FACULTY FOCUS
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Civility is Needed in College Classroom—Now More than Ever

By: Robert W. Hill, EdD

"The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers."
(Attributed to Socrates, 469–399 BC, by Plato)

My grandmother often told me to "treat others as you would like to be treated." I just assumed parents and grandparents told all children this variation of the Golden Rule. I was also certain well-meaning teachers, coaches, clergy members reinforced it. Yet what has

happened to common decency and basic civility in society these days? Have they just become signs from days gone by? Do we no longer teach or practice the Golden Rule? I've actually heard this alternative interpretation of the Golden Rule: "He or she with the most gold makes the rules." As faculty members, I believe we need to step up and start teaching civility and compassion in our classrooms.

"You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar"—another of my grandmother's favorite expressions. As a child I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I understand it now and often pass on this same sage advice. There is a related education quote that goes something like, "*Students don't care how much you know until they know how much you care.*" I wholeheartedly agree. Students of any age benefit when they have teachers who care.

Who Most Needs to Model Civility?

Although each college has its own policies for both student and faculty conduct, as college professors "the buck stops" with us when it comes to controlling the climate and establishing the expectations for civil discourse in our classrooms. Professors need to model civility, and by that I mean much more than proper manners and etiquette, such as regularly saying "please" and "thank you." I mean feeling actual empathy toward students. A syllabus, even if it's posted online, says a lot about us before the course even begins. The same could be said about an introductory welcome letter for an online course. First impressions are important. That very first class should clearly set the expectations. Too often faculty miss this opportunity and just dive into their academic content without any attention paid to the culture that needs to be established in that course. We should all be good stewards, heed our grandparents' advice, and foster a caring learning community imbued with mutual respect. If we don't practice civility, empathy, and respect, how can we expect meaningful conversations to occur in our courses?

I am not proposing yet another campus-wide administrative initiative. Academic leaders already have more than enough on their plates—governance issues, outcomes assessment, and accountability; recruitment, retention, and graduation rates; decreased budgets and increased competition; and personnel and political divisiveness on campus. Moreover, well-intentioned institutional "civility codes" that encourage courteous language while forbidding hateful or offensive words are seen by some as suppressive. Recent efforts by both public and private colleges to promote decorum, curtail pernicious language, and elevate how students treat each other have been increasingly met with legal disputes. Using the first amendment, some argue that these restrictions can be used to quell legitimate political debate. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education or FIRE, a non-profit Philadelphia-based education foundation whose mission is "to defend and sustain individual rights at America's colleges and universities" has successfully challenged many institutions. If the colleges do not subsequently back down, they then must endure ensuing negative publicity and the costs of a lawsuit.

In 2011, Ellen Smyth posted a piece in *Faculty Focus* titled "What Students Want: Characteristics of Effective Teachers from the Students' Perspective." The short article referenced a study that resonated with me and left a lasting impression. The purpose of the study was to identify the essential characteristics for effective teaching from the student perspective. The researchers combined "reasonably synonymous characteristics" and isolated the top nine for both online and face-to-face students. Interestingly, the number one characteristic was "respectful" which ranked higher than "knowledgeable." Teaching with civility does not make one an "easy A" or a less effective faculty member. Weakness and civility are not mutually exclusive qualities. Furthermore, civility does not compromise academic freedom.

Where and How Should We Teach Civility?

A better way to combat the current venomous maelstrom that has seeped onto our campuses is to focus on the classroom. In face-to-face courses students spend 12-15 hours each week with their professors. That's a lot of time, and even in online courses teachers and student interact extensively. Some students have the same professor for more than one course and may end up with that teacher as their faculty advisor.

We have to start somewhere. Why not the first year in college? Faculty frequently complain that college freshmen do not know how to interact with college professors. They treated high school teachers poorly and think that's the way to treat all teachers. Teaching was once regarded among the most noble of professions, but no longer. We have seen a gradual decline in the respect accorded to teachers. Perhaps this is due to the growing vulgarity and anti-intellectualism of our culture.

Many of our students are not just unprepared academically, but also psychologically and emotionally; they are not ready for the demands of college. Just as undergraduate students often have to learn how to take notes, write research papers, and prepare for exams, many have never learned how to comport themselves in a classroom, lab, or study group.

The 1980's gave rise to the "broken windows theory" of neighborhood policing, which I would argue is applicable to the college classroom. The theory centers on the belief that a broken window left unrepaired makes a building look uncared for or abandoned and enticed vandals to break even more of the windows. Likewise, if a professor does not "repair" uncivil behavior in the classroom at the outset, that lack of response tacitly allows it to continue. Faculty should have zero tolerance for inflammatory language or derisive behavior (including bullying). All students should feel free to ask questions and openly express differing opinions. Diverse points of view should be listened to respectfully by everyone in the course. Civility promotes better relationships, critical thinking, and enhances learning. It makes students better citizens and employees.

It has been 15 years since P. M. Forni's classic *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* was first published. The award-winning Johns Hopkins University (JHU) professor then followed that bestseller in 2008 with *The Civility Solution: What to Do When People Are Rude*, which was featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show. This native of Italy has been teaching Italian literature at JHU for more than 25 years and has been recognized as an award-winning teacher; he was also the co-founder of the university's Civility Project back in 1997. I think his many years with college students make him uniquely qualified. Perhaps his texts should be required reading for all first-year experience classes and seminars for residential hall learning communities.

Are Millennial Students the Problem?

Did the title of this piece lead you to believe it was yet another hatchet job of the Millennial generation (or their parents) while scapegoating technology and the pervasive use of social media? I am not going to point fingers or throw an entire generation "under the bus." Ben Sasse's new bestselling book *The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis— and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance* does a fair job of that. Sasse is a 45-year old junior senator from Nebraska and the former president of Midland University. He is also a father of three children who are homeschooled. Senator Sasse, a conservative Republican who holds degrees from both Harvard and Yale, became disenchanted with the behavior and entitled attitudes of students on the Midland campus and the children of his friends. He saw his own children being coddled. He and his wife have come to believe that "building and strengthening character will require extreme measures and the intentional pursuit of gritty work experiences." Time will tell how this "working theory" of theirs bears out.

It would also be hypocritical of me to pin the demise of manners and civility on Millennials (or even the new Generation Z) as I am a proud parent of a self-reliant, college-educated Millennial child who is a happily married, successful, working professional as well as a homeowner and taxpayer. The so-called "trophy generation" or "bubble-wrap" generation cannot be the blamed for often misguided parenting that did not teach the value of delayed gratification. Moreover, the opening quote by Socrates should be considered before blaming today's youth for the demise of character and resulting lack of civility.

Lack of civility on our campuses is not just exhibited by students. Administrators, faculty, staff—all have exhibited examples of rudeness and intolerance. Handbooks with institutional codes of student conduct are updated virtually every year, but then sporadically enforced. Most faculty handbooks (including those distributed to adjuncts) could also benefit from regular updating. However, in lieu of yet another ineffective mandatory training, why not start in the classroom on the first day of the semester? Differences of opinions or concerns related to the class are welcome as long as they are presented in a mutually-respectful manner. And when those differences arise, students and teachers can learn from them.

I'm for bringing back the Golden Rule. After all, what harm could be done by trying this kinder, gentler approach? We faculty are often regarded as the lifeblood (or oxygen) of our institutions. Our students do value campus facilities and support services, their out-of-class experiences and extracurricular activities, but they routinely tell us, now and after they've graduated, how much they cherished their interactions with faculty (Hill, 2013). So, let's recommit to civility and exhibit deference. Everyone deserves the benefit of the doubt, especially our students. Let's strive to "catch more flies" this academic year with kindness and consideration.

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Robert W. Hill is an associate professor at Nova Southeastern University.