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***Entitlement, Incivility and Excessive Informality:
The Instructional and Administrative Challenges of Student Misconduct***

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Abstract:

Increasing incidents of incivilities and in some cases outright violence are well documented in K-12 through undergraduate educational setting as well as in the workplace across all sectors, yet the academic and professional literature that reflects and informs public affairs education is striking in its omission of how incivilities necessarily impact our teaching and program administration. In this paper, the authors trace the growing problem of student incivilities, identify contributing factors linked to the entitlement society, and make the case for a more proactive and comprehensive response. They present suggestions for MPA faculty and administrators to use within and outside the classroom to ensure that a safe and constructive learning environment is maintained for students and faculty. The authors work from two underlying assumptions: (1) that professional public affairs programs have a special obligation to graduate individuals who not only have substantive expertise but also meet the highest standards of civility, and (2) that we cannot and should not wait for minor incivilities to escalate to explicit threats of or acts of violence within any individual program or graduate public affairs programs generally. They present a call to action and warn of the potential for long term negative consequences if we ignore the signs of this impending storm. They introduce the concept of “civility efficiency” and challenge programs to take the lead in promoting this concept.

Introduction

Evidence of increasing incidents of incivilities and in some cases outright violence are well documented in educational settings ranging from K-12 (Hansen, 1991; Kaufman & Burbach, 1998; Stewart, 1998; [Thernstrom, 1999](#)) through undergraduate levels (Benton, 2007; Boice, 1996; Clayton, 2000; Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001; [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#)) and in the professional public sector workplace (Chenier, 1998; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Vickers, 2006). Education professionals are becoming increasingly aware that the growing sense of entitlement in young people corresponds with a decrease in respect and formality and an increase in incivility and outright hostility toward authority figures in grade schools, high schools, and now in colleges and universities. As the problem of incivility percolates into graduate programs, the absence of this topic in the academic and professional literature that reflects and informs public affairs education is striking. While our programs regularly address workplace violence as a topic within the human resource management curriculum, discuss school violence in classes focused on educational policy and administration, and explore generational differences within our discussion of diversity, we have demonstrated considerably less awareness of, preparation for, or ability to respond to student incivilities within our graduate degree programs.

The instructional role of faculty in higher education is to assign students relevant and challenging tasks, guide them in their learning of new knowledge and skills, evaluate the quality of their performance, and assign grades in a manner that reflects appropriate evaluation criteria (Benton, 2007). Faculty in professional graduate degree programs have the added responsibility of inculcating students with professional values and ensuring that

students are prepared for positions of responsibility within their selected field ([Curry & Wergin, 1993](#)). The demands of graduate programs often creates confusion and anxiety for students, but most are able to rise to the academic challenges before them and at the same time remain respectful of their instructors. Most students come to class prepared to learn and participate in meaningful and constructive ways. They also realize that the only route to academic success involves hard work and compliance with the policies, guidelines, and instructions communicated to them by their student handbook, course syllabi, instructors, and codes of conduct.

A small but increasing number of students are not prepared for the rigors of learning in a college or university environment ([Kilmer, 1998](#)). They are set apart from the majority by their disruptive, disrespectful, and uncivilized behaviors. Individuals from this group show little to no interest in educational tasks, treat their instructors with disdain, and refuse to exert effort in productive endeavors. They believe they are entitled to credentials simply by virtue of enrolling and paying tuition. They engage in behaviors that disrupt class, impede learning, and generally detract from the university experience of other students.

In this paper, we trace the growing problem of student incivilities and identify contributing factors linked to the entitlement society. As individuals with an overriding sense of entitlement make their way through undergraduate programs and into professional graduate programs, faculty and administrators will increasingly face problems similar to those experienced at the K-16 levels. Accustomed to working with professionals, or those who aspire to be professionals, many of us – individually and at a

programmatic level – may be wholly unprepared for the challenges presented by some of our incoming students.

After presenting evidence of this impending storm, we make the case for a proactive response on the part of MPA programs. We contend that, in preparing students for positions of public service leadership, graduate programs in public affairs have a heightened responsibility to demonstrate awareness of and effective response to incivility, and to ensure that our degrees attest to not only substantive expertise and knowledge but also standards of conduct. Leadership of public service organizations necessarily entails engaging in civil discourse to address complex and often controversial policy issues and placing collective interests above individual interests for the good of the organization and community. We present a framework for institutional and programmatic level action that includes clear policies, training for all parties, swift response to even minor incivilities, a support network for the targets of incivilities, and serious consequences for those who not improve their conduct. We also suggest a more cautious approach to admitting and embracing new students. Beyond that we introduce the concept of civility efficiency and offer it as a long term strategy to promoting greater civility within our programs and public service professions.

The Trickling Up of Student Incivilities

The increasing incidence of classroom incivility in our colleges and universities is beginning to seriously interrupt instruction and impede learning (Feldmann, 2001; [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#); Hirschy & Braxton, 2004). Classroom incivility includes any behavior or action that “interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom” (Feldmann, 2001: 137). Incivilities can be grouped in four

general categories. Some incidents are seemingly harmless activities such as chatting with other students during class, arriving late to class, or being demonstrably unprepared for or uninterested in class discussion. If left unaddressed, these behaviors, which might initially be characterized as simple annoyances, may continue and escalate to a level where they have a substantial impact on the classroom environment and student learning. Other incidents can be considered “classroom terrorism,” such as when a student is overtly intolerant of the opinions of classmates or the instructor, uses foul or other inappropriate language to express dissatisfaction with their grade on an assignment, or insists upon extensions of deadlines. A third category of student classroom incivility is intimidation, which may involve placing pressure on the instructor by threatening to take their “unresolved complaints” to the department chair, dean or other administrator. The most serious category of uncivil action is when one student threatens a classmate, the instructor, the program, or the institution with some form of harm or violence (Feldmann, 2001). In secondary education, classroom incivilities include all of the above as well as more disturbing incidents of peer bullying and physical violence against students and teachers (Boice, 1996).

There are obvious dangers when students engage in behaviors that are outside of cultural and institutional norms. Rude, disrespectful and disruptive students lead to the demoralization of instructors and other students, as well as the degradation of educational programs and institutions ([Carter & Punyanunt-Carter, 2006](#); [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#); [Hirschy & Braxton, 2004](#); [Tiberius & Flak, 1999](#)). If left unchecked, classroom incivilities have the distinct possibility of escalating into violent and tragic events on the scale of those that took place at Columbine High School and Virginia Tech.

Incidents of violence have been on the increase in public schools, and many of the rude, disrespectful attitudes are percolating up to institutions of higher education (Boice 1996) creating ever increasing challenges for administrators and faculty alike (Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001; [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#)). Some college students may be unaware of the proper way to behave in the classroom or how unacceptable and disruptive their actions may be (Williams, 2007). Their incivility is a learned behavior by virtue of not having been confronted in grade school. If the problem behaviors were present during a student's time in the K-12 system but never drew condemnation from teachers or administrators, a confrontation over this habitual behavior in the college classroom might be met with incredulity. Even if they did acknowledge that their conduct was an issue, such a realization may not be a substantial impetus for change. Instead of adopting a new manner of behavior, the student could just as easily expect their professors to "put up with it." If students sense that a professor who expresses concern about their behavior is in a vulnerable position and lacks institutional support to take substantial action, students may actually increase the scope of their misbehavior (Williams, 2007).

The potential inability of a graduate student to accept behavioral criticism underscores the need for early intervention. When grade school teachers decide to put up with a disruptive student for a year instead of addressing the problem, they are actually entrenching those problem behaviors within the student. Of course, grade school teachers have a host of concerns about confronting problem behavior. They may wish to avoid permanently tarnishing the student's academic record or seek to maintain their image of being in control of their classroom ([Hernández & Fister, 2001](#); Hirschy & Braxton,

2004). Intimidation and the threat of violence are additional factors in the decisions of many teachers who choose not to confront bad behavior. A 1991 study that found that 58 percent of secondary school teachers had been verbally abused at some point in their career; twenty-three percent of those surveyed had experienced such incivilities in the four weeks immediately preceding their participation in the survey ([Thernstrom, 1999](#)). Weighing heavily on the minds of some teachers who decide not to correct bad behavior is that ever-younger child offenders are committing more serious crimes both inside and outside of school ([Kauffman & Burbach, 1998](#)).

Intentional efforts to teach children civility can pay off, but such initiatives rarely garner sufficient political or administrative support ([Kauffman & Burbach, 1998](#)). Such instruction is needed more than ever, since bad behavior is on display almost everywhere children look. The sports figures who serve as role models engage in trash-talking on the court or field and indecorous conduct in their personal lives, politicians habitually trade insults and sling mud over the smallest issues, and talk show hosts goad their guests into confrontations. In addition to the negative role models in the media, children may also observe examples of incivility on the part of their parents who may shout obscenities at other drivers or brawl with coaches or parents of opposing sports teams.

Factors Contributing to Incivilities

Student incivility has been attributed to a number of factors, including psychological pathologies, racist and misogynistic beliefs, vulnerabilities of untenured faculty, and the lack of consequences for misconduct. We discuss each of these factors briefly below; in the following section we focus our attention on the overarching concept

– the entitlement society – that helps explain the growing problem of classroom incivilities.

Classroom incivilities can be understood as stemming from one or more psychological factors in students: the need to express power over other students; the desire to control students, the instructor, or the classroom environment; and the need to express frustration over what they perceive as unresolved situations in an inappropriate manner (Feldmann, 2001). While overtly hostile and aggressive behaviors may be easier to link to these pathologies, subtle student incivilities are born from them as well. Students who selfishly demand to be assigned less rigorous course work, turn in assignments at their leisure, or secure better grades without displaying the evidence of the work required may not be committing hostile or aggressive acts, but they are nevertheless attempting to control the grading decisions of their instructors.

Some incidents of student incivility reflect institutionalized societal racism and sexism. Professors who are not “big white older males” (Feldmann, 2001) are sometimes met with classroom experiences that range from disrespectful to disastrous ([Alexander-Snow, 2004](#); [Hendrix, 2007](#)). White male students in particular can feel threatened by the exercise of power by women and minority faculty, and incivilities are often precipitated by the discomfort and frustration of submitting to this power ([Alexander-Snow, 2004](#)). Having students and instructors of the same gender and race does not guarantee proper respect. The kinship that some minority students initially perceive when dealing with faculty of the same race can manifest itself in inappropriate requests for academic leniency on assignments or other special treatment ([Hendrix, 2007](#)). Most minority faculty members are unwilling to extend favors to their minority students and such

refusals often lead to resentment by the minority students, which may manifest in the form of classroom incivility.

Often students who engage in incivilities will target faculty weaknesses, or faculty who appear to lack support. Adjunct and non-tenured faculty are the most vulnerable in these situations unless they have the support of both the administrative personnel and policies that are clear, concise, and situation-specific ([Hernández & Fister, 2001](#)).

Untenured faculty may feel powerless to halt disruptive activities given concerns about their job security (Feldmann, 2001). Adjuncts are especially vulnerable because they often teach in isolation, are almost never mentored, and are rarely included in faculty or department discussions regarding issues of student misconduct. They may rationalize that it is better to ignore disorderly students in hopes the problems will simply go away with time. If confronted by faculty member perceived to be in a vulnerable position, students with an entitlement mindset may respond with efforts at intimidation, threats to complain to the administration, or a ratcheting up of the incivilities (Feldmann, 2001).

Another factor contributing to student incivility is the lack of any meaningful consequence for misconduct (Bray & Del Favero, 2004). Some students will only act appropriately if there is a perceived or known probability of punishment for engaging in disrespectful or disruptive behavior. In the absence of clear policies and demonstrated institutional commitment to enforcement, there is little incentive for uncivil students to change their ways. Avoiding punishment for their actions is often as easy as claiming that they did not understand the rules (or perhaps the lack of rules) addressing the behavior in question (Bray & Del Favero, 2004).

The Entitlement Society

In addition to the explanations provided above, the growing problem of student incivility can be attributed to a concept broadly labeled the “entitlement society.” As applied to education, the entitlement society refers to a cohort of students who have the attitude that since they have paid tuition to enroll in their courses, they are entitled to good grades and college degrees (Hansen, 1991; [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#); [Kilmer, 1998](#); [Stewart, 1998](#)). These students think they should not have to engage in rigorous work, attend class or turn in assignments when required, nor should they be required to behave appropriately in class (Hansen, 1991).

The willingness of students to earn things is waning and a sense of entitlement to anything at any time is becoming more prevalent (Hansen, 1991). Early references to the educational attitudes characteristic of this group date back to the 1980s. Wheeler (1988) references the “entertained generation,” a group of young adults brought up alongside television, movies, and computers who insist that teachers make class fun. Delivering an interesting class to students whose motivation to learn has been compromised is a worthy goal, but it raises questions about when students will become acclimated to the “real world.” If students are brought through the college experience with the assistance of “fun” teaching methods, their ability to function in a workplace that is certain to be at times somewhat less entertaining and more mundane will be drastically underdeveloped.

Technology can exacerbate the incivility of entitlement society students. Students accustomed to using e-mail for casual communication with friends bring a level of informality to their e-mail communication with faculty. Anecdotal examples abound of e-mail messages sent to faculty that begin with “Hey” or “Hi Prof” or no salutation at all, demonstrate complete disregard for sentence structure and grammar, or use no

capitalization and seemingly random punctuation. Increasingly the abbreviation patterns of text messaging are creeping into emails as are the expectations for instantaneous response. Students accustomed to engaging in real time communication with their friends 24 hours a day, 7 days a week expect the same continuous access to and immediate replies from faculty. Anything less is grounds for indignation and complaints.

Higher education rightly challenges students and may test students' self-esteem, especially if they pride themselves on good grades but find themselves in a failing position. Students with entitlement issues can excuse their performance by placing the blame for their failure externally with bad teaching, poor textbooks, and unfair grading (Stewart, 1998). These students see special treatment as a right, and some go as far as to attempt to receive academic accommodations by falsifying a learning disability (Stewart, 1998). Students "want to graduate without having to do tasks that they consider boring but normally are associated with getting a degree" (Kilmer, 1998: 81). At the start of the 21st century, more authors began to characterize entitlement as a persistent pathology instead of just a new challenge in education. As more students from the entitlement society enter higher education, it becomes increasingly clear that the entitlement mindset and the behaviors it brings into the classroom are a direct threat to academia at large. Entitlement is linked to a degradation of personal and professional boundaries and the rise of rudeness and incivility in the classroom ([Hernández & Fister, 2001](#)).

The social and professional atmosphere of most graduate programs is markedly different than what students have previously experienced in their academic careers and those differences may exacerbate incivilities. Formalities, such as the use of titles, may be foregone in an effort to promote an environment of bi-directional learning. For most

students, this collaborative learning approach motivates them to raise the quality of their work to a higher level. They appreciate the respect they are afforded by their professors and are willing to work hard to remain in good standing within their degree program. Unfortunately, this classic approach to graduate school may be contributing to the perpetration of classroom incivilities by certain types of students.

Students of the entitlement society engage their education and the world at large on different terms than past generations ([Hernández & Fister, 2001](#); [Kilmer, 1998](#)). To the higher education student operating from a mindset of entitlement, it makes sense to approach graduate studies in the same way they approached their earlier education: do a minimal amount of work, expect to get high grades for it, and wage a campaign of incivility against all resisting professors until they capitulate. Because they are accustomed to disregarding the opinions of authority figures, the invitation to interact with professors on a collaborative basis may be interpreted as faculty docility, weakness and vulnerability. This first impression, in turn, encourages students to begin the semester with an unprecedented readiness for uncivil behavior. In an undergraduate context, it is widely accepted that the underlying structure for a civil or uncivil classroom is established within the first four days of class ([Hirschy & Braxton, 2004](#)); for graduate seminars that may meet only once per week, this means that a few unexpected incivilities could catch a professor off guard on the first day of class and set the tone for a semester rampant with classroom incivility.

Reducing Incidents of Incivility

A number of sources provide detailed plans for preventing, attempting to remedy, or imposing punishments for classroom incivility ([Hendrix, 2007](#); [Hernández & Fister,](#)

2001; Hirschy & Braxton, 2004; [Kilmer, 1998](#)). The shared characteristics of these plans are: (1) clearly stated and consistently applied policies and practices, (2) education and training for all students, faculty, staff and administrators regarding the policies, (3) swift response to minor incivilities, (4) a support network for faculty who experience student incivilities, and (5) serious consequences for students who do not improve their conduct in response to early interventions (see Table 1).

Clear Policies and Consistent Application

Institutions must have clear policies that are universally understood and consistently enforced. Faculty and university administrators have accepted and applied this concept with respect to cheating and plagiarism. Policies are explicit and are rigorously enforced. If a student is found to be engaging in such activities, they are usually penalized with a failing grade for the assignment or course and possibly expelled from school. Consequences for infractions such as these are almost universally known by students because they receive extensive attention in student handbooks and course syllabi.

With respect to incivilities, the institution needs policies that define categories of uncivil actions and behaviors, processes that delineate appropriate actions on the part of instructors and/or administrators following uncivil acts, and programs designed to educate and support university employees and students (Hernández & Fister, 2001). The production of a faculty and staff handbook that details behavioral policies and disciplinary procedures for a wide array of student conduct is an important first step in standardizing the institutional response to incivility (Hernández & Fister, 2001). These books should provide faculty with a detailed list of campus resources they can turn to

when they encounter disciplinary problems and make it easier for them to take action against students who are not abiding by the rules. The comprehensive system can be based around a university's counseling center, and must combine logistical and emotional support for faculty members who have experienced classroom incivility and systemic policies to deal with the problem in a consistent and predictable manner (Hernández & Fister, 2001). If students know that inappropriate behavior will be handled in the same way no matter where or under whose watch it is committed, the tendency of students to target faculty members who they perceive as weak will be diminished.

Education and Training for All Students, Faculty, Staff and Administrators

Policies are only as good as their implementation. Faculty, staff, and administrators need to receive regular training in the evolving psychology of the modern college student (Hernández & Fister, 2001). Trainings should also address various categories of incivility, the different degrees of danger that they present, and methods that can be used to deescalate situations in the classroom (Hernández & Fister, 2001). This training needs to be part of faculty orientation adjunct instructors and new tenure track and part of a professional development process for long term tenured faculty. It is important for all faculty and administrators to understand that the mentality of the average college student has been changing for many years and may now be completely different than when they received their degrees or started their professional careers.

It is equally important to educate students about the policies so they understand the expectations for civil conduct and the consequences of incivility. This information can be conveyed in writing in student handbooks and syllabi, and discussed at during student orientations and initial class meetings (Hirschy & Braxton, 2008; Gonzalez &

Lopez, 2001; [Kilmer, 1998](#)). Students may not recognize their behaviors as fitting within labels of incivility or misconduct; fully 90 percent of Americans say that incivility is a problem, but 99 percent claim that their behavior is civil ([Kauffman & Burbach, 1998](#)). Instructors must therefore provide students with concrete examples of proper and improper conduct. This discussion will ensure that students have a better understanding of class policies and procedures, reduce the likelihood of incivilities, and diminish grounds for student grievances later in the semester if interventions or sanctions are necessary in response to incivilities.

Swift Response to Minor Incivilities

Once all parties have been educated on both the nature of the growing problem and the institution's policies, it is essential that every instructor make a commitment to recognizing and responding to minor incivilities before they are allowed to escalate. While most people recognize that threats or acts of physical violence against other students, colleagues, or the program and institution must be dealt with swiftly and severely (Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001) there is often less agreement regarding the need to respond to seemingly minor incivilities as well.

Some instructors are in the habit of not addressing minor acts of incivility in the hope that they will dissipate in time. This failure to address the behavior and actions of rude and disrespectful students has the effect of condoning them (Feldmann, 2001). When taken in combination, annoying behaviors like talking during the presentation of material or habitual lateness can have an impact on the class that is comparable to less frequent but more serious incivilities. These "less serious" activities ultimately take

valuable time away from the instructor that could have been spent attending to the needs of other students or completing the intended lessons.

Other faculty may hesitate to address incivilities when they are perpetrated by students with otherwise strong academic records. As faculty, we are well equipped and eager to assess knowledge of course material. Based upon carefully designed assignments and exams, we assign grades, provide feedback to students, and when needed advise students into remedial classes. We are less prepared for evaluating student conduct within our existing grading systems. Yes it is no more appropriate for faculty to measure academic performance solely on intellect and knowledge without regard for the incivilities displayed by the student than it would be for a supervisor to base evaluations on job performance without regard for an employee's conduct violations.

Tolerance of minor incivilities in the classroom is analogous to James Q. Wilson's "broken windows" theory ([Thernstrom, 1999](#)). Just as unrepaired property damage invites more serious crime into a neighborhood, annoyances that are not remedied contribute to a classroom structure in which more serious incivilities will become commonplace. Students who are emboldened by being allowed to act out inappropriately in one classroom may be empowered to act out in other classes, thereby potentially harming the teaching/learning environment for colleagues and all other students in the program. If every professor were to take immediate action when mild misbehavior occurs, this would not only help prevent the escalation to violence but would also reinforce the value of civility. Although some faculty may find the minor conduct violations to be offensive, they have a responsibility to their colleagues, the other students and the institution to participate in sending a consistent and strong message to

students. Living with good policy requires each person to give up some autonomy, but this sacrifice is offset by the desirability of the resulting state.

Professors are advised to intervene swiftly in response to initial incivilities, however minor, by meeting with the involved student or students ([Hendrix, 2007](#); Hernández & Fister, 2001; Tiberius & Flak, 1999). Even though the behaviors that precipitated the meeting may be maddening in the classroom, keeping one's emotions in check throughout the following process is necessary (Tiberius and Flak, 1999). At this initial meeting, the professor should briefly and gently lay out the concerns and then provide the student an opportunity to speak openly about their interpretation of the problem (Tiberius & Flak, 1999). When it is clear that the student's account is finished, the professor should indicate that they understand what the student has told them. This does not mean that agreement is required. Depending on the situation, expressing empathy for the student may or may not be relevant. The professor must judge if there are mitigating factors in the narrative that warrant empathy. Caution should also be taken to prevent a statement of empathy from tacitly condoning the behavior. The professor should then explain in greater detail how the student's behavior is seen as uncivil and generally disruptive to the class. This should be done in a manner that is as calm and unthreatening as possible so that the student will be able to collaborate in the final step of generating solutions to the problem (Tiberius & Flak, 1999).

The student's ability to respond properly to the professor's account and work with them to find solutions is dictated by their maturity level and the mindset they have about higher education. Students who have adapted to the college environment in a largely successful manner, notwithstanding the behavior that prompted the meeting, will

recognize that the professor is actively working to resolve the situation without trouble. This approach will be appreciated and respected, since it allows the student the opportunity to continue in the class without consequences if they amend their ways. Mature students will accept responsibility for their own conduct and work with the professor to develop solutions. If the incivilities were a reaction to what was perceived by the student as disrespect, rudeness or condescension from the instructor the initial meeting may allow this to be identified and addressed as well (Boice, 1996). If the troubling situation was the result of a result of a misunderstanding, the discussion that occurs at the meeting can easily clear things up. In these cases, the meeting should end civilly with the student committed to stopping their disruptive behavior and restoring harmony to the class.

The next two recommendations are based on the recognition that not all students will respond positively to this initial intervention meeting. Confronting a student about a disruptive behavior often brings a disproportionately hostile response. An individual student who has been asked to amend their actions may lash out with accusations that they are being discriminated against unfairly or deprived of their opportunity to participate or have their opinions heard. The continuation of the original problem behavior or the post-confrontation hostility not only undermines the efficacy of the instructor's teaching, but personally demoralizes them. More extreme misbehavior covertly or overtly intimidates other students into silence, which in turn impedes their ability to learn.

Support Network for Faculty

After experiencing an incivility, faculty are often confused about how they should respond. They question their handling of the situation, wonder how serious a threat the offending student poses to themselves and their class, and are angered and saddened by the disrespect that the student has shown. Department chairs and deans, many of whom rise from the ranks of faculty without any advanced training regarding this issue, are often just as unprepared for responding to student incivilities as the individual faculty. As such, universities must identify qualified staff and make them available to assist or take the lead as necessary at any point in the incivility timeline.

Communication with a special faculty liaison from the university's counseling center can help faculty regain their equilibrium, better assess the student's behavior, and help them prepare for disciplinary proceedings (Hernandez & Fister, 2001). Counseling center employees can also facilitate group meetings of instructors, including regular faculty, adjuncts, and teaching assistants, where they can come together to share their experiences with uncivil students (Clayton, 2000; Hernández & Fister, 2001). This is particularly important if only one instructor in a department or program is experiencing or recognizing the student misconduct. These meetings will open campus channels of communication and help mitigate the sense of isolation, embarrassment, anger, sadness and guilt that professors feel when they are the target of incivilities. In addition to this, faculty will be able to use these gatherings to develop more advanced strategies for dealing with problematic student behavior and minimizing its impact on the learning setting as a whole.

Serious Consequences for Continued Incivilities

As noted above, students with entitlement society mindsets may not appreciate or respect a professor's attempt to resolve early problems in a professional manner. If students are unwilling to acknowledge their improper conduct they may become defensive, shift blame to the professor, and escalate the problem behavior. In these cases, documentation of classroom incivility becomes crucial (Feldmann, 2001; [Hendrix, 2007](#); Hernández & Fister, 2001). Notes on the time, date, location, and nature of incidents of student misconduct can help professors develop a portfolio that demonstrates the extent to which each individual student contributes to problems in the classroom. Documentation should also be created after all disciplinary meetings with students, especially if ultimatums were given or promises were made. Similarly, meetings with administrators should be documented so that they can be reminded of their recommendations and actions if the situation needs to be revisited. All documentation available can become relevant very quickly if a student escalates their incivility to a point where their removal from a class or program is warranted.

Although the goal is certainly to maintain civility in the program and a second best outcome is to stop minor incivilities before they escalate, instructors, programs, and institutions must also be prepared to remove students who do not conform to standards of civility. It is essential that faculty not be sent the message that there is nothing that can be done unless and until a student makes overt threats of violence. Removal need not be limited to those who actually commit or explicitly threaten violence. This is a threshold that should never have to be crossed. Programs and institutions need to balance the safety, security and learning environment for the other students and the faculty member, and not focus exclusively on the rights of the student engaging in incivility.

Public Affairs Programs and the Public Trust

The recommendations discussed above are generally applicable and represent sound advice for programs at all levels and in any discipline; they are a necessary but insufficient response on the part of graduate programs in public affairs. Graduate programs in public affairs hold a position of special responsibility in promoting civility. In certifying the qualifications of students for positions of public trust, MPA degrees should attest to not only substantive expertise and knowledge but also standards of conduct. Vickers (2006) acknowledges that the literary canon of public administration is replete with articles on the theory and practice of leadership, teamwork, management, efficiency, and effectiveness. The concern shared by Vickers (2006) and a growing group of theorists and practitioners is hardly about a lack of skill or knowledge in the profession at large, but rather the lack of humanity and decency in practical application.

As we lament the inaction on the part of teachers and administrators within institutions of primary, secondary and undergraduate education who allowed incivility to trickle up to graduate programs, we cannot simply pass along the problems to the profession. Intolerant and condescending interactions in the classroom are likely to be mirrored in the workplace if the perpetrators become convinced that such behaviors are both effective at producing desired results and tolerated by those in senior authority positions ([Kauffman & Burbach, 1998](#)). Students who challenge their professors without consequence will be inclined to disrespect their supervisors at work. Similarly, students who bully and intimidate their classmates may end up thinking they can exert such pressures on coworkers. In a workplace increasingly dependent on the use of diverse

teams to accomplish complex tasks in the public interest, civility is a prerequisite not a luxury.

Public affairs faculty may find disconcerting the notion of needing to address incivilities within a professional graduate program devoted to public service, but it should come as no surprise. As James Madison noted in *Federalist 51*, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.” Even in programs devoted to public service, some students will need policies, controls and sanctions to ensure that they do not engage in abusive expressions of self interest. Preempting incivilities will require actions that many professors consider antithetical to the reasons they chose to teach at the graduate level. The recommendations presented earlier represent the first step. Additional steps to consider include: (1) more thorough screening in the admissions process, (2) clear articulation of competencies regarding civility, (3) requiring students to sign civility contracts, (4) careful monitoring of professional conduct especially during the student’s first semester, (5) requiring students to earn rights of full inclusion, and (6) commitment to the concept of civility efficiency (see Table 2).

Admissions Screening

If prevention of disruptive incivilities is a desired goal, one option is to use more thorough and professional screenings as part of the admissions review process. Some programs in the fields of nursing, law and social work have entered into contracts with private firms to have professional background checks conducted on applicants. This may seem like an extreme action, but arguably it may be necessary to protect programs for allegations of contributing to harm. The concept of negligent hiring is well established

([Kondrasuk, Moore & Wang, 2001](#)) and a similar concept of negligent admissions could apply if other students or faculty are harmed by the foreseeable actions of a student admitted to a program.

Civility as a Core Competency

A challenge for public affairs programs seeking to delineate measurable competencies is that lack of civility does not always translate into a lack of academic ability. Some very intelligent students demonstrate incivilities, and some students who are unwilling to invest effort in completing assignments work diligently to beguile their peers and educators into thinking that they are earnest. As we prepare students to meet the accountability challenges they will face in the profession, we must also practice what we preach. A public administration program that is unable to successfully define its boundaries with policies that are carefully crafted and consistently implemented ceases to be a credible source of policy knowledge and training. Graduates who secure positions of responsibility and then demonstrate lack of civility have the potential to discredit not only an individual program but the branding of the MPA/MPP degree.

Civility Contracts

One proposition for ensuring that MPA graduates are truly committed to the field is to require students to sign a civility contract in which they acknowledge their responsibilities to contribute to a respectful learning environment and the consequences of failing to do so. In the pursuit of the worthy goal of protecting student's individual rights, many institutions and programs have lost sight of or only give lip service to student responsibilities; a civility contract would restore balance to the relationship. In determining provisions of the contract and monitoring student compliance, programs

would need to decide where, when, by whom and under what circumstances misconduct data could be gathered. Would monitoring be limited to conduct during class sessions, any activities on school property, or extend to actions off school property if linked to the program? This proposal may be inadequate in identifying individuals who quietly agitate the ranks of the program but never directly act out in the presence of faculty. It would serve as a supplement to institution-wide policies and would reinforce the message to students about the high value placed on respectful conduct. Civility contracts are particularly important if faculty wish to continue to assign course grades on academic performance without regard for conduct; this would provide an administrative means for removing disruptive students regardless of their grades.

First Semester Monitoring

The idea that the civility level of the classroom is determined very early in the semester (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004) can be extrapolated into a larger statement with programmatic implications. With moderate variations in time, the overall civility of a cohort group in a two-year graduate program will be established within the first half of the students' first semester. The responses that various behaviors receive during this time will determine how hard the most audacious students are willing to push faculty and fellow students. Although some behavioral probing may occur when new teachers are encountered in future semesters, this can be minimized if students are made aware that the faculty stand as a united front against student incivility. This can be demonstrated by addressing all student incivilities – however minor – that occur within this initial half-semester timeframe in a firm, direct, and consistent manner that leaves no question about the seriousness with which these actions are taken.

Earned Inclusion

Related to the notion of civility contracts and first semester monitoring is the idea of earned inclusion which requires suspending the preconceived notion that all graduate students are mature and eager to learn and a reformation of the manner in which new students are welcomed into graduate programs. In many programs, students are fully integrated into the departmental family upon orientation. While completion of an undergraduate degree is a significant accomplishment for many students, grade inflation and student intimidation of professors contribute to a devaluation of baccalaureate degrees. Therefore, it is appropriate to communicate to students that privileges in the graduate program are dependent upon evidenced civility in graduate classes. As students demonstrate their intellectual and attitudinal dedication to the program, they can be admitted to the “inner circle” of the department. This is not an argument for curtailing the access that new students have to faculty and peer support, but instead a call for professors to more warily monitor the conduct and scholarship of first-semester students in particular.

Promoting Civility Efficiency

Classroom incivility promises to be one of the defining challenges in higher education for many years to come. Successfully addressing this problem will require institutions and programs to develop creative new methods of breaking down the hostile facades that the entitlement society hides behind, drawing them out into a community that lets them know that it is okay to care about the future in both individual and collective terms, and then re-energizing them with a mission of self-improvement and academic achievement. This will take time, effort, commitment, and a complete realignment of

paradigms. Incivility will never be stamped out unless a more appealing and less taxing alternative is provided.

We propose that a concerted effort to promote civility efficiency is needed. As we envision it, civility efficiency is much like energy efficiency. Like energy efficiency, which has been at times considered a quaint and novel idea and only pursued by the most ardent environmentalists, the academy may initially be skeptical of the need for any concerted effort to promote civility efficiency. As we have witnessed however when the price of gasoline, home heating oil and electricity skyrockets people are more willing to alter their behaviors to waste less energy. And once people begin to make changes – whether driving less, setting their thermostats a bit lower, or installing compact fluorescent light bulbs – these practices become the new norm. The initial transition to a proactive a comprehensive approach to student incivilities will be difficult, but once enough people make a commitment to civility efficiency, it can be self sustaining. From a global climate perspective, conservation would have been more effective if it had widespread support much earlier. Similarly, our programs and the professions we serve will realize the greatest benefits if we take steps now to make incivility a more costly undertaking for students starting rather than waiting for more widespread evidence of the effects of the entitlement society.

Public affairs programs are ideally suited to take the lead in promoting civility efficiency as a means to promote greater civility throughout the public service professions for which they prepare students. If program faculty and administrators consider this too daunting a task to be accomplished, let them be reminded that challenges involving morality and modernity have been overcome before. It was less

than a generation ago that there was a boom in plagiarism ushered in by the Internet. Today, warnings about “academic honesty” adorn all course syllabi, the subject receives extensive treatment in institutional disciplinary codes, and the Internet has now been harnessed as a partner in the fight against plagiarism. Though the problem has not been eliminated, the academy has been able to impress upon the majority of students that plagiarism is an offense for which there is no tolerance.

A similar commitment to civility is demanded by conditions of the day. While the vigilance and warnings about classroom incivility will probably always be maintained once they are ushered in, they will hopefully be a stopgap measure as society moves to a state in which incivility is once again a rare occurrence rather than a growing trend. Because expending energy in uncivil interactions is technically easy but emotionally draining, investing the energies of our educational institutions in creating civility-based partnerships for learning remains a worthy cause and one for which public affairs programs have a clear stake.

Conclusion

The “perfect storm” of classroom incivility may not yet be upon us in public affairs education, but it is brewing in a most ominous fashion. “Higher-education institutions are simply microcosms of the world around them – a world that often includes violence” (Silverman, 2008: A51). The combined effects of a steady migration of the entitlement society to graduate programs, a weakened professoriate in which contingency faculty are unable to assert themselves when problems develop in their classes, administrators who learned their trade when the more disciplined generations of yesteryear dominated the higher education system, and a system at large that has not yet

expressed a wholehearted desire to tackle this issue head all contribute to the problem. A necessary first step is for institutions and programs to adopt and implement comprehensive policies and practices regarding incivilities that recognize even minor incivilities as deserving of response. The conventional policy approach is a necessary but insufficient approach. Only with a concerted effort at promoting civility efficiency, can public affairs programs improve the classroom learning environment for students and faculty alike, and better prepare the public service professionals of the future.

Table 1**Meeting the Challenge of Student Incivilities:
General Recommendations for Institutions**

1. Clearly state and consistently enforce policies regarding incivilities;
2. Deliver comprehensive education and training to all students, faculty, staff and administrators regarding the policies;
3. Ensure that all instructors swiftly respond to minor incivilities;
4. Provide a support network for faculty who experience student incivilities; and
5. Impose serious consequences for students who do not improve their conduct in response to early interventions.

Table 2**Meeting the Challenge of Student Incivilities:
Supplemental Recommendations for Public Affairs Programs**

1. Engage in more thorough screening in the admissions process;
2. Clearly articulate competencies regarding civility;
3. Have students sign civility contracts;
4. Carefully monitor professional conduct especially during the student's first semester;
5. Require students to earn inclusion; and
6. Actively promoting civility efficiency

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