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Red America, Blue America: A Country (Campus) Very Much Divided

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Red America, Blue America: A Country (Campus) Very Much Divided

Robert W. Hill, EdD

Disclosing that I am a college professor conjures up its own set of stereotypes. While it is true that there has been an upward trend of liberal college professors on our nation's campuses, especially in the social sciences, it is important not to paint all with the same brush. Just as there are different types of conservatives (e.g., fiscal, social, etc.) the same could be said for liberals. Pigeonholing anyone without truly getting to know him or her, based merely upon profession, outward appearance, or car choice, is not constructive to our civil discourse. The same also applies to passing judgment based upon someone's choice of candidate in the last presidential election.

Elections do have consequences, but there is something unique about our American tradition of a peaceful transition of power that we should cherish. The recent presidential election revealed just how polarized our nation truly is, and that deep divisiveness does not appear to have waned since November, let alone since Inauguration Day. We need to realize that not all conservatives live in the Rust Belt and not all liberals are on the two coasts. There are progressive conservatives just as there are progressive liberals, and while the two major political parties are seemingly moving to the extremes, most hard-working Americans (including our very own students and colleagues) are somewhere in the middle.

The pundits, depending on the brand of cable news one watches, tend to portray two opposing factions when it comes to the electorate, but most Americans probably have more in common than this you might think. So, how does one put aside stereotypes and formulate a baseline to get to

know our neighbors and understand our colleagues without derision? If we do not first get to know each other and foster a modicum of community and mutual respect, how can we ever be productive and move forward as a nation?

For more than a decade, millions of people have turned to social networking and media sites such as Twitter and Facebook to learn the latest news. There are, of course, potential problems caused by filtering our only access to information, news, or (do I dare say?) facts. This past election caused deep rifts in some families, and severed friendships have resulted from the compulsive sharing of political opinions and posts, especially with the frequency of taunting behavior online. There are dangers to generalizing or thinking, for example, that all Republicans believe one thing or that all Democrats think the opposite. The incessant cacophony online has contributed to our quick judgment of others and our subsequent dismissal of them without even allowing for the benefit of the doubt. When a student condemns another student for a different viewpoint in a classroom discussion or refuses to work with a student on a collaborative group project because of political differences, the educational process is damaged.

The English writer Evelyn Beatrice Hall, who wrote under the pseudonym S. G. Tallentyre, penned the immortal phrase, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it." This remains a great, enduring quote in defense of free speech that we as college administrators need to implement on our campuses.

Our college classrooms and campuses are microcosms of society. As educators, we must restore civility in them and promote tolerance and

free speech for both liberals and conservatives. If we cannot have serious, thoughtful, intellectual discussions about controversial subjects and expose students to diverse points of view, we are doing them a disservice. What happened in early March in Vermont at Middlebury College (or UC Berkeley in early February), where protesters so detested a speaker that they tried to prevent their classmates from hearing him speak, is a prime example.

Employers, of course, want graduates with highly specialized knowledge, technical skills, and training. They also want to hire graduates who have broad knowledge and who can communicate clearly, think critically, and solve problems. Perhaps most importantly, they want graduates to get along with others in an increasingly diverse, multicultural work environment. Traditionally, colleges and universities do not abandon their significant responsibility to prepare their students academically. Yet, in a democracy, whether they are public or private institutions, colleges should also focus on promoting good citizenship.

Much has been written about the fragility of free speech on college campuses as "trigger warnings," "microaggressions," and "safe zones" have become common higher education administrator concerns. Many big-name celebrity comedians now refuse to perform on college campuses due the prevailing PC culture, and college presidents now dread picking commencement speakers for fear of a possible kerfuffle resulting from a perceived polemic. Back in the fall of 2015 while speaking at an educational town hall meeting at a high school in Des Moines, Iowa, President Barack Obama spoke out about political correctness: "I've heard of some college campuses where they don't want to have

a guest speaker who is too conservative, or they don't want to read a book if it had language that is offensive. . . . I don't agree with that either—that you when you become students at colleges, you have to be coddled and protected from different points of view.”

I know I may unfairly be typecast as another liberal NPR-listening coastal elite, but can we all just agree to try to not be so judgmental and dismissive of others? Can we all just tamp down our rhetoric and the impulse to immediately debate or convert people we do not know by hectoring them into submission? Can we all agree to lower our voices and practice actually listening to others (not just waiting for our turn to speak) and being more tolerant? Can we agree to decide wisely whether to simply forward or share that offensive tweet, snarky post, or email? Finally, can we all just get along and practice the golden rule that we were once taught?

Award-winning Hollywood screenwriter/producer Aaron Sorkin wrote the opening speech to *The Newsroom* series delivered by HBO's fictional news anchor, Will McAvoy. That 2012 speech entitled “What makes America the greatest country in the world?” resonated with the fictional viewers as well as real Americans, as it then went viral and was seen by millions on YouTube. It is still relevant today, almost five years later:

“We sure used to be. We stood up for what was right! We fought for moral reasons, we passed and struck down laws for moral reasons. We waged wars on poverty, not poor people. We sacrificed, we cared about our neighbors, we put our money where our mouths were, and we never beat our chest. We built great big things, made ungodly technological advances, explored the universe, cured diseases, and cultivated the world's greatest artists and the world's greatest

economy. We reached for the stars, and we acted like men. We aspired to intelligence; we didn't belittle it; it didn't make us feel inferior. We didn't identify ourselves by who we voted for in the last election, and we didn't scare so easy.”

I do hope we, as Americans (including our elected officials), can be civil to one another, stop stereotyping, and put country ahead of party or ideology. I also hope that we can recapture that spirit about which Sorkin wrote so nostalgically. Our students are now watching all this political division play out, and they are looking to us. Let's elevate the conversation and be good role models.

Robert W. Hill, EdD, is associate professor of higher education leadership at Nova Southeastern University. ▼

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The Practicality of a Liberal Arts Education

Thomas R. McDaniel, PhD

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory,” said John Dewey, one of America’s most important philosophers. And I say there is nothing so practical as a sound liberal arts education. Academic leaders are sometimes challenged to defend the value of a liberal arts education in a world that seems more interested in promoting preparation for careers and professions. STEM subjects are important—but not to the exclusion of a broader liberal arts education.

The college curriculum today has expanded far beyond the traditional seven liberal arts, in part to answer every parent’s question: “So what can you *do* with your college degree?” Some parents and students focus too soon and too narrowly on specific job training and specialized occupational skills. Such a view can be myopic and, over time, quite impractical. In fact, a 2014 report by the Association of American Colleges and Universities says at peak ages (55–60 years), those workers who majored in the humanities or social sciences earn annually about \$2,000 more than those who majored in professional career-oriented subjects. Want to do well on the LSAT and in law school? Major in philosophy, history, or English.

What is a liberal arts education? Traditionally, this is a curriculum rich in the arts, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. Robert Hersh, president of Hobart and William Smith Colleges, did a survey in 1996 that indicated that 44 percent of high school students were

unfamiliar with the term, and both students and parents overwhelmingly believed the reason for going to college was to prepare for a prosperous career. Almost none saw liberal arts as the best preparation for such a career. If

Meaning of a Liberal Education,” said: “One becomes an educated person by virtue of patient study, quiet meditation, intellectual courage, and a life devoted to the discovery and service of truth.” In our current era

“A liberal arts education is both the most personal and practical preparation for life and work we can offer today’s college student.”

anything, this attitude is more prevalent over twenty years later. But if they want to be prosperous, students should take a closer look at the practical value of a liberal arts education.

The liberal arts are more than bodies of subject matter, such as history, philosophy, literature, mathematics, science, and psychology. They are more than vast quantities of information or technical skills. At their best in the college classroom, they constitute the living legacy of the great thinkers and doers in the world’s civilizations. In the classrooms of dynamic professors, the liberal arts connect learning to life. Mere note-taking will not do; there must be debate, discussion, and dialogue among students and faculty. Students must learn to defend and communicate their thoughts and beliefs in well-argued oral and written discourse. Every career is enriched by such an education—and smart business recruiters know it.

At the heart of the liberal arts is a view of how one learns. Everett Dean Martin, in a 1926 essay entitled “The

Meaning of a Liberal Education,” said: “One becomes an educated person by virtue of patient study, quiet meditation, intellectual courage, and a life devoted to the discovery and service of truth.” In our current era

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