

Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education

Volume 53

Article 19

February 2018

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Recommended Citation

Ford, Billy (2018) "Student Voices: Students Found a New Journal: Sharing Ideas on Campus," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 53 , Article 19.

Available at: <https://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol53/iss1/19>

Students Found a New Journal

Sharing Ideas on Campus

By Billy Ford

America has reached a critical juncture in its history. Across our country, men and women, politicians and pundits seem incapable of engaging in civil discourse. Instead they lambaste their ideological opponents, and strict ideological labels like Democrat and Republican prevent individuals on both sides of the aisle from coming together to craft the policies we need to improve our healthcare system, our economy, our immigration system, and our foreign policy. Now more than ever – as populism and xenophobia rear their ugly heads, as the global refugee crisis continues to fester, as climate change uproots homes and upends lives – it becomes important for people in America and across the world to think critically about the problems that we face. It becomes necessary to discern our duty to others. It becomes necessary to reject this status quo of divisive politics and ineffective policy-making, repair the sundered bonds between ideological opposites that cleave our communities into hostile factions, and forge a new path forward.

When I came to the College of the Holy Cross in the late summer of 2015, I hoped to discern this path forward through my coursework; I hoped to deepen this discernment through an outside outlet, through which I could author opinion pieces on those issues about which I am particularly passionate.

When I arrived to campus, however, the existing student publications were not discussing in any meaningful way the problems we face as a world, as a country, as a local community, and as individuals. Moreover, these outlets did not publish or highlight student research, nor did they contain the space necessary to publish the long-form pieces required to address the critical issues before us.

In response to this gaping void in campus discourse, and to the growing inability of both students and adults to disagree without being disagreeable, I began to think about creating a new journal of opinion at Holy Cross, one that championed civil discourse and committed us unequivocally to serving the common good.

It began in my dorm room, on the second floor of Wheeler Hall. My friend Connor Hennessey and I sat down and started thinking about how we might structure this hypothetical journal. Opening a Google doc and exchanging our ideas with increasing rapidity and excitement, we spoke about what we hoped to accomplish. Soon all speech stopped, replaced only by the rhythmic beating of fingers on computer keys as we sought to get down on paper those thoughts racing through our heads.

We wanted a vigorous exchange of ideas. We wanted animated prose that communicated the hope of young minds. We wanted people of different ideological backgrounds to come together and in a single forum both to contend fiercely and to listen closely. Acutely aware of our own shortcomings and our limited knowledge and experience, we sought not to exclude from this dialogue any individual who could express his or her thoughts clearly, forcefully, and civilly. We knew that this journal must be open to people of all faith and ideological backgrounds.

After sharing my idea with Connor, I began to approach other students. It wasn't a difficult sell. Andrew Smith, a bright conservative from my macroeconomics class, jumped at the idea. Mithra Salmassi, a writer and researcher in Holy Cross's Digital Transgender Archive, signed on immediately after I shared my proposal. Our staff began to grow.

As I thought about this idea more throughout the summer of 2016, the purpose of this project became clearer to me. It was, it is, about harnessing the electrifying hopes of young people and encouraging them to make these hopes concrete in such a way that rejects both the venom and visceral political binary of this discursive moment. By doing so, I hoped to reclaim – if only on Holy Cross’s campus – the now radical notion that my ideological opponents and I are engaged in a common enterprise. Be one Democrat, Republican, Libertarian, or none of the above, we all seek a more perfect union; stronger, more loving communities; and a brighter future for our children and our children’s children. We all know that we have more work to do.

We will always have more work to do.

But if we can reclaim the notion that we share similar, if not the same, goals, and simply disagree over the proper way to get there, the deafening contempt and useless noise of our current politics will fade away. What will be left after that is what should have been there all along: productive discussion, aimed at maximizing our common good.

This is the type of discussion that this journal, *A Contest of Ideas*, hopes to model for the Holy Cross

community. We took our name from President Barak Obama’s speech to the 2016 Democratic National Convention. Ideas do struggle with each other, even as they complement each other.

We at *ACI* acknowledge that our impact will likely be small, and we shall ever seek to expand it. But change starts small.

If we truly seek to reduce inequality, to serve the poor and the marginalized, to better the country, the economy, the environment, or the future of our world in some other way – if we hope to have any impact on this world – we must rehabilitate our broken discourse. We must respect, engage civilly with, and learn from those with whom we disagree.

We must start this work now.

Billy Ford, assistant editor in chief of A Contest of Ideas, is in junior year at the College of the Holy Cross; he spent the first semester in Amman, Jordan, and is to spend the second in an internship in Washington.

See www.acontestideas.com.



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