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# Promoting Civil Discourse on Campus

By Rita Bornstein

**D**uring the past several decades, off campus and on, much of the discourse on controversial issues has been personal, vicious, and divisive. On the national scene, politics has become permeated with incivility. Public disgust with ugly partisanship resulted in promises for more bipartisanship by President Barack Obama, as well as by his predecessor, former President George W. Bush. In each instance, we have been hopeful that our elected representatives would dig out from their trenches of absolutism and find common ground. We now appear to have been naïve about their ability and willingness to engage in civil discourse and compromise. If these processes are important to us and to the country, then we must find a way to teach such behavior to our students and our publics or I believe that civility in our society is a lost cause.



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This country was forged through civil discourse, civil protest, and civil war. Although our founders occasionally resorted to duels to resolve their differences, for the most part they engaged in a search for common ground through spirited but civil discourse. The terrible losses of the Civil War remind us of what can happen when parties to a dispute hold irreconcilable views. Today, we acknowledge that the more moral arguments were those of the North: the protection of human rights and survival of the Union. We also understand that there are those who hold a lingering attachment to states' rights and a resentment to policies designed to overcome the vestiges of slavery. Our country remains divided over the role of government in our society and the role of America in the world. These deep schisms impede the ability of our elected officials to serve the American people. The flames of incivility have been fueled by the personal and ugly attacks our politicians make on those with different views, the egregious falsehoods shouted by talking heads on television and radio, and the uncontrolled stream of vitriol that is quickly and broadly disseminated through electronic social media. These behaviors perpetrate inaccurate, venomous, personally debasing, and grossly uncivil myths posing as truth.

Although the combat of the culture wars has not disappeared from our campuses, today the battles are being fought most fiercely on the national political stage. In the current environment, issues central to American life such as health care, economic recovery, war, and climate change are being disputed, not discussed. The vast economic disparity between the wealthy few and the middle class has been exacerbated by the economic downturn, but any suggestion of a tax increase to support social and educational needs is met with great acrimony. Academic institutions have been especially vulnerable to the meltdown of state resources. Collapsing budgets have led to increases in the numbers of contingent faculty, reductions in faculty compensation, revocations of tenure, and the elimination of faculty, staff, and programs. The greatest impact is on students, who face growing costs and declining opportunities. The recent student-led protests in the University of California system may presage a national rebellion against the evisceration of higher education.

During the presidential election of 2008, Americans were upbeat and hopeful that we could restore civility and work together to make the changes essential for the strength and health of our nation. Americans of all colors, ethnicities, and ages were engaged in campaigning, and unprecedented numbers of people went to the polling booths. The country seemed poised to reverse the decline in social capital that Robert Putnam had pointed out in his 2000 book, *Bowling Alone*. Putnam defined social capital as the trust and reciprocity that enable people to act communally for the common good. However, within months of President Obama's historic inauguration, his aggressive change agenda was vilified and falsified by naysayers across the country. Some attacks sprang from genuine opposition to his initiatives, but many were ugly, intemperate assaults on the president himself and his party. We are in the midst of a national spectacle that should shame us.

Never has there been a greater need for creative and enlightened academic leadership. We must demonstrate alternative ways of expressing dissent and disagreement while seeking common ground. We already have committed ourselves to promoting responsible citizenship by championing civic engagement, service, and leadership programs for our students. Education for civil discourse is the natural next step. If we want to help restore civility in America and produce effective citizens, we need to make the arts of respectful disputation and compromise part of our curriculum and co-curriculum.

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We can be successful in this effort because critical inquiry and intellectual challenge are central to our mission.

### What Is Our Obligation as Academics in This Polarizing Environment?

We must protect the traditional role of the academy as a safe haven for the exploration of unpopular and controversial ideas. We also must protect the traditional role of academics as informed critics of society. Better than any other sector, we can affirm and demonstrate the value of civil discourse even among those with apparently irreconcilable ideas.

Civil discourse can be conceived as a respectful exchange of views, with active listening, no interruptions, no inflammatory language, and, especially, no ad hominem attacks. However, a courteous exchange of ideas, although an important element of civility, is not sufficient. We need to be open to other ideas, willing to seek common ground, and, at times, forge a compromise. In fact, civil discourse that produces compromise strengthens the connections between and among people and helps build social capital in our communities and institutions.

To make civil discourse a more intentional part of academic life will require faculty leadership. Although we often mock the incivility of faculty disputes, there is no substitute for faculty members modeling, in class and in public, the many respectful ways to disagree, argue, and compromise. If we are to open students to new ideas and new ways of thinking, the faculty will have to bring the principles of civil discourse into our institutions.

Many students come to college without experience in reasoned debate and active listening. They lack familiarity with or openness to different ideas. We can establish expectations for every student to learn and practice the arts of debate and argumentative writing, leading to a variety of experiences with civil discourse on controversial topics. We can help students avoid prejudging others; control their emotions; remain courteous; better articulate and defend their own ideas; present accurate, fact-based arguments; and identify shared values and goals among disparate perspectives. The outcome we seek is for students to discover that even people with deeply divergent views can find common ground and make acceptable compromises for the benefit of the group.

### What Is the Appropriate Role for Presidents in Promoting Civil Discourse?

Presidents can nurture and model civil discourse in their own institutions and communities. They can bring the roiling political and social issues into

their institutions for examination and consideration. They can support students and faculty who wish to host controversial speakers, even those that some in the community find objectionable. They can invite community leaders to campus for discussions of challenging local and national issues. Most of all, presidents can use their bully pulpits to educate both local and larger communities about the importance to our democracy of freedom of expression, tolerance, and civility.

Despite our good intentions, however, we may find both conservatives and liberals condemning the privileging of a form of civil discourse that requires respectful listening, carefully reasoned argument, and openness to new ideas. Conservatives may be concerned about an inherent liberal bias in the willingness to compromise and worry about promoting relativism. Liberals may suspect an attempt to make space for the absolutism of conservative voices.

Perhaps they are both right. On one hand, civility is incommensurable with certainty, and we all have core values that are unlikely to change. On the other hand, we need to make room for multiple viewpoints and learn to listen to each other. Civil discourse, although not value-neutral, is neither liberal nor conservative. It reflects our historic American values of diversity, tolerance, and even, when appropriate, compromise. It also provides a means of integrating newcomers of different ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds into our culture and our institutions.

Presidents and faculties need to ensure that civil discourse is part of the educational experience for students. Presidents need to resist the considerable pressures from both the right and left to limit expression of controversial ideas. They must not submit to the internal and external assaults on academic and democratic values by inhibiting expression and discussion. And, finally, they need to stand firm in promoting civil discourse, the sharing of ideas, and the possibilities for learning and compromise even among those with disparate beliefs and values.

As public intellectuals, we have an obligation to promote and demonstrate thoughtful, open, yet challenging discourse within our institutions and in the larger community. The academy is the only American institution with the intellectual values and cultural traditions that can teach us how to disagree without being disagreeable. We can model a path to respectful consensus building that, in turn, will produce the social capital necessary to ensure a vibrant future for America. ■

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