

## Collective Action for Civil Discourse

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Published online: 31 August 2016  
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In fall 2016, more than 20 million students will enroll across more than 4 million colleges and universities in the U.S. One in four students will be members of a minority group, and approximately one million will be international students. These students will interact with approximately four million administrators and faculty and staff members in a diversity of settings. Most of these students will easily transition into a life of academics and social interactions. For others, insults, aggressions, and lack of inclusion are a reality; and these experiences will shape their interactions and perceptions of opportunities in the upcoming year.

Today is the first day of fall semester, and I find myself reflecting on the challenges facing the nation and world and considering the role that post-secondary education plays in improving civil discourse nationally and creating safe spaces for dialogue and personal growth on campuses. Over the summer, we read about and saw on social media acts of violence, disruption, and incivility around the globe and at home. We watched in disbelief the shootings, bomb-blasts, and hate speech unabashedly pronounced at political assemblies. Regrettably, our schools and colleges are not immune to these actions.

If our mission as colleges and universities is to discover and apply knowledge (research), to educate students for leadership and employment (instruction), and to serve our communities (public service), what should we be doing against this national backdrop? Colleges and universities cannot exist, untainted, in a context of incivility, violence, and bigotry.

As the fall semester begins, we have another opportunity to ask what we want our undergraduate students to learn, all 17 million of them, beyond the basic technical skills for a job or the specialties in a discipline or major. Graduates will work in an increasingly diverse workforce in the global industries of consumer goods, financials, health care, telecommunications, technology, utilities, to name only a few. They will need cultural knowledge, respect for people and places, skills of reflection and communication, critical thinking abilities, creativity, and a sense of empathy to make their workplace, the world they will inherit, safe, equitable, and productive.

How will we teach tolerance, understanding, and collaboration across the college years so that those values can be carried from college into the next stage of life? How do we

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acknowledge individual preferences, but not accept unexamined prejudices as a right? How will we achieve civil discourse, while respecting the right to free speech? How will we demonstrate rejection of overt expressions of racism and sexism?

These issues are not new, and progress has been made in certain sectors. For example, our faculties, staff, and students are now more diverse; yet numbers are not the only goal. Other actions must be taken to ensure a more inclusive campus and civil society. So, while we wait for more solutions, what can we do individually and collectively in the upcoming year to make progress?

Four ideas come to mind that faculty members and students might consider as ideas for action. First, identify resources to support conversations around civil discourse, social justice, and inclusion. I came across two resources in my quick search: the Arizona project for Civil Discourse (<http://www.projectcivildiscourse.org/>) and the Project on Teaching Tolerance (<http://www.tolerance.org/publication/civil-discourse-classroom>), which is school-oriented; but sometimes it is best to start at the beginning to gain clarity.

Second, explore the curriculum. Faculty members can start with their own syllabi, move to the program level, and then ask questions about general education and requirements in the major. Programs to include diverse voices in literature and the arts, across history and the social sciences have been underway for several decades now (e.g. African American studies, women's studies); but the work is not done. The representation of minority voices and women's voices within a few programs and disciplines is not enough to resolve issues of equity and inclusion. It is important to resist college as purely vocational training and to consider how the questions of enduring value may be woven into every course and embedded in programs of all types.

Third, explore institutional resources and connect with groups on campus which have diversity and inclusion as a primary responsibility. This year I will reach out to our Office of Institutional Diversity to learn what is planned on campus and what I can do to assist. Widely known to college administrators is the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU), which supports among other projects the American Democracy Project (ADP). The ADP aims to prepare “the next generation of informed, engaged citizens for democracy” and “to produce graduates who are committed to being knowledgeable, involved citizens in their communities.” With 250 institutional ADP participants, there is plenty of room for growth across the 4000+ U.S. postsecondary institutions. AASCU has experience with difficult discussions and civil discourse (see <http://aascu.org/programs/ADP/>).

Finally, in the absence of a new program or new project, could we individually and collectively in every department, college, and administrative unit resolve to make a difference—to role-model and ask our students to be kind, show compassion, be inclusive and fair, and extend a hand of friendship? Maybe our academic words, like social justice, just do not resonate. Perhaps people forget that words have power and can cause long-lasting pain or can provide encouragement. While we may study and advocate for equity, perhaps we should say that this campus and my class will discuss challenging topics; but we will be characterized by the following values: to listen, to reflect, to show compassion, to think critically, and to care about this community of learners. I know: it sounds like Robert Fulghum's (1988), *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. However, sometimes simple guidelines work best.

What if, alongside of proficiency exams and job placement reports, we had to attest to our graduates' sense of ethics, respect for ideas, compassion, creativity, communication and collaboration abilities, and understanding of cultural differences? Rubrics for affective

and behavioral assessments have been around for a number of years, but in education we have prioritized cognitive appraisals. Maybe some tweaking is in order.

In the end, do we have the courage to be the person and the place to engage a campus dialogue, a community discussion, a national event? How will we know when we have succeeded? Will we commit as institutions and individuals to be change-makers?

## References

Fulghum, R. (1988). *All I really need to know I learned in kindergarten*. New York, NY: Villard Books.