

Workshop explores fostering civility in classroom, campus, community

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<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/9532/workshop-explores-fostering-civility-in-classroom-campus-community/>

The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh campus was immersed in conversation on Thursday, Feb. 24, regarding the UW System's "Civility in Everyday Life Workshop," an event that presented various views on civility and how to incorporate civility into higher education.

The Workshop's main objective was to help UW System campuses develop and support robust and thriving academic communities of students, faculty and staff all working to advance academic freedom, free speech and a commitment to truth and learning. Kicking off and attending the Civility Workshop, hosted by UW Oshkosh, was UW System President Kevin P. Reilly.

"We are here to discuss civility—how to teach it, foster it, promote it, how to weave it into the fabric of our daily life both on our campuses and in our communities," Reilly said as he welcomed the audience. "We are here to talk about ways to make our campuses places of inclusion, welcoming to diverse people and ideas. It's an important challenge and worthy of our attention."

Chancellor Richard H. Wells added that all individuals are works in progress and need to be brutally honest with themselves to achieve authenticity.

"We do not want civility to become the next politically correct code of conduct or roadmap," Wells said. "Rather, we see the need for viewing civility norms as a compass that provides direction while giving us room to roam."

Following the opening remarks, five Civility Workshop guest speakers presented topics ranging from "What's Civil About Hate Crimes and Hate Speech?" to "An Integrated Approach to Diversity." With all presentations touching on civility, UW System administrators; UW Oshkosh faculty, staff and students; and members from the community were provided an educational setting to explore the standards of civil conduct.

"What's Civil About Hate Crimes and Hate Speech?"

Vicki Washington, associate vice president for Equity, Diversity and Inclusion for UW System, began her presentation by asking the question, "What's civil about hate crimes and hate speech?" Washington's statistics were overwhelming; including the fact that there were 7,775 reported hate crime offenses for 2009 with several more unreported.

The presentation stressed the importance of having a continuous dialogue to regulate micro aggressions, which are brief, everyday indignities that communicate hostility, stereotypes or negative slights and insults of people of diverse backgrounds.

“The goal of dialogue is not to decide which way of thinking is the right way but rather to build a common experience base that will allow us to learn from each other,” said Washington.

She also took time to answer the big question her presentation title posed.

“Nothing is civil about hate crimes and hate speech,” Washington said. “Nothing is civil about a young black man run off the sidewalk because he was walking by a small group of white men in an automobile. Nothing is civil about a young white woman punched in the face by a white guy wearing a t-shirt proclaiming legalize gay [marriage]. Nothing is civil about what we allow to happen on our campuses under our watch.”

The workshop continued throughout the day, touching on several aspects of civility. P.M. Forni, an award-winning professor at Johns Hopkins University and the keynote speaker for the Civility In Everyday Life Workshop, discussed “Civility and the academy: Principles, Practices and Perspectives,” while Kathleen Hull, director of the Byrne First-Year Seminars and co-founder of Project Civility at Rutgers—New Brunswick, gave a presentation on how Rutgers acknowledges civility.

With UW System institutions turning out highly educated citizens who touch communities around Wisconsin and beyond, Reilly stressed the importance of bringing civility to the forefront of education and teach students that in order for democracy to work, people must be able to advance their points of view strongly and persuasively, knowing that others will do the same.

“It’s been shown that exposure to a broad range of perspectives produces students—and ultimately citizens—who are more analytical, more engaged, more creative, more open to collaborative endeavors,” Reilly said. “It’s not easy. Acts of intolerance and violence occur all across our nation, in big cities and rural communities alike.

“We recognize that our society isn’t always welcoming to ideas that don’t mirror our own. Indeed, at a time when impulse tweets, grandstanding rants and popular media often seem to celebrate incivility, we have a special obligation to see that our students learn that there are more productive ways to conduct the democratic dialogue.”

Presenter Panel Question and Answer

During the Presenter Panel Question and Answer segment of the Civility Workshop, four of the speakers answered questions to help the represented campus communities as well as the local community understand the importance of efforts to build a sense of shared values and understanding relating to interpersonal communication.

A question from an audience member representing UW-Eau Claire created much discussion among the panelists when she asked how a faculty member should respond to a student who is uncivil in the classroom—specifically in regards to hate speech. With varying answers between the panelists, they all agreed that some sort of action needed to be taken.

“What I encourage facilitators to do if those comments come up in the classroom is to focus on those comments instead of redirecting the conversation,” said Robbie Routenberg, program manager of the

Program on Intergroup Relations at the University of Michigan. “I would encourage a facilitator to ask that specific participant to say more about why they would want to say that now and to give that person space. And that sounds risky, but then you can turn that dialogue to the group and ask them what the group thinks of that.”

Forni said opening up and focusing on the comment with the rest of the class could take away from a lesson.

“There is risk that the exercise could become one that is essentially destroying the class because of how the comments would be perceived,” Forni explained. “I can picture some of the students coming to me the next day saying, ‘you didn’t control the class, because you let this become a sort of a fine’ between the person who first uttered the inappropriate remark and the ones who resented it.”

The panel wrapped up with discussion among audience members, with many of them asking each other questions they were unable to ask during the panel. But as the Civility Workshop continues, attendees will have a deeper understanding of presenting civility in the classroom.

“Civility requires restraint, respect, and responsibility, and as this story shows, how we handle people—especially those with outlandish ideas—is a reflection of the quality of our interaction with other human beings,” Wells explained in his remarks about the Workshop.

“Formal leaders of academic communities, such as chancellors, must be especially careful not to suppress ‘outlandish ideas’ while insisting on the need for a safe and civil environment for the exchange of controversial and competing ideas.”

Read more:

- [Civility in Everyday Life: A Compass for Higher Education](#)
- [Forni: Why be civil? ‘Being good is good for you’](#)
- [UWO civility workshop sparks community initiative](#)
- [UWO to host ‘Civility in Everyday Life’ workshop](#)
- [Snapshots: Civility in Everyday Life Workshop](#)