CIVILITY

Last spring President Kustra assembled a task force to initiate a campus-wide conversation on civility. As part of that conversation, the fall brought a civic conference on Sept. 18 attended by faculty, staff and students. The morning session was opened by Dr. Kustra and followed by a panel discussion in which I participated. The following is my reflection from that discussion, supplemented by additional excerpts gleaned from the references cited below.

My preferred definition of civility is a simple one: civility is treating other people with respect, even if you disagree. By contrast, uncivil words and actions are those that are rude, disrespectful and often hateful. Why do we need a civility initiative on campus? The Educational Advisory Board, which is a resource of material on current events in higher ed, gives three potential reasons: student conduct issues on campus, incidents at higher ed institutions, and national events, like what we’re seeing in the current presidential election.

I don’t follow a lot of blogs, but I do read enough online content to know that uncivil discourse has become an element of our web-based culture. Even in articles written by and published for those of us in higher education, readers’ comments can sometimes be downright rude. And when you consider the national conversation, whether it’s tab shows, certain so-called news shows, or political debates, it seems like civility has become the new normal.

At the same time, we’re seeing more and more incidents of extreme incivility on college campuses, like the Volunteer video activity by a Rutgers student, or the YouTube video post by a UCLA student that provoked accusations of racism and death threats.

One of the questions asked during the panel discussion was around how we can ensure that underserved voices have opportunities to express dissatisfaction or even anger at the status quo without being shut down in the name of being civil. In other words, how can we undertake the need to have often contentious civil or civic discourse from the common definition of civility — the imperative to be civil. We, as academic leaders, need to first accept and then learn to deal with the national tension between allowing free speech and requiring those who participate to express that right to do so in a civil way. Only then can we deal with difficult issues without acting in ways that are destructive and inappropriate, even if they are legal.

As the University of Messica’s Skip Weis Respless Speeches Committee points out, many people who act in an uncivil manner do so not because they are bad or evil but they are really mad. While we may be able to dismiss some mirror instances of incivility as inconsiderate, in other situations incivility and disrespect interfere with our relationships and our work and learning environments. Therefore, we must actively encourage respect and tolerance, while being sensitive to the counterbalancing force of tolerance for free speech.

As we continue our conversation about civility over the next few months, let us keep several questions in mind:

- How do we define civility at Boise State, and what are the issues around our campus?
- How do we engage faculty, staff as well as student leaders and organizations in this initiative?
- In the future, how do we first introduce the concept of civility to new students?
- How can we use our discussions of civility as an introduction to the more specific issues of tolerance and diversity?
- And ultimately, how do hold each other accountable for upholding a code of civility?

References

Erin McDougall and Sarah Moore, Educational Advisory Board, “Campus-Wide Initiatives to Promote Student Civility,” 2012.
KRC Research and Powell Tate (a division of Weber Shandwick), “Civility in America,” 2013.

Has questions, comments, or suggestions for newsletter topics? Contact Marylynn Harmer at marylynnHarmer@boisestate.edu

Wonder who to contact in the Provost’s Office for general questions? Visit the Office of the Provost website to see the staff listing.

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Dr. Martin Schimpf joined the faculty at Boise State University in 1990. He has held several administrative appointments at the University, including Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences,代理 Provost, and Vice President of Academic Affairs, a position he has held since 2010.

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