

Provost Report to the Faculty

November 2013

Confronting Hatred and Promoting Civility through Community Building

Over the last few weeks racist writings have appeared on campus. Meanwhile in nearby Pine Bush, anti-Semitic graffiti and bullying have appeared in schools. We are all shocked and appalled when we hear of these incidents. They serve as painful reminders that our society is still plagued by legacies of ignorance, hatred and indifference. As members of an academic community we have a particular obligation to confront this challenge by using the power of education to reaffirm our common humanity in the face of those who would sow hatred and divide us.

Our faculty, staff and students represent diverse experiences, thoughts and expectations and we must respect those differences. At the same time, we must be conscious of the biases we all bring to the table – biases that are products of our backgrounds. Acknowledging and combating them is difficult work. It is even more difficult to have conversations about them. It is nonetheless essential that we have those uncomfortable conversations about our own biases and those of the broader society.

The classroom should be one of the safest and most productive outlets for these difficult discussions. These are conversations that must be ongoing. Some of our faculty, through their disciplines, courses and scholarship, regularly frame and shape these discussions. However, there are many faculty members and students who care deeply about these issues and are impacted by such incidents but do not know how to engage in these conversations. I have invited a group of faculty who regularly address these issues to meet with me, our Title IX Officer Tanhena Pacheco Dunn, and other administrators to share ideas on how to accomplish our goals. How do we engage in these discussions in the classroom? What opportunities can we identify that support these discussions across a range of disciplines? How do we support a colleague who wants to help in this mission but feels unprepared to do so?

Let me reiterate: these have to be ongoing efforts, not merely responses to individual incidents. Hateful attacks, whether against an individual or a group, are affronts to everyone on our campus. We must build a stronger campus community together – students, faculty, staff and administrators -- by working to increase respect for diversity, social justice and thoughtful reflection through civil discourse and multi-disciplinary programming. Over the coming weeks, I will work with interested faculty

to develop ongoing programming structures that can advance these goals through a variety of on-campus activities. To do this, though, we need to:

1. **Generate interest and engagement across a wide spectrum of campus constituencies;**
2. **Engage the campus as a whole in a multidisciplinary discussion of complex issues;**
3. **Focus on a greater understanding and appreciation of diversity and social justice;**
4. **Do this in a way that advances the educational mission of the College.**

No individual, group or department on campus can take on this task alone, but I am confident that if we work together as a campus community we can confront these challenges in a way that will unite us in common purpose. Last weekend's symposium, "Let's Talk About Race, Gender and Identity," represents our campus-wide commitment to move intentionally in that direction. The conversations that came out of that event offer us a rich beginning and a foundation on which we can build.

Respect is key to any meaningful and productive interaction; it underlies all civil discourse and behavior. Everyone, no matter their background or position on our campus – faculty or staff, student or administrator, deserves to be treated with dignity and respect. We need to be constantly aware of how our behaviors affect others. The growing literature in the area of civility outlines many possible strategies for fostering civility in universities. These strike me as especially important:

1. **Separate problems from people:** Faced with a problem, many focus on placing blame on an individual or group. The search for blame is likely to strain relationships, lower trust and morale, and increase the odds of conflict. A more productive approach would be to engage in a cognitive reframing of the issue away from The Problem and towards The Solution. Such a reframing focuses on a shared collegial effort to solve a common problem.
2. **Keep an open mind:** We all come to issues with the biases of our past experiences and we must remain aware of the unique context of each person's background and identity. This is especially true in the diverse and internationalized environment in which we live and work. Civility requires that we make an effort to understand another person's point of view, even if we disagree with it – and to speak and behave respectfully regardless of our agreement or disagreement.
3. **Make decisions transparently and communicate them clearly:** Too often civility breaks down when there are sharp disagreements over decision making. Poor communications or ad-hoc decisions can come across as a lack of respect for the professional role of staff, faculty or administrators. Civility requires that we

communicate the importance of everyone's role and opinion in the decision-making process. Having a clear and inclusive decision-making process in which all parties understand how decisions were reached can promote a sense of belonging to the wider community.

In contemplating the 150th anniversary of the Gettysburg Address recently, I came across a blog post titled "Lincoln's Lessons on Civility and Community" (<http://communicate4life.blogspot.com/2011/01/lincolns-lessons-on-civility-and.html>) in which the writer presents Abraham Lincoln as "a model of civility and communication competence":

He listened to opposing viewpoints, chose his words carefully, and treated others – even those who demonized him – with respect.... Lincoln knew that to influence public opinion for the common good, he needed to understand how different people thought.... His respectful treatment of even his enemies demonstrated his communication ethics. When others failed to demonstrate mutual respect, Lincoln did not get even; rather, he remained focused on the greater good.

It occurs to me that this is the challenge to which we all must rise: to focus on the greater good by actively listening to one another, engaging in respectful discourse, treating each other civilly and with dignity, and agreeing to work together for the betterment of our campus community and beyond.

Provost Awards

I think many of you would agree that we need to highlight the accomplishments of our faculty more effectively. We have world-class faculty engaged in high-quality teaching, scholarship and academic leadership. The Provost Awards for Faculty Excellence represent a small step in this direction. These awards recognize excellence in the areas of teaching (full-time and part-time), scholarly/creative activity, and professional service, as well as outstanding accomplishments by a pre-tenure faculty member. Any New Paltz faculty, staff or alumnus may nominate a candidate by submitting a letter to the Provost Awards Committee, made up of the 2012-2013 awardees and chaired this year by Aaron Isabelle. Nomination letters should be sent electronically to Margaret Kemp (kempm@newpaltz.edu) by January 25, 2014. Please consider nominating someone.

Business & Liberal Arts

On Tuesday, November 19th, a faculty forum entitled "Business and the Liberal Arts: Rethinking a Business Education" took place in the Honors Center. The impetus for this well-attended session came from the book *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education*:

Liberal Learning for the Profession, which President Christian has spoken of and recommended. Businesses across the country have repeatedly emphasized the importance of the skills that a liberal education provides—from oral and written communications to critical thinking. The challenge, as the book points out, is to find a balance between the applied learning central to the professional education provided by business schools and the modes of inquiry that characterize the liberal arts. A fascinating presentation by Professor Vicki Tromanhauser of the Department of English modeled a balanced approach, demonstrating how liberal inquiry using Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* can be the basis for meaningful discussions about the role of ethics in a market economy. It was tremendously rewarding to see this very engaging dialogue across fields in a process that I am sure will be enriching for both students and faculty.

SEIs

I was recently asked about my position on the use of SEIs. In my December 2012 report to the faculty I made it clear that, “The primary purpose of a Student Evaluation of Instruction is to provide individual instructors and the College information that can help assess teaching skills, identify problems and plan for improvements.” I continue to believe that, used within the broader context of a faculty member’s overall teaching portfolio, SEIs can provide important information. As I also noted in that report,

I believe both numerical and open comments should be available for review by the faculty member and decision-makers involved in the reappointment, tenure and promotion processes, and I hope to work with faculty governance on these guidelines and their timing. Comments can provide valuable context for interpreting SEI numbers and if used as part of a formative approach to assessing teaching, be helpful to the continuous improvement of teaching on our campus. Information on faculty SEIs must be considered confidential and should not be shared beyond those who are authorized to review them. However, faculty should be aware that under both Federal and New York State law, individual SEIs are subject to FOIA and state public records law.

I continue to believe that this is the proper approach and will work with faculty governance on guidelines for using SEI information in a way that serves the best interests of both the faculty and the institution.

Feel free to share your thoughts with me on these or other issues.

Sincerely,

Philip Mauceri
Provost & Vice President for Academic Affairs