

Civility, Civic Discourse, and Civic Engagement: Inextricably Interwoven

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It is an honor to be asked to write the inaugural piece for this column. I was asked to write something thought-provoking as a way to share what one president is thinking about engagement. As a member of the board of directors of Campus Compact, I support Campus Compact's three strategic goals: (1) to elevate the impact of the civic engagement field by building partnerships and promoting alignment; (2) to help solve critical issues facing member institutions and their communities by catalyzing, promoting, and amplifying civic engagement innovation; and (3) to maximize our collective potential as a network through improved accountability, collaboration, and communication. Within each of Campus Compact's overall goals are 14 objectives, and two are of specific importance to this column: First, promote a research agenda to prove and communicate the effectiveness of civic engagement approaches and, second, pursue demonstration projects that test the effectiveness of innovative civic engagement ideas related to networkwide programmatic priorities, partnering with funders and others in the field.

As Campus Compact created its *Strategic Plan: 2014 and Beyond* (2013), the University of Connecticut (UConn) was undertaking a university-wide academic planning process. The plan, released this month, has Global engagement as one of four core values and a path toward excellence in public engagement as one of our five overall goals. Regarding global engagement, the plan states:

Through outreach, research, translation, and partnership, we promote sustainable development and a happy, healthy, and inclusive society. This engagement is local and global, based on intercultural understanding and recognition of the transnational nature of the economies, challenges, and opportunities we face. (*UConn, 2014*)

UConn desires to be a model for a 21st-century engaged university in part by studying the impact of engagement on student development, faculty scholarship, and community outcomes. It is readily apparent that these areas of study align with Campus

Compact's strategic goals and objectives. UConn seeks to facilitate "problem solving" for the state (and beyond).

A 21st-century engaged university. What does that really mean? Is it about increased service-learning? Is it centered on community partnerships? Is it an approach to problem solving? Is it increasingly more engaged scholarship? Is the scholarship of engagement the synthesis of discovery, teaching, integration, and application?

Given that 2014 is the 100th anniversary of the Smith-Lever Act, which created the Cooperative Extension movement, and we are two years past the 150th anniversary of the Morrill Act, which created land-grant institutions, the timing for this discussion could not be better. Engagement is the key to sustainable partnerships with the entities with whom we work. Allow me to quickly add that as a president, I consider conducting and investing in all levels and aspects of scholarship key to the continued future of the academy; however, we also must examine the impact of our work, and that occurs through the scholarship of engagement for the 21st-century engaged university. Magrath (1999) speaks of the 21st-century land-grant university as one that must be focused on partnership ways, and I agree.

Although all the above are essential components and questions for an engaged university, student body, staff, and faculty, and have significant sustaining value in our everyday work, I posit a perhaps more fundamental premise: that the 21st-century engaged university is about both the protection and advancement of civil discourse, and civility is the scaffold for civil engagement.

Leskes, in "A Plea for Civil Discourse: Needed, the Academy's Leadership" (2013), asserts:

Questioning and argument, weighing evidence and analyzing alternative interpretations—such values are at the core of teaching and scholarship. Professors help students recognize gaps in available information, see when conclusions drawn rest on incomplete data, and tolerate ambiguity (Bain, 2004). These very elements of civil discourse make its mastery requisite for success in classes. Faculty research, which proceeds through the "offer and demand for argument and evidence" (Sexton, 2005), shapes the debate of a generation's most crucial issues. Bollinger (2005) suggests that of all the qualities of mind valued by the academy, exploring the full complexity of a subject and considering simultaneously multiple angles of perception are the most esteemed.

This extreme openness, that invites challenges to a single point of view, relies on both daily exercise and a community of people keeping it alive. The pervasive dogmatism, close-mindedness, and “discourse by slogan” (*Sexton, 2005*) favored today by the public arena risks marginalizing the distinctive open character of universities. The responsibility falls to each and every faculty member and administrator to do his or her part in resisting the “allure of certitude” (*Bollinger, 2005*). It is such certitude about one’s own viewpoints, along with intolerance of others, that public intellectuals like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Hannah Arendt identify as central causes of democratic failure... It is time now for the higher education community—collectively and through its individual campuses, associations, and funders—to step up as visible and effective advocates. ..To ensure their own survival (*Sexton, 2005*), as well as the survival of U.S. democracy, universities must now be at the forefront of advocating for—and of comprehensively modeling—rigorous civil dialogue. The academic community is, in sum, an essential actor—Sexton says the last real hope—in assuring that the current climate of anger, mistrust, prejudice, intolerance, and hatred does not prevail in the wonderful, though still imperfect, democratic experiment that is the United States. (*Leskes, 2013*)

All our efforts—teaching, scholarship, and service—need to be centered on enhancing one’s ability to engage in civic discourse. Let’s begin with civil discourse; what does it look like? What are its components, and how do we teach our students such discourse? Can it be learned? Is it the role of the university to help students learn these skills? Why are they so important? Discourse is the ability to have a conversation, not a one-sided soliloquy but an engagement of two or more people in the exchange of ideas, information, opinions, and/or positions. Knowing how to both posit and defend a position is key to the educated person. Discourse is not an argument in the common sense but an educated argument that has a position—a central thesis, which is identified, supported, and presented for response and reaction. An argument within civil discourse is not an endpoint but a beginning and an integral component of the process.

Inherent in the ability to have such a conversation is the skill of listening. In order to listen, one must be willing to open oneself

to the ideas of others. Listening in discourse is clearly differentiated from the act of hearing, which is based on science, anatomy, and physiology. Listening is an art that is learned over time and develops into both a skill and an attitude. The attitudes of interest, of informed perspective, and of involvement in the words of others are keys to good listening. Discourse depends on this openness, this freedom to give as well as to receive. Through the activity of listening, diversity in ideas is illuminated, and growth has the potential to occur. When one shuts oneself off from the ideas of others by becoming loud or single-minded in pursuit of one's rightness, one becomes hard and static. That is not what either individuals or society needs. Dynamic conversation promotes growth, change, and movement.

Such movement is the key to understanding, which leads to enhanced discourse. Listening is one component of this discourse, and so is the ability to express oneself with passion and assertion without being obnoxious, loud, and offensive. Berating another is not civil discourse. Quiet and demure behaviors do not necessarily lead to civil discourse, but neither does rudeness and incivility. Civil discourse is dependent on expression, and it embraces free speech. However, effective civil discourse is bordered by respect for the other individual in the conversation and their right to express themselves. Respect is acceptance, and it is openness to the ideas of others. I said that expressing oneself with passion was a requirement of positive civil discourse, but passion and the need for it should not be mistaken for a right to impoliteness. Passion is excitement, it is commitment, it is affirmation, and it is needed. Yet passion must be communicated within a framework of civility.

As Lundberg (as cited in *Shuster, 2010*) suggests, we can reach back into history to find another notion of "civil" on which to build a new civil discourse:

The idea of civility does not mean politeness. It originates in Cicero with the concept of the *societas civilis*. What it meant was that there are certain standards of conduct towards others and that members of the civil society should comport themselves in a way that sought the good of the city. The old concept of civility was much more explicitly political than our current notion of politeness. Speech was filtered through how it did or did not contribute to the good of the city. (*Shuster, 2010*)

Politeness should be taught in homes, churches, and elementary schools, not as a subject for the academy, but as an expected behavior.

In *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (2010), I suggest that “it is civility that makes the American public a public” (.p 147). Without civility in our discussions, we are left with polarities that promote not discourse but divisiveness. Hence students must learn to have civil discourse in a civil manner with a focus on presenting a reasoned argument clearly and concisely while promoting civility within the conversation. I am not naïve enough to believe that civility is always the path chosen, but it is the path that the academy needs to encourage. Civility must be the expectation. My university senate faculty colleagues often say, “One can disagree, but one should not be disagreeable.” Civility is one’s ability to know and understand the difference between the two. Within the academy, perhaps unlike the current world of politics, the importance of civility should be evident in our role models, in our classrooms, on our playing fields, and in our meetings. Civility is politeness, but it is so much more than that. Civility is listening rather than just hearing; civility is engaging rather than just being in the same space; civility is being open to exploration rather than just presenting information.

Aristotle’s three arts of persuasion—ethos, pathos, and logos—are used to create the 21st-century engaged university outcomes. Ethos is the credibility and character of the individuals involved in the discussion and the individual character that brings civility to the discourse. Pathos is the passion committed to the discussion, and it is the engagement that is an outcome of the process. Logos is the discourse itself, using the knowledge and skills of argument such as Toulmin’s (1969) approach to persuasive argument:

1. Claims: the position one desires to be the prevailing argument
2. Grounds: the evidence or supportive data
3. Warrant: the connection between the grounds and claims (the passion)
4. Backing: additional support and connectedness
5. Qualifier: how generalizable is the position
6. Rebuttal: preempt counter claims.

Toulmin’s approach is one; there are many others, such as ARE: assertion, reasoning, and evidence. Whichever one chooses, the

essential component is that a position must be supported with critical thinking and rational thought backed by data. My point is not to advocate a specific approach but rather to point up that we must teach our students how to engage and participate in civil discourse, and this needs to be done within a framework of civility in order for true sustainable engagement to occur.

Civic engagement is the future of higher education. Our schools, colleges, and universities must be focused on the scholarship of discovery so that the desired outcome of knowledge discovered can be used to involve our communities and to solve real societal problems. Poverty, food justice, transportation, potable water, obesity, living with chronic disease, health care access, eradicating the achievement gap, and many other societal problems that have plagued us for decades, if not centuries, will be addressed when we are engaged in relevant, responsible, and reciprocal partnerships.

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