



Fostering Civil Discourse

BY JONATHAN R. ALGER

News of angry campus protests boiled over from higher education press into popular news media last semester. Students drawing attention to a myriad of “micro-aggressions” based on race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, or other characteristics felt marginalized. Others decrying the prevalence of “student coddling” pointed at what they saw as “political correctness” run amok. In this swirling free-speech paradox, name-calling and rudeness were all too common.

Much of the frustration on campuses today seems to reflect economic and cultural uncertainty in society, in the face of increasing demographic diversity and global competition. In the midst of all the noise, our fundamental educational mission remains constant—to protect and nourish the robust exchange of ideas that serves as the linchpin for higher learning.

Fostering civil discourse on campus is more important than ever, but good role models are in short supply. Politicians sling mud to score points, talking heads shout over each another on television talk shows, and angry outbursts quickly take on outsized influence by going “viral” on social media. How do we combat these trends that substitute volume and coarseness for reflection and reason?

At James Madison University, we have adopted a new vision focused on engagement with ideas and the world. The forms of engagement we embrace—engaged learning, community engagement, and civic engagement—all require the intentional building of relationships with others around us. Our aim is not to stifle discussions on hard or emotional topics, but rather to provide an environment that stimulates thoughtful and productive dialogue so as to build awareness, understanding, and knowledge.

To accomplish that goal, we recognize that we have much to learn from the father of the Constitution, for whom our institution is named. James Madison was not the loudest or most eloquent orator. His persuasive power emanated instead from careful preparation and critical thinking. Madison did his homework, and backed up his points with historical examples and logical arguments.

Vigorous debate can cause people to examine

their assumptions and perspectives, especially if it is based on facts, evidence, and analytical reasoning. Madison himself evolved in his thinking over time about issues as fundamental as the need for the Bill of Rights. When I served on the board of the National Association of College and University Attorneys, board members often remarked that the best meetings were the ones in which some of us changed our minds or modified our views after learning new information and hearing from other people.

Recognizing that debate is an active, high-impact learning experience, we have incorporated a team debate in the honors seminar on leadership that I co-teach. Many students are initially uncomfortable with the debate format, but they gain confidence from researching their topics and rehearsing their arguments together.

The students can teach us, too. When students at JMU organized a march in response to racial incidents elsewhere around the country last semester, they ended the event with a time for sharing reflections on what they had experienced. Members of the senior administration joined them for honest conversation, and I was reminded once again of the power of respectful, face-to-face human interaction.

Governing board members and presidents play an especially important role in promoting healthy and productive interaction on campus. As leaders, we must model civil discourse in our own debates and discussions, both in board meetings and in dealing with other constituencies. We must also acknowledge that difficult and controversial issues are a part of life in higher education. When we encounter expression that is ignorant or offensive, we should seize such opportunities as teachable moments.

Humility, open-mindedness, active listening, and a willingness to learn from and with others are key leadership skills for this purpose—especially when others rush to judgment or respond emotionally to situations without all the facts. If we model these positive attributes as leaders, over time we can create conditions in which trusting relationships can grow and deep learning can take place.

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