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Stanley H. Barrett

Nadia Rubaii

Binghamton University--SUNY, nadia.rubaii@binghamton.edu

John Pelowski

Binghamton University--SUNY

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Preparing for and Responding to Student Incivilities: Starting the Dialogue in Public Affairs Education

Stan Barrett
State University of New York, Cortland

Nadia Rubaii-Barrett
Binghamton University, State University of New York

John Pelowski
Binghamton University, State University of New York

ABSTRACT

Almost all faculty, even those in graduate public affairs programs, will at some time encounter incivility in the classroom. How we respond sends an important message about how we as individuals, programs, and a profession value civility. Master's of Public Administration and Master's of Public Policy programs have a particular responsibility to graduate individuals who not only have substantive expertise but also meet the highest standards of civility. In this essay, we present a series of recommendations for how individuals, programs, and institutions might respond to incivility. While not all of these recommendations will be appropriate for all programs, and some may be perceived as more troubling than the problem they are intended to address, we hope that they will to serve as the starting point in stimulating discussion of this issue within programs and across the profession.

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 including

the professional public sector workplace (Chenier, 1998; Johnson & Indvik, 2001; Vickers, 2006). Within graduate programs it is unclear whether incivility is a problem that is trickling up from the K-16 ranks to be encountered with increasing regularity, or whether it will continue to be limited to isolated incidents. In either case, it seems relatively certain that, with enough time in the classroom, all faculty — even those teaching in professional Master's of Public Administration (MPA) and Master's of Public Policy (MPP) programs — are likely to encounter incivility. In this essay we suggest that it is time for public affairs programs to examine the extent to which they are prepared for incivilities and to consider and discuss appropriate ways to respond.

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). In professional graduate degree programs, faculty have the added responsibility of inculcating students with professional values, and ensuring that they are prepared for positions of responsibility in their selected fields (Curry & Wergin, 1993). While 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, not only to substantive expertise and knowledge, but also to standards of conduct. Leadership of public service organizations necessarily entails the process of engaging in civil discourse that addresses complex and often controversial policy issues, and places collective interests above individual interests for the good of the organization and community.

In this essay we make the case for a proactive response to incivility on the part of MPA and MPP programs. 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 do 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 suggest it as a long-term strategy for promoting greater civility within our programs and public service professions. While not all of these recommendations will be appropriate for all programs, and some may even be perceived as antithetical to other public service values or cultural norms of a program, we are hopeful that this essay will generate dialogue about the challenge of student incivilities and foster more deliberation about what individual faculty and any given public affairs program might consider as appropriate actions. Before presenting our recommendations, a brief review of the concept of student incivilities is in order.

Examples of Student Incivilities

Student incivilities can be grouped in four categories, according to the level of severity: (a) simple annoyances, (b) intimidation, (c) “classroom terrorism,” and (d) threats of violence (Feldmann, 2001).¹ Simple annoyances are seemingly harmless activities such as chatting with other students during class, repeatedly arriving late, or being demonstrably unprepared for or uninterested in discussion. Intimidation may involve placing pressure on the instructor by threatening to take unresolved complaints to a department chair, dean or other administrator. “Classroom terrorism” (in Feldmann’s taxonomy) occurs when a student is overtly intolerant of the opinions of classmates or the instructor, uses foul or other inappropriate language to express dissatisfaction with the grade on an assignment, or insists upon deadline extensions when they are not offered or negotiated. The most serious category of incivility is when one student threatens a classmate, the instructor, the program, or the institution with some form of harm or violence (Feldmann, 2001).

Technology creates new avenues for expressing incivility (Nworie & Haughton, 2008; Kolanko, Clark, Heinrich, Olive, Serembus, & Sifford, 2006). Students accustomed to using e-mail, instant messaging, and social network sites for casual communication with friends may bring a level of informality to their electronic communications with faculty along with an expectation of immediate responses from faculty at any hour of the day, on any day of the week. Text-messaging, checking e-mail, watching DVDs, or playing computer games are modern technological annoyances that affect the classroom setting. Misuse of sites such as RateMyProfessors.com are a technological means of intimidation, and cyberbullies in general are a 21st-century form of terrorism (Dickerson, 2005).

Student incivility has been attributed to a number of factors, including psychological pathologies (Feldmann, 2001), racist and misogynistic beliefs (Alexander-Snow, 2004; Hendrix, 2007), and the lack of consequences for misconduct (Bray & Del Favero, 2004). To the extent that racism or sexism are contributing factors, women and minority faculty may be disproportionately targeted (Alexander-Snow, 2004). Adjunct, non-tenured faculty, and others who are perceived as vulnerable or as lacking institutional support to take substantial action against a student also are likely to be targets of incivilities (Hernández & Fister, 2001; Feldmann, 2001; Williams, 2007).

Some scholars have attributed the growing problem of student incivility to a concept broadly labeled as the “entitlement society.” As applied to education, the entitlement society refers to a cohort of students who have the attitude that, because they have paid tuition to enroll in their courses, they are automatically 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). To

the extent that incivilities arise from the entitlement mentality, the atmosphere of many graduate programs may exacerbate the problem. Formalities, such as the use of titles, may be foregone in an effort to promote an environment of bi-directional and collaborative learning. The invitation to interact with professors on a collaborative basis may be interpreted by those with an entitlement mindset as faculty docility, weakness and vulnerability.

We do not endeavor to assess whether incivilities are attributable to a sense of entitlement. Rather, we assert that, regardless of the underlying reason for student incivilities, the fact that such behavior “interferes with a harmonious and cooperative learning atmosphere in the classroom” (Feldmann, 2001, p. 137) is sufficient to warrant our attention.

Preventing and Responding to Incidents of Incivility

In considering how to address the challenge of classroom incivilities, we examine existing literature and also draw upon our diverse individual experiences. The three of us were motivated to write about this topic because we had each experienced incivilities, albeit in different contexts and in different ways, based on our individual circumstances. Nadia Rubaii-Barrett is a tenured public administration faculty member with experience as a program director, a director of graduate studies, and a department chair. As both a faculty member and an administrator, she has documented an increasing frequency and severity of incidents of incivility among graduate students over the past 20 years, and has been frustrated by the lack of adequate programmatic and institutional mechanisms to respond. Stan Barrett also has a combination of administrative and teaching experience, although his teaching positions have been on an adjunct basis and thus inherently are more tenuous. His experience supports what literature suggests about the vulnerability of adjunct faculty in the face of student intimidation, and in the absence of clear policies and administrative support. As a graduate student in two professional master’s degree programs, John Pelowski has observed students intimidating instructors with impunity, and also felt threatened by other students. Our collective experiences clearly inform our perceptions of this problem, as well as the ideas we propose.

We begin by identifying some general recommendations that are grounded in higher-education literature and that we consider to be necessary, but not sufficient, for public affairs programs. Following this, we provide some additional recommendations that are specific to graduate MPA and MPP programs. At this later stage we endeavor to push the reader beyond the general comfort level, as a means of encouraging dialogue and discourse.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS

A number of sources provide detailed plans for preventing, attempting to remedy, or for imposing punishments for classroom incivility (Hendrix,

2007; Hernández & Fister, 2001; Hirschy & Braxton, 2004; Kilmer, 1998). The shared characteristics of these plans are (a) clearly stated and consistently applied policies and practices, (b) education and training for all students, faculty, staff and administrators involved with the policies, (c) swift response to minor incivilities, (d) a support network for faculty who experience student incivilities, and (e) serious consequences for students who do not improve their conduct in response to early interventions. [*See Table 1*]

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 involved in the policies.
 3. Ensure that all instructors swiftly respond to minor incivilities.
 4. Provide a support network for faculty who experience student incivilities.
 5. Impose serious consequences for students who do not improve their conduct in response to early interventions.
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Step 1: Adopt Clear, Institution-Wide Policies

Institutions must have clear policies that are universally understood and consistently enforced. Specifically, the institution needs (a) policies that define categories of uncivil actions and behaviors, (b) processes that delineate appropriate actions on the part of instructors and/or administrators, and (c) programs designed to educate and support university employees and students (Hernández & Fister, 2001). An important first step in standardizing the institutional response to incivility is a faculty and staff handbook that details behavioral policies and disciplinary procedures for a wide array of student conduct, and that identifies campus resources (Hernández & Fister, 2001). The comprehensive system can be based around a university's counseling center, and must combine (a) logistical and emotional support for faculty members who have experienced classroom incivility and (b) systemic policies to deal with incivilities in a consistent and predictable manner — no matter where or under whose watch they are committed (Hernández & Fister, 2001).

Step 2: Educate and Train 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, the various categories of incivility and the different degrees of danger that they present, and the methods that can be used to de-escalate classroom situations (Hernández & Fister, 2001). This training needs to be part of faculty orientation for adjunct instructors and new tenure-track faculty, and part of a professional development process for long-term, tenured professors.

It is equally important to educate students about these policies so that they understand the expectations for civil conduct and the consequences of incivility. This information can be conveyed in student handbooks and syllabi, and discussed during student orientations and initial class sessions (Gonzalez & Lopez, 2001; Hirschy & Braxton, 2004; Kilmer, 1998). Students may not recognize their behaviors as falling under the definitions of incivility or misconduct. Fully 90 percent of Americans say that incivility is a problem, but 99 percent claim that their own behavior is civil (as cited in Kauffman & Burbach, 1998). Instructors therefore must provide students with concrete examples of proper and improper conduct. This discussion will (a) ensure that students have a better understanding of class policies and procedures, (b) reduce the likelihood of incivilities, and (c) diminish grounds for student grievances later in the semester if interventions or sanctions are necessary.

Step 3: Swiftly Respond to Minor Incivilities

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

Some instructors are in the habit of ignoring minor acts of incivility, in hopes that they will dissipate in time. This failure to address the behaviors and actions of rude and disrespectful students has the effect of condoning them (Feldmann, 2001). When taken in combination, annoying behaviors such as 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. The cumulative effect of minor incivilities takes valuable time away from the instructor that could have been spent on the needs of other students or on completing the intended lessons.

Other faculty may hesitate to address incivilities when the perpetrators are students with strong academic records. As faculty, we tend to be better equipped to assess academic performance than we are to evaluate student conduct. Yet it is arguably no more appropriate for faculty to measure academic performance

solely on intellect and knowledge, without regard for the incivilities displayed by a student, than it would be for a supervisor to base evaluations on job performance, without regard for an employee's conduct violations.

Responding to minor incivilities in the classroom is analogous to James Q. Wilson's "broken windows" theory ([Thernstrom, 1999](#)). Just as unrepaired or vacant property invites more serious crime into a neighborhood, annoyances that are not remedied also contribute to a classroom structure where more serious incivilities can become commonplace. Students who are emboldened by being allowed to act inappropriately in one classroom may be empowered to act out in other classes, thereby potentially harming the teaching and learning environment for colleagues and all other students in a program. If every professor were to take immediate action when mild misbehavior occurred, we believe it would not only help prevent the escalation to violence but also would reinforce the value of civility. Although some faculty may not find 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. Living with good policy requires each person to give up some autonomy, but this sacrifice is offset by the desirability of the resulting collective benefit.

Some minor incivilities can be used as "teaching moments" within the classroom setting. When a student expresses dissatisfaction about a policy, the instructor can facilitate a discussion among students about interpersonal behaviors and styles of communication as an example of a management problem they may encounter in the workplace. In the process of problem-solving, a discussion of group norms can emerge to guide the behavior of all students. Similarly, an instructor can use an incident as an opportunity to redirect students' behaviors to more constructive uses. For example, a student who is observed to surf the Web during class can be enlisted to search for class-related sites to be shared with the group. In these instances, all students have the opportunity to benefit from what otherwise could have been a disruptive situation. An added benefit of these "teaching moments" is that they provide the opportunity to differentiate between behaviors that, while different from the norm, may simply be cultural in how respect is demonstrated, as opposed to truly uncivil behaviors that reflect a lack of respect.

In addition to using initial incidents of incivilities as opportunities for classroom learning, a meeting between the faculty member and the involved student or students is usually sufficient ([Hendrix, 2007](#); [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#); [Tiberius & Flak, 1999](#)). The goal of such a meeting is to increase understanding and to work collaboratively on identifying solutions. In our experience, most students will recognize this type of meeting as an indication that the professor is trying to help them improve. Students who accept responsibility for their own conduct and work with the professor to develop solutions should be allowed to continue in the class without consequences if

they mend their ways. Similarly, if the meeting reveals that the incivilities were a reaction to what the student perceived as disrespect, rudeness or condescension from the instructor, the two parties can reach agreement on how to address that concern as well (Boice, 1996).

Of course, not all students will respond positively to an initial intervention meeting. Confronting a student about disruptive behavior can trigger a disproportionately hostile response. An individual student who has been asked to amend personal actions may lash out with accusations of being discriminated against unfairly or deprived of an opportunity to participate or be heard. Continuation of problem behavior or post-meeting hostility undermines the efficacy of an instructor's teaching process, and is personally demoralizing. More extreme misbehavior may covertly or overtly intimidate other students into silence, which in turn can impede their ability to learn.

Step 4: Provide a Support Network for Faculty

When an instructor's initial attempts to curtail incivilities through classroom dialogue or private meetings do not lead to improved student conduct, it is particularly important to have a support network. After experiencing an incivility, faculty often are confused about how to respond. They may question their handling of the situation, wonder how serious a threat the offending student poses, and feel anger or sadness about the disrespect shown by the student. Department chairs and deans, many of whom rise from the ranks of faculty without any advanced training on this issue, are often just as unprepared for responding to student incivilities as the individual faculty member. As such, universities must identify qualified staff and make them available to assist or take the lead as necessary at any point in the timeline.

Communication with a special liaison from the university's counseling center can help faculty regain their equilibrium, better assess the student's behavior, and help them prepare for any necessary disciplinary proceedings (Hernández & Fister, 2001). Links to trained counseling personnel are important not only because a fraction of the offending students may have psychological conditions that warrant treatment, but also because of potential psychological harm to the targeted faculty member. Counseling center employees can facilitate group meetings of instructors, including regular faculty, adjuncts, and teaching assistants, where they share their experiences about 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 types of meetings open campus channels of communication and help mitigate the sense of isolation, embarrassment, anger, sadness or guilt that professors may feel when they are the targets of incivilities. These gatherings also may help the faculty develop more advanced and effective strategies for dealing with problematic student behavior, and minimizing its impact on the learning setting as a whole.

Step 5: Impose Serious Consequences for Continued Incivilities

If students are unwilling to acknowledge their improper conduct, they may become defensive, shift blame to the professor, and escalate problem behavior. In these cases, documentation of classroom incivility becomes crucial ([Feldmann, 2001](#); [Hendrix, 2007](#); [Hernández & Fister, 2001](#)). As with a misconduct issue in an employment context, the instructor should carefully note the time, date, location, and nature of any incident, as well as any meetings with students or administrators, and agreements reached. Such documentation can become essential if a student escalates the level of incivility to a point where the removal from a class or program is warranted.

Removing students who do not conform to standards of civility is clearly a last resort, but it is essential that institutions and programs do not inadvertently convey that nothing can or will be done unless and until a student makes overt threats of violence. Removal should 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.

ADDITIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS PROGRAMS

The recommendations discussed so far generally are applicable for programs at all levels and in any discipline. Given the positions of public trust that MPA and MPP programs prepare students for, it is particularly important that they promote civility. As such, we consider the prior recommendations as a necessary but insufficient response on the part of graduate programs in public affairs. Our programs must certify not only technical and substantive expertise, but also professional norms, values and 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 is about the lack of humanity and decency in practical application. A failure to address incivilities would only exacerbate the problem.

To the extent that we encounter incivilities among students in our 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 that is

increasingly dependent on the use of diverse teams to accomplish complex tasks in the public interest, and with the need to facilitate public participation on issues that are often emotionally charged, civility on the part of public administrators is a prerequisite and not a luxury.

Public affairs faculty may find disconcerting the notion of needing to address incivilities within a professional graduate program that is 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 may well 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 the following: (a) more thorough screening in the admissions process, (b) clear articulation of competencies regarding civility, (c) requiring students to sign civility contracts, (d) requiring students to earn rights of full inclusion, and (e) commitment to the concept of civility efficiency. [*See Table 2*]

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

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1. Engage in more thorough screening during the admissions process.
 2. Clearly articulate competencies regarding civility.
 3. Have students sign civility contracts.
 4. Require students to earn inclusion.
 5. Actively promote civility efficiency.
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As stated earlier in this essay, the recommendations presented here are intended to generate discussion about options and implications, rather than to serve as a universal blueprint for how programs should respond. These ideas are largely drawn from methods used within professional work contexts. We present them here as techniques worthy of consideration, albeit largely unproven.

Step 1: Conduct Thorough Admissions Screening

If prevention of disruptive incivilities is a desired goal, one option is to

more carefully screen applicants in order to identify and deny admission to those with the propensity for incivility. Drawing upon the lessons from the field of employment selection, there are several options available to gather more information during the admissions review process. One approach might be to check social networking sites, such as Facebook, MySpace, or LinkedIn. Human resources management officials in both public and private sectors use these sites to gather background information on prospective employees. Applicants' online public profiles are examined to see whether they portray an individual who has a fondness for jokes that might create a hostile work environment, engages in risky or illegal behavior, regularly uses foul language, posts revealing pictures, or complains extensively about supervisors, coworkers, or instructors (Lane, 2008).

Alternatively, programs could use professional background checks to gather more consistent information about each applicant. Some programs in the fields of nursing, law and social work have entered into contracts with private firms for professional background checks to be conducted on applicants. This may seem like an extreme action, but arguably it may be necessary to protect programs from allegations that they contributed to harm. The concept of negligent hiring is well-established in employment settings as a factor that contributes to workplace violence and employer liabilities ([Kondrasuk, Moore & Wang, 2001](#)). A similar concept of negligent admissions could apply in education settings if programs limit their admissions decisions to academic measures and, subsequently, students or faculty are harmed by the foreseeable actions of a person who was admitted to the program.

Step 2: Define Civility as a Core Competency

A challenge for public affairs programs seeking to delineate measurable competencies is that a lack of civility does not always translate into a lack of academic ability. Some very intelligent students openly demonstrate incivilities, while other students are unwilling to invest their efforts in completing assignments, but will 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 public service professions, we also must 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 a lack of civility have the potential to discredit not only an individual program, but also the branding of an MPA/MPP degree.

Competence in civility can be assessed at the level of individual classes, as well as at the broader programmatic level. Within courses, civility should be a universal theme and a skill that is regularly evaluated. At a program level, a code of conduct can articulate expectations and consequences. Examples

abound in other professional degree programs that have adopted professional codes of conduct. Drawing from the fields of social work, nursing, counseling, and medicine — as well as from the professional codes of ethics used by the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), and other associations — public affairs programs can craft codes for their students that address conduct within and outside the classroom, and hold students to standards of honesty, integrity, and civility.

Step 3: Have Students Sign Civility Contracts

One way to convey the importance of civility to students is to require that they sign a civility contract, where they acknowledge their responsibilities to contribute to a respectful learning environment, and the consequences of failing to do so. In pursuit of the worthy goal of protecting students' individual rights, many institutions and programs have lost sight of, or only give lip service to, student responsibilities. A civility contract could help restore some balance to the relationship. To determine provisions of the contract and to monitor student compliance, programs would decide where, when, by whom, and under what circumstances misconduct data could be gathered. Would monitoring be conducted only during class sessions or activities on school property, or would it extend to actions off school property if they are linked to the program? This proposal may be inadequate for identifying those 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 — both in school and in their future professions. Civility contracts are particularly important if course grades continue to be based on academic performance, without regard for conduct. This would provide an administrative means for removing disruptive students who otherwise have acceptable academic records.

Step 4: Have Students Earn Full Admission

Most public sector positions include a period of probationary status. Hirees are accorded regular employment status only after a period of six months or a year, where the employee demonstrates the knowledge, skills, and abilities related to job tasks, and compliance with the norms of the organization. Similar notions of earned inclusion could be applied to the graduate student context. This would require rethinking the way that new students are welcomed into graduate programs. Many programs grant full admission status based purely on academic criteria. Only those who have questionable academic records are admitted conditionally or on a probationary basis. We are not advocating a lowered level of priority for academic standards, but we do suggest an additional consideration for demonstrated competence in civility.

Students will be granted regular admission status, and full privileges of informality and inclusion in departmental decision-making only after they

demonstrate their intellectual and attitudinal dedication to the program, This is not an argument for curtailing the access that new students have to faculty and peer support. It instead is a call for professors to more warily monitor the conduct and scholarship of first-semester students in particular, and to treat the first semester as a probationary period, even for those students whose academic records warrant regular admission status.

In an undergraduate context, it is widely accepted that the foundation of a civil or uncivil classroom is established within the first four days of class (Hirschy & Braxton, 2004). For graduate seminars that often 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 the entire semester. By extension, the overall civility of a cohort group in a two-year graduate program might be well-established in the first half of the students' first semester. Even in the absence of a cohort model, impressions formed during a student's first semester can have a lingering effect. 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 that occur in the initial half-semester time frame — however minor — in a firm, direct, and consistent manner that leaves no question about how serious these actions are.

Step 5: Actively Promote “Civility Efficiency”

Given our personal experiences with incivilities, along with the documented rise of classroom incivility experienced at the K-12 and undergraduate levels, we are concerned that this may well be one of the defining challenges in future graduate education. Successfully addressing this problem will require institutions and programs to develop creative new methods of promoting civility. Screening for potential problems, monitoring student conduct, and responding swiftly and decisively to even minor incivilities are important components of a systematic response. We would be remiss if we did not also offer some ideas on how to promote civility. For that purpose, we propose the concept of “civility efficiency,” and suggest that public affairs programs engage in a concerted effort to promote it. As we envision it, civility efficiency is much like energy efficiency. Like conservation of energy, we need to make civility more appealing and easier to achieve, and make incivility more costly and less desirable for students who might otherwise be tempted to engage in this behavior.

Granted, the process of promoting civility and responding effectively to incivilities requires effort; so too does conservation of energy. Like energy efficiency, which once was considered a quaint and novel idea that was pursued only by the most ardent environmentalists, the academy initially may be

skeptical of the need for a concerted effort to promote civility efficiency. To continue the parallel, when the true costs of energy become apparent in the form of higher prices for gasoline, home heating oil, and electricity, people are more willing to alter their behaviors to use less energy. And once people begin to make changes — whether they are driving less frequently, setting their thermostats a bit lower, or installing compact fluorescent light bulbs — these practices become the new norm. Similarly, we assert that the initial transition to a proactive and comprehensive approach to student incivilities will be difficult, but once enough people make a commitment to civility efficiency, it can be self-sustaining, and also generate rewards at both the individual and community levels.

From a global climate perspective, energy conservation would have been more effective much earlier if it had widespread support (backed by changes in consumer behavior). Similarly, we contend that 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 today's students, rather than waiting for more widespread evidence of incivilities.

Public affairs programs are ideally suited to take the lead in promoting civility efficiency as a means to foster greater civility throughout the public service professions. Investing the energies of our educational institutions in the process of creating civility-based partnerships for learning remains a worthy cause, and one that public affairs programs have a clear stake in.

CONCLUSION

“Higher-education institutions are simply microcosms of the world around them” (Silverman, 2008, p. A51). To the extent that the world includes incivilities, it should come as no surprise that we will encounter incivilities in the classroom as well. Given the unique responsibilities of MPA and MPP programs for preparing the next generation of public service professionals, it behooves us to begin a dialogue about conduct expectations in our programs, and how we can and should respond to incivilities within individual classrooms, within programs, and across the discipline. We hope that the ideas presented in this paper serve as a starting point for those conversations.

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Preparing for and Responding to Student Incivilities

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FOOTNOTE

- ¹ Editor's Note: The cited paper in which Feldman uses the term "classroom terrorism" was published in Fall of 2001, and therefore he chose it before Americans became sensitized to the realities of true terrorism.

Stan Barrett has a Ph.D. in Educational Administration and has previously worked in community college administration. He has taught on an adjunct basis at several colleges and universities in the areas of public administration, public policy, political science, and education. He currently teaches in the Department of Political Science at SUNY Cortland. His research focuses on learning styles and pedagogy in higher education.

Nadia Rubaii-Barrett is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Public Administration in the College of Community and Public Affairs at Binghamton University. Her research focuses on issues of diversity in public affairs teaching, human resource management, and local government service delivery. Her current focus is on the integration of immigrants in local communities.

John Pelowski graduated with a Master's of Public Administration degree in May 2009, and is completing a Master's of Science degree in Student Affairs Administration as part of a dual program at Binghamton University.