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Reflection on Civility Week

Brian Noland & Edward Kelly

Recently, we commemorated Civility Week at East Tennessee State University. This weeklong celebration afforded an opportunity to reflect upon the mission and purpose of this institution, its important role in our society, and our role as members of the ETSU community in promoting civil discourse. Throughout the history of American higher education, one of the central roles of the academy has been to prepare individuals to transition into our representative democracy. In doing so, universities not only create the future, but they provide a lens for appreciating the complexity of perspectives, positions, values, and beliefs that exist in a representative democracy.

As we reflect upon the beauty of higher education, we are struck by the power of the diverse perspectives that exist across our ETSU campus. As an institution of higher learning, an entity that employs faculty whose life is a pursuit of knowledge, we by our very nature are built to test beliefs. The process of research, discovery, and inquiry provides a foundation for our general education core. Civil discourse is at the heart of our mission and it must not be relegated to specific academic departments or simply embodied in codes of conduct or speech. The foundations of civil discourse must be embraced across the curriculum.

As Diane Rehm, a renowned journalist on National Public Radio and a recent speaker at ETSU noted, our ability to have a conversation about topics with which we disagree, and our ability to listen to each other's perspectives, simply no longer exists. We are not suggesting argumentation is evil. Without argumentation, there is a tendency to dogmatism. However, we must be able to work through tension and feelings of angst, for those points of temporary discomfort afford opportunities to grow. In fact, one should not expect civil discourse to create a feeling of comfort; discourse creates uneasiness and often challenges deeply held opinions, but it also leads to personal growth, development, understanding, and empathy for others whose beliefs, perspectives, and backgrounds are different than the mainstream.

Civil discourse embodies the very values of civic learning; open-mindedness, compromise, and mutual respect. Beneficial and worthwhile participation in civil discourse requires gaining an informed understanding of public policy issues, critically weighing the validity of diverse information sources, building a logical argument, and presenting positions in a convincing but non-doctrinaire manner to individuals who hold opposing viewpoints. As informed and engaged citizens, we need to be respectfully attentive to alternative interpretations, weighing them analytically, and be willing to alter our positions based upon convincing argument and evidence.

We have gained awareness of the complexity of public discourse over the past few weeks as a result of the presence of various speakers, presenters, and protestors on our campus. Many have found themselves in strong opposition to positions taken in locations such as the Culp Center or Borchuk Plaza. Some in our community have found these events and activities offensive and have asked to be spared the rhetoric and positions being espoused. Some have endorsed the positions and have reacted negatively toward those who have protested.

To paraphrase Salmon Rushdie, the concept of free expression is meaningless without what at least some would consider offensive expression. Advocates can and do rely on the right to free speech guaranteed by our Constitution and we have to honor our obligations in both letter and spirit. However, the constitutional protection of speech, while laudable, important, and necessary, misses the mark in a very significant way. The First Amendment gives the right to speak, but civility gives us the duty to listen.

To listen. The Chinese symbol “to listen” contains not only the symbol for “ear,” but also the symbol for “eyes,” “undivided attention,” “heart,” and “you.”

Our responsibility as citizens in a civil community involves more than free and open dialogue. Such dialogue too often results in people speaking past each other. We reinforce without question our own beliefs and prejudices. Meaningful discourse requires the hard work of active listening. Our duty to the presenter, even the offensive presenter, is to in effect say, “I give you my ears, eyes, heart, and undivided attention.”



Robust engagement with difficult ideas is the basic tenet of academic freedom, a concept that underlies all three elements of the academy’s mission. Since colleges and universities thrive on reflection, nuance, and complexity, attention to civil discourse is a critical part of the fabric of ETSU. At a healthy and vibrant institution, the responsibility falls to each of us to do our part in resisting the allure of certitude. It is such certitude about one’s own viewpoints, along with the intolerance of others, that public intellectuals like Oliver Wendell Holmes and Hannah Arendt identify as the central cause of democratic failure. We must push ourselves to understand and respect others, recognizing that our beliefs may not change, but we will understand why we hold those beliefs and hopefully our beliefs will be rooted in inquiry rather than the predispositions of personal biases or unexamined belief. We are hopeful that at East Tennessee State University we can use the events and activities across Civility Week to begin a real conversation about civility, both in and out of the classroom.