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Civility:
Reframing Discourse
in Higher Education

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CIVILITY:

Reframing **Discourse** and Promoting **Engagement** through Higher Education

Civility is defined by the American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language as “courteous behavior; politeness.” Today’s headlines, however, are ‘breaking’ news filled with acts of global incivility.

The author of this article, Grammy award-winning songwriter and President of The Next Level Consulting, LLC, Pamela Pruitt, received her Masters of Communication and Information Studies (MCIS) from Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick in May, 2012. Here she gives us a glimpse of her thesis on civility.

For example, many of us witnessed rap singer Kanye West jumping onstage and interrupting Taylor Swift’s award-winning moment for Best Female Video. He started praising Beyoncé’s video as “the best of all time” (Caramanica, 2009).

On another occasion when President Obama was giving a speech, Joe Wilson (R-South Carolina) breached protocol by shouting out, “You lie!” (Hulse, 2009). And then, when former President George Bush was at a news conference in Baghdad, CNN (2008) reported how an Iraqi journalist threw his shoes at the President’s head, one at a time, and shouted in Arabic, “This is a farewell, you dog!”

According to Hughes (2011) angry commuters cut each other off in traffic and even impose physical harm on one another. She describes the diminished value of excellence in customer service; how political campaigns seem to bring out the worst in the respected; and, how children survive through the stress of bullying at school. Even in the workplace acts of uncivil behavior seem to be ever-increasing. It makes one question if our world’s population is going mad?

Historically, Delaney (2010) notes that uncivil behavior dates back to Medieval Europe where the ‘kings and powerful’ ruled. During the eighteenth century as the “Age of Enlightenment” evolved, liberalism emerged as did moral and ethical behavior; and, eventually institutions of higher learning were established to socialize and educate people. Regrettably these seem to be the very places where uncivil behavior is escalating, according to Gilroy (2008).

While it looks like efforts are underway in schools and universities, communities, businesses, organizations, and governments to find solutions through various civility programs, the problem seems to continue to dominate U.S. and international media on a frequent basis. People appear to be more narcissistic and thus uncaring about their fellow men. The resulting implications have been unfortunate leading to death, embarrassment, disgust, and shame.

In the study, “Civility: Reframing Discourse and Promoting Engagement through Higher Education,” Ochoa (as cited by Pruitt, 2012) suggests that higher education may not have prepared some, who have displayed public outbursts of incivility, for their careers as we may think it should. Thrift (2012) further implies that there is a heightened level of abusive language going on in today’s times, and even attacks such as the aforementioned, that seem to be synonymous with “anger and rage.” He insinuates that those who are angry must be disillusioned to think that their anger makes them right. His point is that there is a challenge to endure in an atmos-



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phere filled with opposing opinions and aggressiveness interspersed with rage. And while inside and outside of universities civility initiatives may make a difference, debate should be able to flourish without any evidence of threat.

Looking at children and young adults as our future we see through the media that they are faced with high occurrences of uncivil behavior. The Tyler Clementi cyberbullying incident is only one of the more significant cases that caught the attention of many. His death prompted action across the country on many levels. After this event, just three and a half months later, New Jersey's Governor, Chris Christie, signed legislation enacting one of the toughest laws against bullying and harassment in schools, which went into effect the next school year. As a coincidence, Rutgers University launched its Project Civility for a period of two years as the Clementi case was unfolding; and many institutions of higher learning incorporated similar initiatives for the same or longer commitment of time after it had received major media attention.

I theorized through my research that there is evidence to suggest that when young people arrive on college campuses they are 'disconnected' emotionally to the new community in which they may reside for the next four years, as well as from their families back at home. While they are empowered by their parents to enjoy this new experience and usually have high levels of self-esteem, they may lack self-restraint. Also, they turn towards the value of peer approval rather than that of their parents and caregivers. Being more "I" focused they are independent but not interdependent; and, this new community may prove to be more densely populated than the 'social silos' in which they were able to thrive, through technological affordances within the comfort of their parents' and caregivers' homes. The resulting challenge is poor face-to-face interpersonal communication that may result in uncivil behavior and poor judgment such as in the Clementi case.

As a starting point colleges and universities may assist in reframing negative discourse regarding civility by first researching current civility programs and social media to identify what is or

is not being said about civility or uncivil behavior; and second, by promoting effective service learning programs and initiatives by introducing new dialogue, activities, and practices that may truly make a difference in changing behavior and attitudes; and growing more respectful people.

While higher education cannot change the world, it can extend existing knowledge, research new and innovative methodologies, refine, and teach positive behavioral competencies in how we communicate about civility and practice it responsibly. Further, institutions of higher learning are resourceful and can reach k-12 administrators, continuing education students, and business partners to promote civil engagement in many ways without infringing on the rights of citizens. ■

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