

Kenneth P. O'Brien
University Faculty Senate Fellow
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"Is Civility Patriotic?"

When President Kay asked me to speak to the plenary about "civility," I admit wanting to "Simply Say No!" But then, I had promised Gwen that I would do anything she needed. So, I was caught and felt compelled to accept.

Of course, the problem was to say something meaningful in thirty minutes to what was, and had been in the past fifteen years, among the most civil of all academic settings. No matter how contentious the issue, it had always struck me that faculty and professional staff who might have earned reputations for being difficult had come to the Senate prepared to engage colleagues in tough-minded, yet respectful, discussions. This place brought out the best in us.

But, having agreed to do it, I did what many academics – irrespective of their disciplinary and/or professional commitments – would do, I began reading. Who knew, certainly not me, that there was a rich and growing literature on the subject, one that could trace its roots back into antiquity, perhaps aided by the growing publicly displayed rancor in the modern age, especially the age of Trump and Trumpism?

In any event, I was reading, still searching for a title, when stopped at a red light I noticed the bumper sticker on the car in front of me. "Civility is Patriotic," it read in bold black and white.

I laughed at the serendipity of the moment, thinking little of it, except, as sometimes happens, the germ of an idea that refused to die had been planted. That bumper slogan and my reading came together with my growing appreciation of both the necessity of civility for democratic discourse and its potential for misuse. Calls for "civility" could be used to close down discussion, defining the legitimate limits of expression.

The next question was how this could be presented effectively, particularly at 3 in the afternoon, after a heavy lunch and a daylong series of "presentations" from the podium to 62 Senators gathered in a rectangular arrangement of chairs. My problem was self-evident, the challenge of catching and holding the attention of the Senate.

I decided to abandon the pretense of expertise on the subject, forsake the lonely comfort of the podium, and craft a session that would lend itself to an actual demonstration of civil discourse. By moving from the lectern at the front of the room to the middle of the table, I could invite them to engage in a conversation around several questions, each of which had been crafted to elicit their understanding of distinct aspects of "civility" and how they could affect our deliberations.

The three questions were:

1. Is civility necessary for effective discourse in governance or is it a threat to free expression?
2. What is YOUR campus's experience with "hate" speech and its limits, if any? Has the campus enacted "speech codes" in response to vile verbal attacks on members of the community?
3. How would you describe your experiences with civility and incivility in departmental, collegiate and/or university settings?

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Each of the three was introduced by a very short paragraph or two describing some of the context around that issue and concluded with an appropriate, thought-provoking quote from one of the pieces I had read.

And it worked. Yes, I gave a presentation, but more than that I had somehow guessed the mood in the room correctly, and by having a colleague and I armed with hand mikes and able to quickly move from one part of the space to another, we facilitated a discussion about civility.

And when I think back on it, I have a couple of thoughts with which I'll conclude.

- Gwen Kay is smarter than me, a fact proven once again by her selecting this topic for a presentation at the UFS plenary. Our time together is precious, and I suspect many of our Senate colleagues when they noticed a half-hour of our plenary time devoted to it, simply rolled their eyes and thought this was a time they could better use to catch-up on email. Instead, they engaged one another. While not unprecedented, it is unusual, which I take as a testament to the need for more “active” learning environments, even in our governance bodies.
- And, it follows that those of us in leadership in campus governance organizations should be thinking about topics that will engage the membership and provide the time necessary for that engagement in our agenda. If we do that, a number of “old” topics that will become new again, which would certainly be true for our colleagues who have just rotated into governance for the first time.

I'll end this where I ended the presentation to the senate, with a quotation from Frederick Lawrence, the former President of Tufts University, “...if we can strive to [‘agree in everything but our opinions’ he wrote citing Justice Louis Brandeis] . . . we will be building the most important kind of community there is – and one worthy of the great shared mission of America’s colleges and universities.” In other words, challenge the ideas and respect the colleague.