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## **Is Civil Discourse Simply about Good Manners?**

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Free speech? Civil discourse? Hate speech? Liberal orthodoxy? Right wing conspiracy? Racism? Tolerance? During the winter of 2004, the Roger Williams University community struggled to define such terms as we dealt with the College Republicans' white-only scholarship. The adviser to that group, and a tried and true liberal Democrat, I struggled with my own definitions as I tried to resolve my commitment to free speech on campus and my personal opposition to the CRs' ideas. As an educator, I thought it was in our best interest not to banish these students to the academic hinterlands, but to keep them in our circle and to try to teach civil discourse by example—during conferences, in class, and in every day conversations about controversial issues. In the aftermath of that winter semester, a number of questions have been raised that we, as a community, will continue to confront as we work together to bring reason and respect to the consideration of conflicting ideas and values.

How free is free speech? It seems to me that at a university, more than at any other place around, we must encourage the free flow of ideas. In *Areopagitica*, a work that some of us read with our Core 102 students, John Milton argues that all ideas must be brought forth, because to sort them into acceptable and unacceptable demeans the substance of them all. Who among us, Milton asks, is fit to do the sorting? By what standards? Milton is confident that the good ideas, when considered next to the bad ones, will prevail.

In his essay *On Liberty*, another Core 102 reading, John Stuart Mill describes the marketplace of ideas in a ringing defense of unfettered expression. Mill argues that societies are not truly free until they can find a means for accommodating all forms of expression however offensive. Mill, too, is confident that the "collision of truth with error" will result in a "clearer perception and livelier impression of truth." By fostering this collision on our campus and in our classrooms, we help our students to sharpen their rhetorical skills and thicken their skins in preparation for a real world in which not everyone is polite, not everyone is gentle. In the spirit of Milton and Mill, we in the academy should accommodate all views and weaken the bad ones by confronting them in the marketplace of ideas.

Does this mean that there are no limits? That anything goes? That we can accept name-calling, *ad hominem* attacks, racist and sexist slurs? Can we, as a community, decide what we allow and what we prohibit? If and when we do prohibit speech, are we sure that the choices we make are not colored by our politics? Are we pushing certain ideas out of the arena when we prohibit certain words? Are we excluding certain participants from the debate when we declare certain topics off the table? How do we find that place that keeps the ideas free, but ensures that we mind our manners? Who defines good manners? Is civil discourse simply about good manners?

What happens when students push the limits of what a community deems as civil? Yet these are our students. We admitted them, they live among us, they learn from us. Is it our obligation to punish them for unacceptable speech in the way we punish them for possession of alcohol or engaging in a fistfight? Or is it our obligation to teach them, both by example and through our content and pedagogy, how to make an argument without invective? We can show students and each other

that people who disagree with each other can converse in a civil manner and still be passionate and persuasive. We can teach them that an argument is about ideas, not about personalities; it is about concepts, not about attacks; it is about persuasion, not about intimidation.

They may not believe us. When Ann Coulter and David Horowitz came to campus to hurl insults at liberals, and in particular at professors, the room filled. When a newspaper is published that is full of sarcastic, demeaning language and provocative graphics, it is the topic of discussion for days. Can we, as a community, explain why drawing attention to their positions in this manner is wrong?

Campuses around the country are confronting a movement that represents a segment of students and faculty who claim to have been forced into silence for decades. This movement, emboldened by political changes at the national level and supported by such prominent thinkers as Horowitz and such national organizations as the Young America's Foundation, seeks to strengthen its voice in the academy. These are conservative students and faculty who see universities as the bastion of liberal thinking and pedagogy. They seek, as anti-establishment types did in the 1960s, to use aggressive tactics and in-your-face rhetoric to shake up that establishment.

Civil discourse cannot be promoted as a means of suppressing this movement. Rather, civil discourse must be a mechanism for engaging faculty and students alike on our common ground. On that ground, we will argue about affirmative action, prayer in public schools, tax policy, the war—and the list goes on. Our challenge is to discover how to have these discussions and walk away energized, not unnerved.