

Why Faculty Experiences With Incivility Matter

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The postelection climate has heightened concerns about managing incivility in instructional settings and society as a whole. In October, I wrote an [essay](#) for *Inside Higher Ed* that explored how understanding what constitutes classroom incivility can help faculty members minimize its dangers while maximizing the teaching and learning opportunities it presents. In this article, I will describe how, in order to deal with the challenges that incivility poses, faculty members must move beyond seeking solutions to every case of incivility they might encounter -- an impossible task. Instead, we must consider the contexts and larger forces driving civility issues in higher education. Such a macro-level approach can help faculty members understand incivility better and thereby manage it more effectively.

The distinct experiences of faculty members are beneficial to these efforts but often overlooked in discussions about classroom incivility and faculty responsibility. While we as faculty members need to be aware of the incivility and attacks to identity that our students encounter, we must also understand our own experiences and their implications for our professional responsibilities.

Faculty members' experiences with incivility are important because:

Reflecting upon these experiences can enhance our ability to empathize with different perspectives. Our previous experiences with incivility, particularly when we were students, can productively inform how we interpret and respond to the uncivil behavior of our current students. Understanding the intentional and unintentional acts of incivility we ourselves have enacted can provide insights into the perpetrators we encounter today. We can also assume the perspectives of victims and bystanders when reflecting upon the uncivil behaviors enacted by students, faculty colleagues, administrators and others.

We should also be mindful of the diverse identities represented in our experiences with incivility. It is important that our consideration of those identities extend beyond race and ethnicity, gender identification, and sexuality to include the effects of ability/disability, religious beliefs, political views, age, socioeconomic status and even physical appearance. And the diverse identities not represented in our experiences reflect perspectives of incivility with which we lack familiarity and will need to gain knowledge.

The professional expectations of faculty members when it comes to managing classroom incivility are the same, but our experiences of incivility vary. Classroom management skills do not account for all of this variance. Our backgrounds and experiences can affect if and how we encounter incivility related to classroom behavior, grading procedures/evaluation and the course content. A variety of factors including our professional status (e.g., tenured/tenure track/nontenured, first-generation academic), areas of expertise (e.g., social sciences, humanities, STEM disciplines) and diverse identities (e.g., race and ethnicity, ability/disability, age) can make us susceptible to incivility of different forms and degrees of severity.

Consequently, some faculty members' experiences with incivility can be infrequent, less severe and offensive, and unrelated to their identities, while the experiences of other faculty members can be frequent, more severe and offensive, and connected to their identities. That can allow some faculty members to be unaffected by and even oblivious to civility issues that others are unable to avoid.

In my workshops, for instance, women and minority faculty attendees perceive that their male and white colleagues less commonly experience forms of classroom incivility that they frequently encounter. Some examples they shared include not being called by their preferred name or title, students snapping at them to get their attention, excessive questions of competence and credibility, and an overt disregard for their intellectual expertise and authority. These differences can inhibit the efforts of faculty members to understand and adequately support one another.

The disparities that exist in faculty members' experiences of incivility can operate as a form of privilege that has implications beyond the classroom. It is a privilege for faculty members to rarely encounter incivility in the classroom and campus work environment, especially that which targets one's diverse identities. Such faculty members are not preoccupied like others are with managing uncivil behaviors enacted by students and colleagues, which can become more stressful and challenging when those constituents are responsible for evaluating the faculty member. Formal and informal performance evaluation processes -- regarding [teaching effectiveness](#), mentoring of students, collegiality and so forth -- that ignore such disparities can unfairly affect retention, tenure and promotion decisions.

Classroom incivility and the responsibilities of faculty members to manage it are but a microcosm of the larger issues -- with incivility, diversity and inclusion plaguing professional life in higher education. We cannot treat classroom incivility and attacks to students' diverse identities as separate from or unrelated to the higher education culture that often encourages and protects such behaviors by faculty members and administrators. Consequently, faculty members who intentionally or unintentionally target the diverse identities of colleagues may perpetuate similar incivilities towards their students. Those faculty members may also marginalize underrepresented students by empowering other students to engage in incivility.

In contrast, faculty members whose diverse identities may make them susceptible to certain uncivil attacks from colleagues may encounter similar behaviors from their students. The experiences of those faculty members can also cause them to vigilantly address classroom incivility and empathize better with student victims of similar incivilities. Despite these potential strengths, frequently dealing with such incivility from students, faculty colleagues and administrators can have negative implications for their professional development and personal well-being.

A dangerous hypocrisy can exist when we expect faculty members to mitigate the incivility students experience while they themselves work within an organizational culture that is ill equipped, unwilling or oblivious to the need to require the same on their behalf. Such conditions inhibit the efforts of institutions to recognize the extent of incivility on the campus and create effective ways to foster civil and inclusive communities.

Faculty members are on the front lines of areas pertinent to students' educational experiences and the success of institutions of higher learning. Therefore, faculty members' experiences with incivility offer important insights into the classroom and campus work environments. Creating a space for faculty members to productively share -- and administrators to acknowledge -- these realities is vital to providing the resources and support necessary to address incivility effectively.

In my workshops, training on incivility and its diverse implications for the professoriate has been beneficial to facilitating these opportunities and increasing awareness among faculty members and administrators. Colleges should incorporate such training in professional development regarding administrative leadership, new faculty orientation, faculty mentoring and human resource services.

Such training sessions and related campus events should facilitate productive forums for discussing incivility to help foster civility and inclusion. When discussions about incivility and faculty responsibility ignore such experiences and the disparities that can exist among them, we further marginalize those from whom we most need to hear: the faculty.

In a future article, I'll describe approaches to managing classroom incivility and the tendency toward regulation.