

A Plea for Civil Discourse: Needed, the Academy's Leadership

By: [Andrea Leskes](#)

A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy's Future, commissioned by the US Department of Education, was published by the Association of American Colleges and Universities in 2012. Representing the work of the National Task Force on Civic Learning and Democratic Engagement (2012), the report builds a strong case for higher education's responsibility, in collaboration with the larger society, for assuring that all students have the skills and knowledge they need to become informed, civically engaged citizens. This article is intended to complement *A Crucible Moment* by focusing in greater depth on civil discourse and the crucial need for colleges and universities to commit strongly to its survival.

My decision to write was born from a visceral and gripping fear that the current breakdown in public discourse is eating away at the very core of US democracy, thereby also undermining the climate a great academic community needs to thrive. Further, I fear that the failure of politicians and the general public to seek compromise threatens the prestige of participatory democracy itself and the position of the United States as its advocate. How credible is the country as a model of true democratic processes if the public arena is dysfunctional? If during a major televised address to Congress, a Representative shouts out "you lie" to the president, disrespecting the office as well as the incumbent? If, inflamed by hate speech, a partisan shoots an elected official (and receives plaudits for doing so)? Isn't now the moment, when fault lines among worldviews are reordering on a global scale, to show the great strengths of democracy rather than elements of its decline? The world is watching.

The United States of America—that inspiring experiment in democratic government—was founded on compromise; the Constitution, one of the greatest give-and-take documents, describes a government with multiple loci of power. The bicameral makeup of Congress ensures the rights of small and large states alike, a solution reached during the republic's creation. The United States came into existence because of religious and heritage plurality. The country's plurality in the twenty-first century includes an entire spectrum of skin colors, ethnic groups, beliefs, languages, and cultures. In a pluralistic society, people hold varying views, and that very diversity is an inherent strength. In a country anchored in compromise and diversity, discourse among people of good faith should flourish.

Many individuals and groups, including those from both sides of the political aisle, publicly deplore the virulence and personal attacks heard daily in US politics, barbs that aim more to destroy credibility and undermine the power of dissenters than to advance any common good. Decrying the "lost art of democratic argument" (Sandel 2011), various observers have noted the "nastiness, name-calling, and negativity" (Allegheny College 2010), calling it "raw and bitter and dangerous" (Noonan 2010) and labeling ours a "rude democracy" (Herbst 2010), a "place where bipartisanship and compromise are dirty words" (Baker 2012).

Under the daily barrage of invective, we may sometimes believe that confrontation and rancor are products of the modern era. But this would be a simplification of history; there was never a “true ‘golden age’ of purely constructive discourse” (Herbst 2011, 8). Democracy is messy, and controversial issues have always generated strong feelings. The time of the early republic, for example, was a highly combative era. During the presidential campaign of 1800, Jefferson’s supporters accused the incumbent John Adams of being “a hideously hermaphroditical character.” Adams’s partisans countered: “Murder, robbery, rape, adultery, and incest will all be openly taught and practiced [during a Jefferson presidency] . . . the soil will be soaked with blood.” The year 1804 witnessed one of the most heinous outcomes of political enmity when Aaron Burr shot and killed Alexander Hamilton. During the acrimonious pre-Civil War period, screaming and beatings were commonplace on the floor of the Congress (Herbst 2011).

While some scholars describe the United States as always having been rough and tumble, with today no worse than before, for many observers (including journalists) the situation is out of hand, the mood hysterical. Presidential contenders who decry compromise or promise dogmatic firmness encourage the public to applaud and emulate such intransigence; yet “public decision-making does not lend itself to certitude” (Leach 2011). The difference from earlier periods, and what makes the problem more pervasive, is the fact that “everyone has a megaphone” (Shuster 2013) and all opinions can reach massive audiences instantaneously. Winograd and Hais, in *Millennial Makeover*, suggest that, while members of the Millennial generation are more interested in working with peers toward a win-win solution than Baby Boomers, the opinion of each group member carries equal weight. The sound bites of ubiquitous Tweets, blogs, and online reader comments require no knowledge of the issue at hand; error or disinformation incur no consequences.

What I hope to add to the conversation about civility in political and social discourse is a charge to the academy to commit itself strenuously and immediately to improving civil discourse as a tool of democracy, most importantly in the next generation of college graduates but also in the public at large. According to a poll (Allegheny College 2010), 44 percent of the 18- to 29-year-olds surveyed identified higher education as the most pivotal player to restore civility (30 percent of those above age 65 agreed).

Defining civil discourse

What is civil discourse? A 2011 conversation among national leaders from many fields, held at the US Supreme Court, defined civil discourse as “robust, honest, frank and constructive dialogue and deliberation that seeks to advance the public interest” (Brosseau 2011). James Calvin Davis, in his book *In Defense of Civility*, proposes “the exercise of patience, integrity, humility and mutual respect in civil conversation, even (or especially) with those with whom we disagree” (2010, 159). National Public Radio journalist Diane Rehm, during an event at Oberlin College, said simply: our ability to have conversation about topics about which we disagree, and our ability to listen to each other’s perspectives (Choby 2011).

For the purposes of this article, discourse that is civil means that those involved

- undertake a serious exchange of views;

- focus on the issues rather than on the individual(s) espousing them;
- defend their interpretations using verified information;
- thoughtfully listen to what others say;
- seek the sources of disagreements and points of common purpose;
- embody open-mindedness and a willingness change their minds;
- assume they will need to compromise and are willing to do so;
- treat the ideas of others with respect;
- avoid violence (physical, emotional, and verbal).

While some consider politeness and good behavior as essential to civil discourse, Ahrens (2009) argues that civil discourse must accommodate offensive expression, with the latter term capturing the harshness of many public debate conflicts. Leach (2011) says that civility “is not simply or principally about manners. It doesn’t mean that spirited advocacy is to be avoided. Indeed, argumentation is a social good. Without [it] there is a tendency to dogmatism, even tyranny.” Herbst (2010, 148) suggests that “even some incivility can move a policy debate along. Creating a culture of argument, and the thick skin that goes along with it, are long-term projects that will serve democracy well.” One should not expect civil discourse to create a feeling of comfort; discord causes uneasiness, and a challenge to deeply held opinions induces pain.

Wegge (2013) distinguishes two elements in civil discourse: (1) the emotive, as expressed through manners and norms of behavior (moderating or failing to moderate self-control), and (2) “constructive confrontation” or civility demonstrated through argument and deliberation. In any case, civil discourse goes beyond courtesy. It involves committing to an informed, frank exchange of ideas, along with an understanding of complexity and ambiguity. Koegler (2012) clarifies that “civil” refers not to mannered conduct but to membership in a civil society. He suggests that civil discourse has both a process (“a pragmatic and open dialogue of the issues themselves, based on evidence and argument, coupled with the willingness to learn from the other”) and content (“serious conversation about public matters of common concern”).

As used here, the term civil discourse includes speaking or writing knowledgeably about a topic and harkens back to the definition of discourse as the process or power of reasoning. It is this basis in reasoned inquiry that affords one essential hook for holding higher education accountable.

Civil discourse in civic learning

A Crucible Moment advocates for adding to college study a third nationwide educational priority, complementing those of increased access and career preparation: the graduation of responsibly engaged citizens. These graduates will need to be informed through knowledge, including knowledge of the political process and the major issues of current and former times. They will also need to be empowered by possessing a range of intellectual and practical skills.

Civil discourse, a central skill of such civic learning, itself rests on core intellectual abilities at the very heart of powerful education:

- critical inquiry
- analysis and reasoning
- information retrieval and evaluation
- effective written communication
- effective oral communication that includes listening as well as speaking
- an understanding of one's own perspectives and their limitations
- the ability to interact constructively with a diverse group of individuals holding conflicting views

Civil discourse also embodies the very values of civic learning: open-mindedness, compromise, and mutual respect.

Participants in civil discourse need to learn about the issue at hand, critically weigh the information's veracity and validity, build a logical argument, and present it in a convincing but nondoctrinaire manner to individuals who might not share the same views. They need to be respectfully attentive to alternative interpretations—weighing them, too, analytically—and be willing to alter positions based on convincing argument and evidence.

Educators will recognize these skills and values as those of any serious intellectual undertaking, which is why civil discourse is not limited to political science or the political arena. It figures as centrally in any field with controversies—science or art or philosophy, for example—and, therefore, can be learned and practiced in most disciplines. Just like the core intellectual and practical abilities of liberal learning, civil discourse is transferable across disciplines and outside the academy, to the workplace and civic life. While concern about the harsh tenor of interchanges in the political arena catalyzed this article, as a democratic approach to handling controversy, civil discourse has broad applicability. Referencing Diane Rehm again, civil dialogue and discourse begin at home.

Promoting civil discourse in undergraduate education

Once we accept that students need to become adept civil discourses—for their own and democracy's good—how can college education foster this important skill?

First, civil discourse must be addressed at the heart of undergraduate education. It cannot be relegated to student affairs or simply embodied in codes of conduct or speech, nor can it remain the purview of a department of politics or communications. Civil discourse needs to be addressed in general education for all students and embraced by the various majors, across the curriculum. Given the swirl of many students among institutions, commitment will be needed in all colleges and universities.

Second, students need to be taught (and not simply exposed to or asked to use) civil discourse, which means giving them both a theoretical basis of the concept and practical tools for using it. Theory could include, for example, definitions and rules, cultural variations and norms, plus analysis of the consequences of dogmatism. Practical tools might involve applying to contentious issues skills learned elsewhere in the curriculum: active listening, debating techniques, public speaking, as well as the basics of persuasive writing (turning opinions into arguments, refuting the arguments of others). Pedagogy is at least as important here as curricular design. Useful non-subject-specific classroom practices (discussed by Shuster but applicable to the university level) include intentionally teaching controversy or turning classroom discussion into a pedagogical strategy: consciously attending to the conduct of discussions, setting goals, having students summarize discussions, and requiring meta-analysis.

Third, we know from much formal research and informal observation that deep learning occurs cumulatively and progressively, whether the learning is of information or of skills. One-time exposure only initiates the process. Learners also progress better when exposed to multiple modalities, including active involvement. Therefore, college curricula and cocurricula should provide students the opportunity to study about, reflect on, and practice civil discourse in a purposeful manner at several points and in increasingly sophisticated ways. The process might start in a first-year seminar, continue in an introduction to the major where civil discourse could be applied to the controversies of the field, and form part of a senior seminar or thesis defense.

Fourth, as with any important learning outcome, the ability to engage in civil discourse needs to be assessed at least at the individual student and the program levels, formatively and summatively. How well do students understand the concept? How skillfully do they practice discourse that is effective and responsible? How successfully does the program (be it for a degree or not) meet its objectives and in what ways can it be improved? For such assessment, rubrics for civil discourse would need to be developed.

Fifth, given that the ability to engage in civil discourse has rarely figured as an institutional learning outcome (Roger Williams University is one notable exception), most professors will be ignorant of ways to include it in their courses—or even how to model it. Therefore, faculty development will be vital; fortunately, most campuses have internal expertise upon which to draw (e.g., their own political scientists, linguists, philosophers, debate coaches, rhetoric teachers, and those from any field who teach controversy in the classroom).

How far has the academy progressed? Examples of civil discourse in general education or taught coherently across the curriculum, across the institution, or across a state system are difficult to find. They are yet to come. However, as a result of attention over many years to the civic engagement of college students, an excellent foundation exists for assuring that civically aware and informed graduates are also skilled in civil discourse. Some components of ongoing efforts could be part of a more comprehensive approach in undergraduate education.

At Roger Williams University, for example, where promoting civil discourse is a widely disseminated core value, numerous elements are in place. Students are expected to use open-

mindful interchanges effectively to present their positions on important topics. An array of initiatives turns the concept into a lived reality. The university's statement on civility is right at the front of the student handbook. Course syllabi identify relevant outcomes that—in biology, the science core, and business, among others—include civil discourse about the course content. A civil discourse lecture series features distinguished speakers, the journal Reason and Respect publishes the diverse viewpoints of campus community members, and graduating seniors who best demonstrate university values, including civil discourse, receive the Presidential Core Values Medallion.

Another commendable example is the Tulane Debate Education Society, an English Department service-learning project designed to catalyze a debate renaissance in New Orleans. Tulane undergraduates use principles of classical rhetoric to promote civil discourse and critical reasoning among middle school students, with special attention to disadvantaged youths. From debate teams at three original partner schools, the society has grown to twelve. At the University of St. Thomas, the College of Arts and Sciences articulates its mission and vision as including the promotion of “civil discourse through . . . curricular and cocurricular offerings.” To further its goal, the college created a Civil Discourse Lecture Series at which a prominent national or international figure models effective, responsible discussion. And at the University of Puget Sound, faculty members have developed guidelines for civil discourse that inform classroom and campus practice.

Good Practice

At Franklin Pierce University, public deliberation and sustained dialogue are an integral part of the required first-year seminar. Students learn theory—including the ground rules for civil discourse and techniques for moderating conversation—and then practice by developing briefs or role-playing. Links to co- and extra-curricular activities build bridges between the classroom and students' wider lives.

Promoting civil discourse in research and service

Lee Bollinger (2005) said it eloquently (and I paraphrase): in addition to the central mission of transmitting to the next generation as much as it can of human understanding, the academic community adds new knowledge to the existing store. It also serves the local and broader communities through its impact on the world of thought (Sexton 2005) and as a site for engaging in serious conversation. Robust engagement with difficult ideas is the basic tenet of academic freedom, a concept that underlies all three elements of the academy's mission. Since colleges and universities thrive on reflection, nuance, and complexity, attention to civil discourse is not just possible but essential throughout their activities.

A scan of the enterprise reveals commitments that extend beyond educating undergraduates. For example, Allegheny College both contributes to new knowledge and provides a public service. Its Center for Political Participation conducts national surveys on civility and

compromise. The 2010 poll (Allegheny 2010) discloses that while 95 percent of responders believed civility in politics to be essential for a healthy democracy and 87 percent agreed that respectful discussion of political issues was possible, in reality people reported observing intolerance and hostility. Allegheny has a Prize for Civility in Public Life and sponsors Pathway to Civility, a gathering of more than two hundred national student leaders to discuss and practice civil dialogue. The center helped develop a toolkit for citizens to use in order to deconstruct the tone and rhetoric of political campaigns, while joint Young Democrat and Republican projects on campus set a high bar for the respectful exchange of ideas.

In 2011, the University of Arizona created the National Institute for Civil Discourse, a nonpartisan center for advocacy, research, and policy regarding discourse consistent with First Amendment principles. The institute publishes a newsletter (Frankly Speaking), holds research forums that include students, and, among many other activities, convenes Arizona groups committed to advancing civil dialogue and public engagement.

Arizona State University's Morrison Institute for Public Policy and its College for Public Programs, as well as the Maricopa County Colleges Center for Civic Participation, partner with the Arizona Humanities Council in Project Civil Discourse. Created in 2008, this statewide initiative fosters respectful dialogue by assembling diverse groups—totaling more than 2,500 individuals to date—in town hall meetings to apply proven skills of collaborative problem solving to important societal issues.

Campuses have been spurred to action and encouraged in their commitment to civil discourse by Jim Leach, a former Republican congressman appointed by Democratic President Obama to chair the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). Leach interprets the public humanities mission of the endowment as compelling attention to the serious lack of mutual respect across the partisan divide. During a fifty-state "civility tour," he spoke about the common good and constructive ways to disagree.

In 2012, inspired by Leach's message, the University of Massachusetts Boston created a Center for Civil Discourse. A large audience of students, scholars, and community members attended a forum on civility, while hundreds of others—including students from nine partner schools—watched online. Panels addressed civility in history, morality, culture, and the media. Washington State University's Foley Institute held one of four public forums, Civility and Democracy in America, supported by the NEH's Bridging Cultures Initiative. Washington State also houses the Ruckelshaus Center that, among other public discourse activities, supports research.

More campuses need to follow these leaders in advancing civil discourse in the areas of scholarship and community service. Additional effective means include sponsoring special grants for faculty or dissertation research; earmarking funds for scholarship on teaching and learning including course development or changes in classroom practice; and encouraging faculty members and administrators to write blogs, newspaper articles, or thought pieces about civil discourse, then recognizing these efforts during performance evaluations.

Good Practice

Emory University's Center for Faculty Development and Excellence sponsored a series of workshops about civil discourse that included panel presentations, case studies, and participant discussions. Follow-up podcasts about civil discourse in the humanities and the health sciences gave professors ideas and tools for fostering, across difference, intellectual community in their disciplines.

Promoting civil discourse to preserve the academy and democracy

A world-class academic community depends on an open society to thrive; it also models an ideal culture of discourse. 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.

Jim Leach has come forward as an eloquent and tireless proponent of greater civility in public discourse. 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. The academy, as an enterprise, has started embracing its responsibility for educating the next generation of leaders and citizens for a diverse democracy. To ensure their own survival (Sexton 2005), as well as the survival of US 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.

Good Practice

To promote critical thinking and tolerance, the Loyola University New Orleans Society of Civil Discourse circulates the Journal of Civil Discourse, featuring articles from students and professionals who represent a range of political opinions. The journal also relies on submissions from the Civil Discourse class, which undertakes academic discussion with social, political, and religious merit.

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