

## **The Challenge of Civility, by President Drew Bogner**

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The Challenge of Civility  
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Thousands of Long Islanders have returned to school in recent weeks, so it's only natural to wonder what they might be learning. That it's ok to threaten to stuff a tennis ball down an official's throat if you don't agree with the call? That it's permissible to take a microphone away from someone accepting an award? That it's fine to call the president of the United States a liar in the middle of an address to Congress? For those who might have missed these exciting moments in American history, you can easily find them on YouTube, along with the latest wrestling highlights.

I often find myself at a dinner or luncheon where the mainstay of conversation is unbridled criticism of a person or an idea. Rarely, if ever, is there any thought given to the possibility that some of what that person has done is good, or that the idea, while not perfect, has some merit. How easy it is to bash and tear down, rather than to find common ground. Perhaps the latter takes more energy, but it makes me wonder if we spend enough time teaching our students to do an even-handed analysis of the many key issues that affect our lives.

Thomas Jefferson believed that democracy works best when an educated citizenry takes the time to engage in thoughtful debate and dialogue. More and more, though, intolerance of diverse positions seems to be the norm, what Bob Schieffer of CBS has called "mindless meanness." And not just intolerance, but visible hostility that seems poised to become actual violence. How did we reach this point? What has happened to education's historic ability to produce critical thinkers who are willing to look at both sides of an issue?

Many people find it easier to accept as true a position espoused by the group with which they identify, rather than taking the time to carefully analyze each and every issue. The result is they become reluctant to challenge their group by questioning ideas, positions, or concepts. So they hold the position of conservative and repeat the soundbite from Fox News, or hold the position of liberal and repeat the soundbite from MSNBC.

Many who are tired and frustrated with the polarization and angry rudeness choose to ignore it all, refusing to engage in any political conversations or state any opinions. This position, too, is dangerous and is part of the problem.

Bad things happen because human beings fail to be a part of the dialogue. We have tens of millions of Americans without health insurance and yet now, as an important national debate is occurring, most Americans are ignoring the conversation, not taking the time to understand the issue. Many are leaving the conversation to a radical few or are simply accepting the soundbite of the day.

Have we taught our students to analyze? To look behind the pundits and the polls? To think? To stand up and engage? To be civil? To build and transform rather than tear down and leave in ruins people's ideas and character? It is easy to criticize but much harder to be thoughtfully critical.

President Obama said that one of the challenges of his administration is "how to make civility interesting." For educators, that's not our challenge, it's our responsibility.

We must, if we are true to our mission, educate individuals who will be critical readers, critical listeners and critical thinkers, citizens who will make a difference and who will work tirelessly to transform our communities. We want to teach our students to put forth new ideas and challenge old ones, but do so in a way that shows respect for everyone in the process.

It is the task entrusted to each of us, whether we are the teacher in the classroom, the coach on the field, or the secretary at the desk. We are all called to model this commitment to be thoughtful, engaged and, yes, civil members of our community.

Or we can all take up wrestling.

[Click here](#) to read Dr. Bogner's remarks from Opening Day