dialogue. Such strategies include the following.

A. *Staging debates*. Sessions that clarify opposing points of view and build credible cases for contrasting positions can enlighten students to the complexity of controversial issues like genetic engineering or environmental pollution. When guided carefully, debates can promote critical thinking, tolerance for alternative perspectives, and respect for persons who hold differing opinions -- the key building block of academic civility.

B. *Playing and reversing roles*. Like debates, assuming distinct roles (e.g., an unwed, pregnant teenager, an opponent of abortion) can clarify the merits of diverse stands on complex topics and humanize those with differing opinions. This approach requires students to analyze information and attitudes that they might typically reject out of hand when confronted with a controversial issue. The purpose of role playing is not necessarily to change students' minds on a topic like the clear cutting of forests but to enhance their ability to look at issues from multiple perspectives and, in the process, to develop tolerance for persons who hold different views.

C. *Employing case studies*. Long used in business schools to address complex problems, the use of cases is also an ideal technique to foster academic civility. They enable students to look at multifaceted issues within their larger context. For example, a case focusing on hate speech could be used in a communications class or a case on sexual harassment could be used in a sociology course to alert students to the sources of such behaviors, the motives of the perpetrators, and the feelings of the victim(s). When utilized effectively, case studies encourage students to develop alternative scenarios that prevent or resolve problems effectively. Instructional strategies that enable students to examine provocative topics holistically promote the development of higher level thinking and tolerance of ambiguity that lead to civil behavior in a pluralistic world.

D. *Critiquing negative models*. Negative examples can be a powerful teaching tool (Heinemann, 1996). Asking students to analyze videotapes of intolerant practices or written examples of dogmatic thinking can promote personal reflection and behavior change. For instance, *Higher Superstition* (Gross & Levitt, 1994), a recent stinging attack on postmodern views of science, could be used in science courses to examine collegial communication.

Conclusion

Creative college teachers can expand this list of strategies to promote civility in the college classroom. Any practices that encourage students to reflect on their own beliefs, gather relevant data to inform their opinions, remain open to alternative positions, and respect others who hold differing beliefs will enhance the quality of dialogue in the classroom. Above all, professors who model respect for their students and open-mindedness toward alternative points of view will promote respect and tolerance among their students. No doubt, when the habits of civility are nurtured in the classroom, they will gradually permeate the institutional culture as a whole.

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