To Practice Civility in an Increasingly Uncivil Society

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Abstract

The tenor of life in the U.S. generally, and on college campuses specifically, has been challenged from time to time by incivility. In order to maintain a well-functioning “marketplace of ideas” and to create an academic environment that is conducive to study, research, and service, community members (students, faculty and staff) ought to pursue civility as a foundational principle and practice. This paper will address three learning outcomes by: 1) discussing the current climate and perceptions about civility in the U.S.; (2) articulating how specific issues on college campuses can seriously challenge the climate of civility; and (3) exploring the role that college educators can play in modeling and teaching civility. This paper also provides three practical means for encouraging civility in academe (1) by reframing community membership as rooted in civility; (2) by supporting the role and purpose of thoughtful dialogue and careful listening in discourse; and 3) by understanding the critical relationship between diversity and civil communities.
To Practice Civility in an Increasingly Uncivil Society

Incivility appears to be on the rise in the work environment (Porath & Pearson, 2013). In addition, increasing political polarization creates ground for uncivil discourse. Further, some media, using “outrage” commentary (commentary designed to create a visceral reaction) have cultivated incivility (Sobieraj & Berry, 2011). And incidents involving racial, social, political, and religious conflicts spill over from society to the university.

To maintain a functioning “marketplace of ideas” and to create an academic environment conducive to study, research, and service, students, faculty and staff ought to pursue civility as a foundational principle and practice. We argue that civility is a worthy individual pursuit; and we believe that teaching to civility can improve the quality of discourse and life on and off campus for the short and long term.

We begin this paper by discussing perceptions about civility in the U.S. We go on to illustrate several examples of incivility that have roiled college campuses. Then we explore the role that college educators can play in modeling and teaching civility. Finally, the paper offers three practical elements that help educators promote and teach civility on college campuses.

Is there a National Crisis of Civility?

Surveys conducted since 2010 by Weber Shandwick and Powell Tate, on “Civility in America,” picture a highly uncivil nation (Weber Shandwick, 2013). The latest available survey (2013) reports:

a) Frequent Incivility: Americans encounter incivility on average 2.4 times per day. And 95% of Americans believe we have a civility “problem” in the U.S.

b) Seriousness: 81% think uncivil behavior leads to violence. 50% say incivility caused a breakdown in friendship. And for 26% incivility in the workplace led to changing jobs.
c) Trend: 71% say incivility has worsened over time; and 54% expect continued decline.

d) Political Dimensions: 71% believe Republicans and Democrats cannot discuss matters civilly. Sixty percent view Congressional Republicans as lacking in civility; while the figure for Democrats is only somewhat better (52%). The news channels, Fox, MSNBC, and CNN have incivility numbers of 37%, 33%, and 32% respectively. And new media, YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, fare still worse, with incivility scores of 50%, 50% and 44%.

e) Business: Corporations (incivility at 53%) are less civil than small businesses (at 24%).

f) Educational institutions: In 2011 and 2012 concerns about incivility in educational settings measured 51% and 50% respectively, but in 2013, the figure rose to 62%.

These statistics underline two broad points: a) Americans find incivility frequent and ubiquitous; and b) they see it as destructive of friendship, citizenship, economic well-being, and peace.

Civility on Campus

Ideally the college campus should be the place where civility thrives, especially since civil discussion and exchange are critical to the life of the mind. However, as item “f” from Shandwick and Tate’s survey indicates, incivility also touches academe. Mindful of the timeless ideal and the contemporary challenge, it is no surprise that civility is offered as one of five key “Aspirations for Student Learning” at Virginia Tech. Civility is not a unilateral moral obligation or a bilateral reciprocal debt. Instead, it is “multilateral gift-giving” conducted among community members (Aspirations for Student Learning, 2014). Moreover, it assumes that civil community members will embrace five constituent elements:

a) Listen as well as speak (intentionally and reasonably).

b) Work to understand commonalities and differences.

c) Give (and accept) respect to and from one another.
d) Show courtesy and consideration instead of rudeness and thoughtlessness.

e) Reconcile free speech and civil discourse--to honor liberty and peace.

**Civility as Informed by Courtesy and Etiquette**

The Virginia Tech definition of civility never explicitly mentions courtesy or etiquette. However, both should not be dismissed, though some persons may picture them as mannered in a negative sense. And if one becomes upset at a mere peccadillo--for example the dinner companion who neglects to place a napkin in his/her lap--the criticism is valid. However, courtesy and etiquette are important, for they inform thinking and ritual that transmit and institutionalize civility. Consider the student who arrives late to class, neglects to silence a cell phone, or surfs the internet during lecture. On one level this constitutes impoliteness but no grand offense. However, such actions detract from individual and group learning. Therefore, if courtesy and etiquette cause the student to adjust scheduling, habits, and attentiveness, learning is improved for all (Feldman, 2001). Similarly the instructor who is late to office hours, permits one student to dominate discussion, or is condescending toward students, though not causing great harm, still fosters incivility that can impair learning (Twale & DeLuca, 2008). All this notwithstanding, courtesy and etiquette by themselves do not establish civility.

Consider Elliot Rodger, a 22-year-old college student who in YouTube videos, and an autobiography, spoke softly, wrote in a courtly fashion, eschewed curses, and described himself as a “supreme gentleman.” Yet beneath this veneer of civility lay a core of savagery. Just after recording these videos and finishing his autobiography, Rodger killed six persons in Santa Barbara in a shooting rampage in May of 2014 (Rodger, 2014). Rodger was not a civil person; rather he was a mass killer who affected an air of refinement.
Situated between minor lapses in courtesy and egregious transgressions which can rise to criminality is an intermediate level where uncivil behavior exacts a substantial cost on a university community and its teaching, learning, and morale. We begin with a case ostensibly rooted in humor but which had serious consequences. For while good natured humor may bring levity and good fellowship to campus, variations that are ill-timed, mean-spirited, or demeaning can also create a very uncivil environment, as is illustrated by a case at the University of Colorado a few years ago.

**Satire and the Case of Max Karson**

On April 17, 2007, the day after Virginia Tech experienced a most violent rampage shooting, a professor at the University of Colorado, out of concern for students in class, asked how they felt about that event. From published accounts, a student in class, Max Karson seemed to defend the Virginia Tech killer, Seung Hui Cho. Max said that he could understand how things about a university—such as fluorescent light bulbs and unpainted walls—could make people angry enough to murder (Associated Press, 2007 and Najima, 2007). Max went on to say that he could comprehend why Cho wanted to kill 32 school mates; and he volunteered that many students would like to kill peers. When asked if he really wanted to murder all the students in class, he qualified his statement by saying that he wished to kill only some of his classmates, not all (Dustin, 2007). Several shaken individuals left the room; and some were hesitant to return, (Miller, 2007). Max was arrested on a misdemeanor: “interfering with staff, faculty, and students in an educational institution” (Miller, 2008).

If the students had been familiar with Max’s history, they might have been less alarmed, for while he delighted in shocking others, he did not have a history of violence. In his high school newsletter, Max authored a lengthy article on self-pleasuring, ridiculed his school’s
multicultural curriculum (Horton, 2007), and flippantly and falsely suggested that he had been romantically involved with his principal, who had been accused of inappropriate conduct with others, (Roberts, 2006). Outrageous commentary continued in his college newsletter. For example, Max authored “The Myth of the Female Orgasm,” which postulated that women’s genitalia and breasts lacked all feeling and so females might be treated roughly during sex (Roberts, 2006). And in his “War on Asians” he indicated that all Asians on campus should be rounded up, bound, and forced to consume abundant quantities of alcohol and sushi (Karson, 2008). Max’s father compared his son to Stephen Colbert (Associated Press, 2007). However, Karson’s writings not only lacked the tight, incisive content associated with Colbert, they were viewed well by many members of his community who saw the work as racist, misogynistic and hurtful.

Rather than Colbert, Max’s writing, and especially the article on women, reminds of another famous but less distinguished comedian, Rush Limbaugh and his exchange with Sandra Fluke, who testified to Congress on subsidized birth control (Keyes, 2012). Limbaugh’s demand that if taxpayers were going to pay for Fluke’s contraception that she should post videos of her sexual activity on line — was not intended to be taken literally. However the tone and content were so crude that they fell flat.

Did Max think it funny that so many students died at Virginia Tech? Did he want women to be treated hurtfully? Was he sincerely advocating hazing of Asians? We think not. Karson might have hoped that his writings would spur revulsion and encourage people to act better. Or he may have been an attention-seeker: satire— even if heavy handed — can get one noticed (Feng, 2008). However, regardless of intent, Karson’s humor seemed capable only of giving offense.
An article written in response to Karson’s corpus of work asked if Karson was both mean and unintelligent (Dustin, 2007). Another commentator on “The War against Asians” found Karson’s satire disingenuous or obscure, (Urie, 2008). And still another critic underlined that if Karson’s point was to satirize racism, the way he wrote only tended to reinforce it (Ono, 2009). Clever satire involves more than saying something offensive and assuming a deadpan expression. Classic satire like More’s Utopia or Cervantes’ Don Quixote is funny, ironic, insightful, and thoughtful. It both criticizes and celebrates the human condition while also being civil.

A Challenging Political Issue: Affirmative Action Bake Sales

Incivility--which often characterizes federal, state, and municipal politics--also can be found in campus politics. A number of student organizations while expressing their political opinions have helped to create uncivil environments. One example of this sort of practice is the “Affirmative Action Bake Sale.”

To understand the mechanics, consider an affirmative action bake sale sponsored by the Young Republicans, at the University of California at Berkeley in 2011 (UC Berkley: racist, 2011). The bill of fare included one item, a cupcake piled with icing; but a long menu allowed for variegated pricing: For White males $2; for Asians $1.50; for Latinos $1; for African-Americans $0.75; and for Native-Americans $0.25. At UCLA in 2013, there was a variation in theme (Donnelly, 2013). Asian Americans paid $2.50, followed by white students ($2.00), Hispanics ($1.50), African Americans ($1.00) and Native Americans (50 cents). Varied pricing for cupcakes, donuts, brownies, or bagels is metaphorical: it is to declare that under affirmative action, minorities disproportionately benefit. Stated another way, the exercise takes traditionally oppressed groups and repackages them as privileged. In addition, in some schools, as the
University of Texas, women are given a discount (typically 25 cents deducted at point of sale). It is not surprising this exercise causes women and minorities to feel unwelcome on campus (Kingkade, 2013).

Over the last dozen years, such sales have occurred at many universities. A partial list, based on a brief Google search includes: Columbia (2003); Bucknell (2009); Du Paul (2006); Fordham (2011); Grand Valley State (2005); Kutztown (2006); Laramie CC (2012); Southern Methodist (2003); Texas A&M (2003); California-Berkeley (2003 & 2011); UCLA (2013); U. Colorado at Boulder (2004); University of Michigan (2003); U. Michigan-Flint (2008); U. New Mexico (2002); U. of Texas-Austin (2013); U. of Washington (2003); Wesleyan U. (2010); William and Mary (2004).

Reaction to these events varies. At Berkeley, administrators permitted the event but released a campus-wide letter condemning it (Wollan, 2011); at the University of Texas, the student newspaper called it childish (Mistry, 2013); and at William and Mary it was first prohibited and then allowed, in part due to the efforts of F.I.R.E., a conservative ACLU (Foundation for Individual Rights in Education, 2004). At Bucknell in 2009, the Affirmative Action Bake sale was shut down for two reasons: a) because the sponsoring organization misrepresented prices when registering; and b) because the university would not countenance discriminatory pricing. Charging different amounts (on the bases of race and gender) for donuts was no more righteous, the administration reasoned, than if the same applied to the purchase of houses or cars, (Jones, 2009). The University of Colorado allowed sponsors to suggest different prices by race, but patrons had the right to pay whatever rate they preferred, permitting symbolism, but refusing to endorse discrimination (Anas, 2007). At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in 2004 a liberal group, in response to a conservative initiative, arranged for
a White Popcorn giveaway whereby Caucasian males would receive a full bag and women and non-whites would be given a third (Wilkey, 2004).

Fordham University in 2011 decided on a Jesuitical affirmative action bake sale regarding admissions to Fordham. The charge list stipulated: Women (General Admission) $1.30; Men (General Admission) $1.25; Underrepresented Minorities $1.00; Legacies, $1.00; Recruited Athletes, 50 cents; and children of the very wealthy 25 cents. All profits went to a local soup kitchen (Korbe, 2007). This sort of exercise also can affect multiracial persons. At the University of Texas a student of mixed race, on Facebook, asked if she was supposed to pay the “pricey” Asian tariff or the more affordable African-American rate. And she wondered if that was determined on the basis of appearance (Suarez, 2013).”

Civility is a means by which contentious but important policy subjects can be discussed. And one can fashion strong arguments for and against affirmative action. However, the arguments might be better joined by thoughtful discussion of social justice and mobility and less by musings on the price of donuts. Unfortunately the opportunity for students to explore and discuss the concept of affirmative action was largely lost due to the method by which the issue was raised.

Care with Expression: Curses, Epithets, and Symbolic Communication Cursing

At a professional retreat some years ago an intelligent, accomplished, and articulate guest facilitator cursed, using words that were highly unprofessional. Most persons—perhaps to be civil—said nothing. However, a couple of individuals put off by the rough language, privately gave gentle feedback. The facilitator took the criticism with grace. She was invited to return to facilitate anew, and this time it was no different! She proceeded to curse a good number of times.
Why did this happen again? Maybe she saw curses as useful filler or intensifiers. The etymologies of common curse words—rooted in accusations of bestiality and anti-gay sentiment—were perhaps too obscure to matter. However, we ask students to be careful about language, and more specifically to avoid the “b-word” and “f-word” that apply to women and gay men. If we want restraint from others, we may need to model the same ourselves.

**Epithets**

In the New York City of a couple of generations past, there were two to four hurtful epithets commonly applied to each ethnic/racial group, such as Chinese, Germans, Irish, Italians, Poles, Puerto Ricans, etc., (Anonymous, The Racial Slur Data Base). African-Americans had it much worse—10 nasty epithets were commonly reserved for them.

Several years ago, one of the authors of this paper assembled a list of epithets from that time and place and asked students in a freshman seminar to match terms to groups. They could not do it. Most of these words were no longer in use, and even better they were lost to memory. While the number of epithets in common use is reduced, for those who face their torment, it can be even more painful (they can feel more selectively targeted). Gay and lesbian students, Arab-Americans, African-Americans, a variety of Hispanic groups, and persons with disabilities can confront cruel or demeaning labels. It is all the more important to show them the respect and consideration that civility accords.

**Uncivil Non-Verbal Expression: The Case of Blackface**

In contrast with affirmative-action base sales, blackface incidents have no public-policy reason behind them, and this can make them even more harmful to a civil temperament. In 2002, two members of a fraternity at Bucknell University went to a Halloween party in “blackface.” The party was not organized around a “racial” theme; and the two students were the only ones
dressed in such a fashion. They seem to have chosen their outfits because they had waited until the last minute; a dreadlock wig and face paint were easy to acquire quickly. Photos taken at the party some weeks later came to light; and there was hurt and anger.

The Dean of Students Office responded with civility. On the night before Lent, (an accidental choice) the university held a town hall meeting, which began at 8:00 p.m. and ended at 12:30 a.m. A presentation on “blackface” was offered, which clarified the racist, negative stereotyping historically associated with this masking. Further, this presentation was conducted in a frank but considerate manner. At the very end, the two students who had dressed in blackface came to the front of the room, where they sincerely apologized. The voice of the second student cracked with emotion as he explained his original unthinking intention and how he regretted the harm done to his community. Suddenly people of all races in the audience began to move toward him—and they began to hug him. It was a wonderful example of true reconciliation. Civility was shown by all in the room: the ones who had harmed but accepted responsibility, and those who had been hurt but who had shared forgiveness.

The Bucknell event is not an isolated occurrence. A brief, incomplete computer search for recent years turned up blackface incidents at 21 schools: Auburn (2001); Delta State (2013); Hamline College (2007); Lehigh U. (2010); Macalester College (2007); Mississippi College (2009); Northwestern U. (2010); Purchase (2011); Syracuse U. (2002); SUNY-Oswego (2014); U. Alabama-Birmingham (2001); U. California-Irvine (2013); U. Florida at Gainesville (2012); U. of Louisville (2001); U. of Mississippi (2001); U. Tennessee (2002); U. of Virginia (2002); U. of Wisconsin-Whitewater (2001); Whitman College (2006); Yale University (2007).

Some events seemed more disturbing than others. A blackface party which incorporates a feigned Ku Klux Klan lynching or police beating seemed more oppressive than an impersonation
of Tiger Woods. And that difference in intent and impact may certainly affect conduct and restorative justice decisions reached afterwards. However, given the inevitable cycle of offense, protest, and labored resolutions, why do these incidents still occur? In part, blackface can constitute a deliberate hostile action. There is a minority of prejudiced people for whom blackface is a convenient way to irritate those they dislike. And it is also a potentially winnable dispute. At Auburn, the University suspended 10 men in a blackface event that incorporated Ku Klux Klan paraphernalia, but a judge ordered them reinstated (Prater, 2006).

However, much is explained by ignorance. We talk a lot about social justice, but we do not speak much to our students about the long, variegated and complicated history of social injustice. And even in states like Virginia, which have an abiding interest in history, the focus can sometimes be placed on the merely antiquarian, rather than on the critical lessons of social history. The positive news is that students in this generation bring much less prejudice, which can help predispose them to civility. So classroom curricula and student affairs programming that provide real information and that link present courtesy with past disregard can be especially effective.

**Civility and the Mental Health Challenge: The Case of Jonatha Carr**

On March 20, 2012, at Florida Atlantic University, Professor Stephen Kajiura, who was making a point in class about mate selection among peacocks, was interrupted by a 24-year-old African-American student, Jonatha Carr. The senior demanded that the teacher explain “how evolution kills black people.” The professor responded that evolution does not kill anyone. Jonatha then became furious, as is documented by a cell-phone recording and a published police report (Blount, 2012):
1) She repeatedly and loudly directed the “F-word” (for coitus), as well as other curses, at her teachers and classmates, (Abdill 1, 2012).

2) She did the same with the racial epithet, the “N-word,” directing it at African-Americans, Caucasians, and persons of Middle Eastern extraction, (Abdill, 2012a).

3) She advocated collective punishment: for every Trayvon Martin who died 10,000 white people should be killed. And she likely said this because she saw the multi-ethnic George Zimmerman as a white person (Nittle, 2012).

4) She threatened to kill her teacher and several other students.

5) She struck a male student, an instructor, and a police officer.

6) A police official reported that she made threatening anti-Semitic comments (Jonatha Carr Police Report, 2012). All this suggests that Jonatha was the antithesis of civility.

A Complicated Background: Bipolar Disorder and Schizophrenia

While Jonatha did harass, strike, and threaten to kill people while disrupting a class intended to provide review for an exam, background information puts matters in a more complicated light. On March 30th of 2012, Jonatha’s family shared that she had suffered from bipolar disorder and schizophrenia since age 13; and that she had been hospitalized twice previously due to “nervous breakdowns” (Jonatha Carr: Family, 2012). It was also noted that she had a 3.8 cumulative average, and was two courses short of graduation.

Did the Trayvon Martin case play a role? Dr. Boyce Watkins of Syracuse University opined that the Trayvon Martin case was relevant to the Jonatha’s actions (Watkins, 2012), suggesting that racial oppression could cause mental illness. However, Rich Abdill, reporter for the Broward New Times, disagreed, saying that the teacher indicated that “a discussion on the death of the late Trayvon Martin isn’t even close to what happened (Abdill, 2012b).” If one
listens carefully to the tape, it is clear that Jonatha referenced Martin at the beginning of her outburst; and the day before the meltdown she had been interviewed about organizing support for the Martin family (Murray, 2012). It is likely that both Watkins and Abdill are correct: that the Martin case was not central to class discussion, but that it may have been a triggering event for an outsized reaction by Jonatha.

**In the aftermath.** All information on Jonatha ceases after May of 2012. An article from September of 2012, written by a classmate, is wry and personal, but sheds no further light (Kaza, 2012). And a 2013 Facebook inquiry on an anti-psychotropic drug site--“Justice for Jonatha Carr” --also provides nothing substantive.

It seems that Jonatha was tried in the court of public opinion rather than in a criminal tribunal. YouTube took down the classroom video quickly, but recordings survive on many websites. And so afterward, according to her sister, Jonatha spent much time reading and rereading the negative commentary (Chapnick, 2012).

In the more extreme parts of the blogosphere, the episode spawned quite cruel as well as uncivil reactions, as persons who viewed the video and police report questioned her intelligence, employed racial epithets, dismissed her as a creationist, or likened her to African fauna (VanGuard News Network, 2012). Also unfair was criticism of the class professor, who to his credit maintained calm in a very trying situation (Chapnick, 2012). Similarly, classmates, even if they were not trained on bipolar disorder, conducted themselves with constraint and charity.

However, the biggest disappointment was the lack of a constructive response at least based on what is published. We do not know if Jonatha was able to recover, take responsibility for her behavior, reconcile with others, and proceed with her education. She just seems to have faded away.
Broader Implications

This fascinating case illustrates how psychosis/mania can challenge civility in a dramatic way. However, other conditions that pertain to autism, behavioral disabilities, and personality disorders can bring about greater or lesser challenges that touch civility.

Historically, persons with significant mental health conditions rarely attended university; and those who did might do so for only a short time. Currently and in future, in view of increasingly broad readings of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and with the necessity for even chronically ill individuals to play a significant role in their own long-term care, we will likely see more students on campus who must address the difficult nexus between mental health disturbance and civility.

Free Speech, Protection from Harassment, and Resolving the Contradiction

When a student has been hurt by curses, epithets, stereotyping, or mocking expression, it is natural to wish to outlaw the offense by folding a requirement for civil expression into a conduct code. However, court decisions—Doe v. University of Michigan (1989), UWM v. Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin (1991), and Corry v. The Leland Stanford University (1995)—which struck down such codes at public and private universities on first-amendment grounds make that impossible.

If the opposite condition prevailed, if our society was organized around absolute free speech there would be a clear if sometimes unpleasant route to follow—laissez faire. However, harassment regulations, FERPA and HIPAA, business confidentiality agreements, rules on political activity by employees, and human resource requirements all impose restrictions on expression. Therefore, the university faces a paradox: to many it should support free speech; and
to many others it should restrict free expression. And in regard to this fundamental contradiction, the practice of civility can be very helpful.

**The Practice of Civility**

Virginia Tech’s aspiration on civility challenges its students to, “pursue and embrace civility” while at university and beyond (Virginia Tech Division of Student Affairs, 2014), but that challenge is rooted in the voluntary exercise of moral virtue, not in external commands given force by sanctions. Further, elements of civility, noted earlier, involve freely given gifts: showing respect and courtesy; striving to listen as well as to speak, understanding commonalities and differences, favoring courtesy over rudeness, and combining free speech with reasoned expression. The practice of civility not only provides a roadmap for individual students to seek their better selves, it also proposes a framework for educators, who have an important role to play in broadly teaching civility on campus. The elements of civility not only inform on strategies for teaching they also instruct on the manner in which we are to do so. More specifically, within this aspiration are three assumptions about how college educators teach civility: by reframing community, helping students to listen and engage in civil dialogue, and embracing diversity.

**Reframing Community**

Civility is not restricted to a small circle, such as immediate kin. Civility is a fundamental way of thinking and acting that applies to a broad community. Consider what Professor P.M. Forni, of John’s Hopkins University writes:

“Civility’s defining characteristic is its ties to city and society. The word derives from the Latin *civitas*, which means “city”, especially in the sense of civic community. *Civitas* is the
same word from which civilization comes. The age-old assumption behind civility is that life in the city (or community) has a civilizing effect. The city is where we enlighten our intellect and refine our social skills. And as we are shaped by the city, we learn to give of ourselves for the sake of the city. Although we can describe the civil as courteous, polite, and well mannered, etymology reminds us that they are also supposed to be good citizens and good neighbors.” (Forni, 2002, p. 12).

At the crux of Forni’s argument is a mutually nourishing relationship between individuals and the community in which they live. Individuals do not operate in a vacuum, with their behavior impacting only themselves; instead they exist in fellowship with their community.

In the campus environment, faculty, staff and student leaders should introduce civility as new members join the university community, not as a nicety but as a core concept. Rather than providing students with a list of what not to do or say, we should help them understand broadly foundational ethics that inform civil expression and concomitant behavior, in their community.

**Truly Hearing and Engaging in Civil Dialogue**

It is important not to underestimate forces that can undermine civility, especially when it comes to truly “hearing.” Extreme individuals, supported by extreme media and extreme ideologies, can demonize ideas or persons with which they disagree. These listeners who do not listen, (Carter, 1998) hear the other side only to locate tactical flaws to make a stronger riposte; many times they formulate a response even before final words are spoken. True listening or “civil listening” is imperative if one will teach civility (Carter, 1998, p. 138); and so we must challenge students to listen closely to the person with whom they may disagree. This type of listening does not require one to abandon a deeply held belief but rather to keep an open mind to other individual’s perspectives and to their possible rightness (Carter, 1998). Or to put it another
way, civil listening encourages students to listen to understand rather than listen solely to respond.

At the heart of successful dialogue is the well-considered exchange of ideas. Care in choosing the words with which we give reply is equally as important to civility as good listening; it is important to avoid terms that elicit hatred, violence, or viciousness (Carter, 1998). Courteous language does not shy away from disagreement but respectfully engages the opposing viewpoint. And in disagreement, we should express viewpoints in a manner that honors the individual with whom we are conversing (Carter, 1998). Sometimes individuals may “agree to disagree agreeably” (Hayden, 2010, p. 10) but we would caution against reflexively doing so simply to avoid an uncomfortable conversation. To truly disagree, our students should understand the other point of view as well as their own. And to truly understand requires significant talking, careful listening, and measured reflection.

**Embracing Diversity**

Our communities are rich with diversity and therefore it is likely that a significant number of persons may hold different views and favor different positions. Ultimately, some of these differences may offer no common ground for agreement (Guinness, 2003). As educators we should encourage our students to accept this possibility but still seek means to resolve differences respectfully (Carter, 1998). By cultivating opportunities to address difference and diversity we help build better community, for it is the civil community that welcomes strangers, different ideas, and varied lifestyles (Block, 2008). Genuine diversity is part of what makes a great society (Guinness, 2003). When there is disagreement, rather than squelching opinions or silencing debate, educators should encourage dialogue. Such dialogue in turn allows students to learn more about the differences, themselves, and others. Dealing with differences does not mean
surrendering one’s convictions, but rather is “softening one’s heart toward others” (Hayden, 2010, p. 23).

It is imperative that students understand that civility is not the process by which they adopt a prescribed “university-approved” belief system. Civility is the foundation and frame for how they teach, learn, debate, and engage with fellow community members, to their better and fuller intellectual and personal development. Equally, we should remind our students and ourselves that “our duty to be civil toward others does not depend on whether we like [others] or not” (Carter, 1998, p. 279). Civility only asks us to be willing to see our fellow community members for whom they are and to try to understand their story.

**Optimism for the Future**

Case studies discussed underline that universities, on occasion, struggle mightily with incivility, but we remain optimistic for the future, because we believe that a serious commitment to civility—even on an aspirational basis—brings clear benefit to individuals and universities. Rooting a student’s development in the healthy ground of an established civil community is a good way to enhance the capacity of that individual to find commonalities and resolve differences with others. Becoming expert in the arts of listening and civil dialogue are practical tools which benefit the individual, university, and society in the short and long term. Approaching diversity through thoughtful discussion (rather than shocking tactics) will promote greater learning in the long run. Teaching to civility reminds faculty and staff of an essential core element of their work—which is always purposeful.

Deep concerns about incivility held by the American public, noted at the start of this essay, may indicate a superficial regret about a loss of courtesy, but it may also point to deeper levels of anxiety about verbal and physical violence, which by degrees can lead to dystopia. In
contrast, increased civility points to a safer and happier outcome on the surface and in depth. If we are generous with each other, if we give and receive elements of civility, individually and collectively, we develop our capacities for goodness and justice.

Finally, there is an institutional benefit. The university that embraces civility (becoming in Forni’s terms a civilizing civitas) can hope to grow still further—and metaphorically become “a shining city on the hill,” (Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 5:14), where the claim to exceptionalism does not rest on material things, but rather is firmly embedded in transcendent virtue.
Notes

1 The Five Aspirations can be found at http://www.dsa.vt.edu/about/aspirations.php

2 We will not produce endnotes for all the material in this table, due to the limits of space, but all can be found by entering in Google Search Engine and the name of the university and affirmative action bake sale.
TO PRACTICE CIVILITY

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