

# Defining and Practicing Deep Civility on College Campuses

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For much of higher education's history, we have sought to define and enact standards of civil conduct on our campuses.

For much of higher education's history, we routinely have failed to meet these standards.

I am not as much concerned with arbitrary and taken-for-granted norms of civility, such as raising your hand to ask a question or refraining from popping gum in your class. Civility as etiquette or as unobtrusive self-presentation is certainly appreciated, but nonessential. We might all be a little annoyed or inconvenienced, but the project of collaborative inquiry undoubtedly could continue in the absence of these practices.

Dialogue around the future of open expression on higher education campuses requires us to think beyond surface expressions of civility. Underlying this essay is a notion of deep civility, which demands radically empathetic regard for others in shared spaces. This type of civility provides an array of protections against cultural abuse and coercion, and compels those who hold power to not simply tolerate but to respect unfamiliar people and practices. Deep civility includes the strategies we use to communicate that someone's presence, history, and interests matter.

If surface civility is the force that insists on "inside voices," deep civility is the force that insists on space for all voices. The two forces could be complimentary. However, in moments of conflict we acknowledge that for students historically denied regard, radical empathy must precede the social smoothness we call politeness.

Our inability to sustain deep civility leaves members of historically marginalized, underrepresented, and misrepresented communities particularly vulnerable. This persistent vulnerability understandably erodes trust in the institutions and assemblies that structure access to meaningful inclusion in cultural and intellectual life. We have witnessed what the consequences of the absence of this trust and regard can look like to young people who feel silenced on college campuses.

## **Demands for Deep Civility at the University of Missouri**

In 2015 at the University of Missouri, a lack of consistent and pervasive deep civility ruptured sense of belonging for a cohort of predominantly black millennial students.

A series of student-led public demonstrations to raise consciousness about black students' experiences with estrangement and alienation at Mizzou garnered international attention. When I joined the Mizzou community in 2017, I was graciously welcomed into student-led conversations about the aftermath of this attention. A unifying thread across these talks was concern about the future of free and open expression on our campus.

Following the 2015 demonstrations, campus administration articulated new and reinforced expectations about on-campus protest and direct action. Free and open expression would be accommodated as long as it did not disrupt, interfere with, obstruct, or prevent university business. Students shared frustration that these expectations seemed to target the structure and style of the activism that elicited institutional interest in their definitions of racism, marginalization, and powerlessness. Specifically, cautions against obstruction seemed biased against nonviolent direct action. They aptly noted that nonviolent direct action contributed greatly to the desegregation of higher education and is often associated with black and brown protest cultures in the United States.

I listened. And I struggled. As a faculty member, I am obligated to help facilitate living, learning, and loving conditions that promote the individual and collective well-being of diverse student populations. I am also obligated to help ensure that all of my students have unobstructed access to the types of information that are valued in work and civic life. In a perfect world, these obligations would never be at odds. In our present world, my commitment to the former obligation can sometimes mean engaging power structures in ways that complicate my commitment to the latter obligation. When complications occur, I am compelled to err in favor of deep civility.

## **Responding to the Demands: Lessons We Are Learning**

Fortunately, I am not alone in this negotiation. I have found a small but critical community of allies who demand deep civility from and for ourselves and our students. We do not have all of the answers. We might not even know all of the relevant questions. I share lessons we've learned from a place of humility, recognizing that we are on the beginning of our journey toward potential healing:

### **Deep civility is historically conscious**

Ruptures are never caused by a single invitation to a controversial speaker, one dismissive comment by an administrator, or a solitary syllabus that erases the contributions of an exploited people.

Potential ruptures are embedded in historical realities that include stolen land, exploited and enslaved labor, and past frameworks of exclusion. At Mizzou, we are toddling forward in work to recognize past injustice and to be intentional about mnemonic restitution. I cautiously smiled during the dedications of the Lucile Bluford and George C. Brooks residence halls and the Gus. T. Ridgel Atrium. Bluford, Brooks, and Ridgel were black activists and educators whose sacrifices forced Mizzou to live up to its stated principles. But I will smile with increased confidence as more black, indigenous, Latinx, Asian Pacific Islander American, and queer names are spoken, chiseled into walls, mounted onto plaques, and integrated into the stories we tell about who we've been, who we are, and who we hope to be.

### **Deep civility supports diverse pathways to healing**

Institutional wounds do not always heal the way we want them to. Some of the students who have been alienated or estranged, or who feel erased by our practice will be comfortable bearing—and displaying—their scars.

The Mizzou Black Women's Initiative (MBWI) facilitates cultural wealth exchanges for undergraduate black women students. Recently, the brave "othermothers" who shepherd the space invited me to participate in a dialogue titled "Unpacking Black Women's Expressions of Anger." I sat with remarkable undergraduates who

chronicled past and ongoing gendered and racialized **microaggressions** on campus. No one interrupted with details about the pace of campus reform. No one minimized their experiences as black women undergraduates by remarking that everyone feels that way sometimes. No one suggested that time heals all wounds. Even as facilitators discussed the social and professional implications of certain expressions of anger, it remained clear that MBWI is one of our safe scar zones. MBWI is far too unique for our community, given our critical awareness of how cultural and vicarious traumas shape students' perceptions of their campus. I am proud of the triage work being done through this program, often by staff and faculty whose own demands for deep civility are unmet.

### **Deep civility is uncomfortable**

If surface civility invokes the norms that simplify public life, one might expect deep civility to promote further simplification. Not quite.

Deep civility requires a consistent and developing awareness of realities that are not our own. This awareness is uncomfortable. For example, in spring 2018, 15 Mizzou faculty from across disciplines applied and were selected as the inaugural **Faculty Institute for Inclusive Teaching Institute** cohort. I was one of the 15. Our purpose was to build capacity for using inclusive pedagogies in undergraduate classrooms.

In the first minutes of our first meeting, some white colleagues in the cohort attributed their silence around racism and white supremacy to fear. They were afraid of what they didn't know and of the possible consequences of operating in ignorance. They were afraid they might offend someone. Ironically, this almost assured a greater offense: that students of color would feel their presence, history, and interests invalidated by apprehensive silence.

As a cohort, we are learning to speak, defend, and sometimes depart from dogmas of appropriate dialogue. To create cultures of deep civility and inclusivity, we are required to ask difficult questions, and to engage in difficult conversations. More importantly, we are required to pursue difficult and often uncomfortable solutions.

These early efforts toward deep civility are evidence that we do not have all of the answers. The answers are somewhere we have yet to arrive—in our historical consciousness, in our accessible and diverse pathways to healing, and in our discomfort.

An overarching lesson is that we—the grown folks, elders, and bearers of tradition who have dedicated our lives to student development—have been far too eloquent and superficial in response to forms of student expression that disrupt our expectations of civility. Student civility is inspired by our deep and comprehensive civility toward students as the bearers of innovation, sensitive to evolving expectations of what it means to regard people as human. Regarding our historically vulnerable students as anything less than this is, well, uncivilized.

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