# Halting Academic Incivility (That's the Nice Word for It)

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Commentary



Katherine Streeter for The Chronicle

By Patrick M. Scanlon March 13, 2016

A report published last year in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* confirms what many might say is obvious: "Incivility, … defined as insensitive behavior that displays a lack of regard for others, is rampant and on the rise." This will not be news for academics. Consider the regular calls for an end to faculty incivility — the rudeness, abusive language, bullying, and general meanness that seem to characterize many of our interactions.

We aren't the only profession with jerks, certainly. But the academy does seem to offer a refuge for the obnoxious. Tenure, seniority, academic freedom, and a penchant for large, unruly meetings and lengthy online arguments provide fertile ground for those who blow the hardest.

Compounding the problem is the fact that faculty members tend to stay in one place for long stretches. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, those working in education have close to the longest median tenures with their current employers. This is for the most part a good thing. We form lasting friendships, build fruitful working relationships, and find collaborators who enrich our working lives. But for some of us, seeing one another at work year after year allows plenty of time for grudges to develop and fester.

My experience of three decades in higher education tells me that incivility is a problem too big to ignore. And yet

mostly what we do is talk about it. Discussions of academic incivility and possible remedies have a hard time gaining traction. They usually are subsumed under the broader and softer term "collegiality," the professional relationships that unite us in a common purpose. Any debates on the subject have often focused on whether collegiality ought to be added as a fourth faculty-evaluation criterion, along with teaching, research, and service.

Opposing arguments tend to run along either or both of two tracks. First, because collegiality is presumably fundamental to success in teaching, research, and service, it will be reflected in those areas. Second, as the American Association of University Professors put it in a 1999 position statement, "On Collegiality as a Criterion for Faculty Evaluation," a distinct criterion of collegiality "holds the potential of chilling faculty debate and discussion." That is, if we were annually to assess faculty members' collegial behavior the way we do, say, teaching, we would suppress free expression and robust argument, and threaten academic freedom.

But what we're talking about here are not the foundations of reasoned discourse or the value of gadflies and vigorous debate. This is about those relatively few just plain nasty hotheads who effectively derail productive discussion by monopolizing the conversation and intimidating colleagues. This is about the hard cases, the people who show up at meetings spoiling for a fight, who look for opportunities to demean someone, who can't combine a subject with a predicate without blowing something up.

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Now comes compelling evidence that incivility does real harm. Christine Porath, an associate professor at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business and a co-author of the *Journal of Applied Psychology* article, has studied the consequences of rude, bullying behavior in the workplace and published widely on the topic in the academic and popular press. She reports that incivility causes unhealthy stress not only for its targets but also for those who witness it. It derails productive work, turns away potential collaborators who would just as soon avoid the nastiness, and in general crushes souls.

In an opinion essay published in *The New York Times,* "No Time to Be Nice at Work," Porath writes that in a number of participant-observation studies, she and her colleagues have shown that "people working in an environment characterized by incivility miss information that is right in front of them." They contribute less and lose focus and conviction. In addition, they are "less likely to patronize a business that has an employee who is perceived as rude — whether the rudeness is directed at them or at other employees." That is, obnoxious behavior in our workplace keeps us from working well together and discourages others from working with us. In contemporary academic terms, it's a barrier to interdisciplinarity.

I suggest we begin by uncoupling discussions of incivility from annual reviews. This would eliminate the obvious difficulty in codifying measures for collegiality as we do with teaching (student and peer evaluations, course materials), scholarship (publications, presentations), and service (committee work, advising). Certainly there are other, less bureaucratic and more communitarian ways to oppose and curb uncivil behavior.

A good first step is simply bringing the offending behavior out into the open without (necessarily) singling out guilty parties. In my own department, a tenure-track professor complained during a meeting that a history of rudeness by some colleagues toward those outside our unit was interfering with her ability to collaborate because those in other departments were chary of working with us. It was a crystallizing moment. Here was a junior member of the department pointing out something we veterans had become inured to. We saw from a fresh perspective the consequences of disrespectful behavior to others' work and careers.

Our colleague's complaint was a seemingly spontaneous outburst of frustration that had built up over a couple years as she adjusted to her work environment. But making incivility a point of discussion in a meeting can be planned by leadership as well. This past year at my university, the new chair of a department with several notably combative senior members stopped a particularly confrontational meeting to change the agenda: They needed to discuss collegiality. That got people's attention. Also, as the chair learned later, it gave voice to what others in the room were

thinking but were afraid to bring up because of their junior status.

Faculty members can establish written ground rules for conduct in meetings and remind attendees of them beforehand. This approach calls for an effective moderator who can, when necessary, gently but firmly call a halt to nastiness.

Or not so gently. Chairs should take the initiative to cut people off when they are being disrespectful or boorish. When that behavior has been chronic, calling the offender out in public can bring the will of the community to bear. Sometimes bad behavior has gone on for so long without comment that it's tolerated as the norm. Porath's research, however, shows that allowing incivility to continue this way brings real harm, not only to those on the receiving end but also to those who witness it.

Finally, the fact that collegiality is not a criterion for evaluation should not stop chairs from commenting on egregious or chronic incivility in an annual review. If someone is continually rude, with bullying behavior that affects others in the department, the chair has a duty to try to stop it.

Too often in my career I've heard someone say something like, "He's such a brilliant scholar. Too bad he's such a horrible human being." We ought to have a better response than that. We're not going to rid the world of jerks, but we shouldn't wink at obnoxious behavior among our colleagues in the name of academic freedom.

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