

# Civility and Academic Freedom: Extending the Conversation

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*Recent rhetorical scholarship has focused on the definition of civility and the relationships among civility, freedom of speech, and academic freedom, with some scholars claiming that calls for civility always squelch academic freedom. Taking up the case of a student organization at a university campus as an exemplar, this article argues that in some contexts at least, we might fruitfully understand civility as a condition for academic freedom and freedom of speech rather than an obstacle to such freedom.*

**Keywords:** academic freedom, campus climate, civility, freedom of speech, student organizations

The concept of civility has received much attention lately, in political discourse, mainstream news coverage, and communication scholarship. Debates have focused on what civility means; whether, when, and how rhetors should use civility strategically; and the relationship between civility and democracy, power, and inequality. Most recently, contributions to a *First Amendment Studies* forum on academic freedom interrogate the relationship between civility and freedom of speech. For Dana Cloud, calls for civility threaten academic freedom by constraining the expression of politically radical faculty members.<sup>1</sup> As such, Cloud echoes and extends her earlier calls for incivility as an acceptable (indeed, required) tactic for scholar-activists.<sup>2</sup> We enter the conversation with an alternative approach: Rather than seeing civility as an absolute and categorical threat to academic freedom, we conceive of civility (in some contexts at least) as a *condition for* academic freedom. To make our case, we first review the considerable scholarly conversations around the definition, possibilities, and limitations of civility and the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of speech. Then, we offer a case study of a student group who emerged in response to bullying

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<sup>1</sup> Dana L. Cloud, "'Civility' as a Threat to Academic Freedom," *First Amendment Studies* 49, no. 1 (2015): 13–17, doi:10.1080/21689725.2015.1016359.

<sup>2</sup> Nina M. Lozano-Reich and Dana L. Cloud, "The Uncivil Tongue: Invitational Rhetoric and the Problem of Inequality," *Western Journal of Communication* 73 (2009): 220–26, doi:10.1080/10570310902856105; Anna M. Young, Adria Battaglia, and Dana L. Cloud, "(UN)Disciplining the Scholar Activist: Policing the Boundaries of Political Engagement," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 96 (November 2010): 427–35.

and harassment of minoritized students on our campus. In leading the campus community to embrace civility, the student group augmented the academic freedom of staff, faculty, and students (in essence, the university as a whole) whose expression and identities experienced the threat of incivility. We conclude with a consideration of what our case study illustrates for the possibilities at the intersection of civility and freedom of expression.

### Defining and Complicating the Concept of Civility

The work of defining the central terms or concepts in any project presents serious challenges. As Leland Spencer has observed, coherence demands the definition of key terms, but “advanced study in an area necessarily complicates the assumptions and terminology otherwise regarded as basic in the field.”<sup>3</sup> Scholarly considerations of civility include a variety of definitions that, while resisting easy categorization, tend to reflect one of three themes, all of which principally treat civility as a communicative strategy: Manners and politeness, awareness and acknowledgment, and robust participation in the democratic process.

In everyday conversation, references to civility likely connote the shallowest conception of the term: One that focuses on manners or politeness. P. M. Forni’s book on the subject offers advice like avoiding idle complaints, listening, and refraining from loud cellphone conversations in public; while Forni’s front matter addresses more nuanced philosophical principles that underlie his rules for considerate conduct, his book functionally stops at a conception of civility as politeness.<sup>4</sup> Treatments of civility that frame it as merely etiquette might be instructive for venues like self-help books and newspaper columns, but serious scholarly treatments of civility typically recognize the importance of a more complex and layered understanding of civility.<sup>5</sup>

The most common definitions of civility figure civility as an awareness, acknowledgment, and respect for others. These understandings of civility center on the importance of human dignity, emphasizing the inherent worth of each person and the necessity of reflecting that worth in interactions, whether interpersonal or political.<sup>6</sup> Stuckey and O’Rourke call this civility as political friendship, where rhetors value respect (not merely tolerance) and approach communicative exchanges with charitably pure motives.<sup>7</sup> Stephen Carter’s often-cited approach to civility sounds similar. For Carter, civility is what we do “for the sake of our common journey with others, and

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<sup>3</sup> Leland G. Spencer, “Introduction: Centering Transgender Studies and Gender Identity in Communication Scholarship,” in *Transgender Communication Studies: Histories, Trends, and Trajectories*, ed. Leland G. Spencer and Jamie C. Capuzza (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), x.

<sup>4</sup> Pier Massimo Forni, *Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Mary E. Stuckey and Sean Patrick O’Rourke, “Civility, Democracy, and National Politics,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2014): 711–36; Craig Rood, “Rhetorics of Civility: Theory, Pedagogy, and Practice in Speaking and Writing Textbooks,” *Rhetoric Review* 32, no. 3 (2013): 331–48, doi:10.1080/07350198.2013.797879.

<sup>6</sup> Sonja K. Foss and Cindy L. Griffin, “Beyond Persuasion: A Proposal for an Invitational Rhetoric,” *Communication Monographs* 62 (1995): 2–18; Jennifer Emerling Bone, Cindy L. Griffin, and T. M. Linda Scholz, “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations of Rhetoric: Invitational Rhetoric and a Move toward Civility,” *Western Journal of Communication* 72 (2008): 434–62.

<sup>7</sup> Stuckey and O’Rourke, “Civility, Democracy, and National Politics”; For an in-depth discussion that explores complications and contingencies related to the idea of political friendship, see Michael Leff, “Kind Persuasion: Lincoln’s Temperance Address and the Ethos of Civic Friendship,” in *Making the Case: Advocacy and Judgment in Public Argument*, ed. Kathryn M. Olson et al. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 75–94; see also, Susan Zaeske, “Hearing the Silences in Lincoln’s Temperance Address: Whig Masculinity as an Ethic of Rhetorical Civility,” *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 13, no. 3 (2010): 389–419.

out of love and respect for the very idea that there are others. When we are civil, we are not pretending to like those we actually despise; we are not pretending to hold any attitude toward them, except that we accept and value them as every bit our equals.”<sup>8</sup> Alternatives on this same motif abound from understanding civility as a sacrifice we make for others,<sup>9</sup> to civility based on the personhood of others,<sup>10</sup> to civility as a way to disagree without demonizing others,<sup>11</sup> and to civility as a strategy that keeps the conversation going.<sup>12</sup>

Still other definitions of civility frame the concept as essential for and consubstantial with robust democratic participation. Craig Rood, for instance, insists that “civility is more than just a matter of politeness or respecting the feelings of others [because] the very survival of our democracy is at stake.”<sup>13</sup> With the same urgency as Rood, Stuckey and O’Rourke suggest that civility ought to mean creating an inclusive community that values incorporation rather than integration, which then welcomes a wide variety of rhetorical strategies including invective and humor. Civility must recognize rather than shy away from conflict; no adequate definition of civility would squelch truth telling, exclude minority voices, or silence unpopular opinions. Stuckey and O’Rourke’s vision of civility acknowledges power difference, permits rather than constrains various forms of protest, and recognizes that interlocutors do not consistently share material or political interests. Defending what many might consider uncivil communication, Stuckey and O’Rourke suggest that invective and vulgarity are the means of civility for oppressed people.<sup>14</sup>

“Civility,” then, a condensation symbol extraordinaire,<sup>15</sup> includes everything from rules for etiquette to modes of speech that purposely and performatively reject such rules. For our purposes, we embrace the second understanding of civility, one that focuses on respect and acknowledgment of others, even while we aspire toward a broader vision for civility as one that includes whatever strategies enable and enact healthy and robust democratic deliberation. Especially as we consider the relationship between civility and free speech, we hesitate to go all the way with Stuckey and O’Rourke in celebrating invective. To the degree that freedom of speech does not shield speakers from taking responsibility for what they say, we find civility instructive. One way to begin unraveling this skein of complexity is to recognize civility as contextual, as many scholars do.<sup>16</sup> Before we expand on the details of our own argument about civility, we first turn to the scholarly debate about the value of (in)civility as a rhetorical strategy.

<sup>8</sup> Stephen L. Carter, *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1998), 35.

<sup>9</sup> Shelley D. Lane and Helen McCourt, “Uncivil Communication in Everyday Life: A Response to Benson’s ‘The Rhetoric of Civility,’” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 3, no. 1/2 (2013): 17–29.

<sup>10</sup> Josina M. Makau and Debián L. Marty, *Dialogue & Deliberation* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Leland G. Spencer, “Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori and Possibilities for a Progressive Civility,” *Southern Communication Journal* 78, no. 5 (2013): 447–65, doi:10.1080/1041794X.2013.847480.

<sup>12</sup> Ronald C. Arnett and Pat Arneson, *Dialogic Civility in a Cynical Age: Community, Hope, and Interpersonal Relationships* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999); Ronald C. Arnett, “Dialogic Civility as Pragmatic Ethical Praxis: An Interpersonal Metaphor for the Public Domain,” *Communication Theory* 11, no. 3 (2001): 315–38, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2885.2001.tb00245.x.

<sup>13</sup> Rood, “Rhetorics of Civility,” 331.

<sup>14</sup> Stuckey and O’Rourke, “Civility, Democracy, and National Politics.”

<sup>15</sup> See David Zarefsky, “Presidential Rhetoric and the Power of Definition,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (2004): 607–19, doi:10.1111/j.1741-5705.2004.00214.x.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Herbst, *Rude Democracy: Civility and Incivility in American Politics* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2010); Rood, “Rhetorics of Civility”; Thomas W. Benson, “The Rhetoric of Civility: Power, Authenticity, and Democracy,” *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 22–30; Christopher R. Darr, “Civility as Rhetorical Enactment: The John Ashcroft ‘Debates’ and Burke’s Theory of Form,” *Southern Communication Journal* 70 (2005): 316–28; Christopher R. Darr, “Civility and Social Responsibility: ‘Civil Rationality’ in the Confirmation Hearings of Justices Roberts and Alito,” *Argumentation & Advocacy* 44, no. 2 (2007): 57–74.

## Civility, Strategy, and Social Change

In 2008, Jennifer Bone, Cindy Griffin, and Linda Scholz extended the theory of invitational rhetoric in their call for civility, concluding: “When we speak from a place of invitation, of civility, we cannot pretend that we journey alone, that others are unworthy or without voice, or that our view is the only ‘right’ view.”<sup>17</sup> In a rejoinder, Nina Lozano-Reich and Dana Cloud charged Bone and colleagues with wielding invitation and civility as “bludgeons of the oppressor”<sup>18</sup> that silence dissent and other, more radical forms of activism. Elsewhere, Cloud and colleagues have claimed that calls for civility ignore material antagonisms.<sup>19</sup> As Spencer has summarized Lozano-Reich and Cloud’s perspective, in this view, “only combativeness constitutes a fitting rhetorical response to conflicts because conflict always emerges from and signifies relationships of oppressive inequality [...] when one understands confrontation as *necessary*, civility is relegated to a conservative trope that buttresses the (always oppressive) status quo.”<sup>20</sup>

Responses to the debate have acknowledged the critique levied by Cloud and colleagues as valuable but also limited. Rood agrees that civility can sometimes serve the interests of those with more power but does not see such a constraint as a reason to normalize incivility instead.<sup>21</sup> Ideally, Rood contends, civility allows for emotive speech, dissent, and a multitude of voices as civility functions to “slow down and focus arguments, thereby creating time and space to explore differences and disagreements in ways that help all involved commit to understanding and being understood, respecting and being respected.”<sup>22</sup> In another example of civility’s positive and progressive potential, John Durham Peters praises the sit-in movement not for rejecting civility, but for exaggerating it: “The conviction of the other’s conscience comes from a civility taken to its extreme. With a mockery so infinitesimal that no one could ever detect it for sure, four young men in Greensboro, North Carolina, in 1960 kept asking for “a cup of coffee, please” at the whites-only lunch counter in Woolworth’s.”<sup>23</sup> In a similar vein, Spencer’s analysis of Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori concludes that civility has progressive potential. Because Jefferts Schori engages civilly with people who agree and disagree with her position about human sexuality in the church, she manages to transcend such controversies and helps all of her constituents concentrate on her vision for a church that acts as a force for social justice in the world.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Bone, Griffin, and Scholz, “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations,” 457.

<sup>18</sup> Lozano-Reich and Cloud, “Uncivil Tongue,” 225.

<sup>19</sup> Young, Battaglia, and Cloud, “(UN)Disciplining.”

<sup>20</sup> Spencer, “Presiding Bishop,” 451–452; see also, Sonja K. Foss and Karen A. Foss, “Constricted and Constructed Potentiality: An Inquiry Into Paradigms of Change,” *Western Journal of Communication* 75, no. 2 (2011): 205–38, doi:10.1080/10570314.2011.553878.

<sup>21</sup> Rood, “Rhetorics of Civility.”

<sup>22</sup> Craig Rood, “‘Moves’ toward Rhetorical Civility,” *Pedagogy: Critical Approaches to Teaching Literature Language Composition and Culture* 14, no. 3 (2014): 410, doi:10.1215/15314200-2715778.

<sup>23</sup> John Durham Peters, *Courting the Abyss: Free Speech and the Liberal Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 271–272.

<sup>24</sup> Spencer, “Presiding Bishop”; For additional examples that celebrate the utility of civility in a variety of contexts, see Bone, Griffin, and Scholz, “Beyond Traditional Conceptualizations”; Leland G. Spencer, “Engaging Undergraduates in Feminist Classrooms: An Exploration of Professors’ Practices,” *Equity & Excellence in Education* 48, no. 2 (2015): 195–211, doi:10.1080/10665684.2015.1022909; Craig Rood, “Barack Obama, ‘University of Notre Dame Commencement’ (17 May 2009),” *Voices of Democracy* 7 (2012): 60–75; Craig Rood, “‘Understanding’ Again: Listening with Kenneth Burke and Wayne Booth,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* 44, no. 5 (2014): 449–69, doi:10.1080/02773945.2014.965337.

While Rood, Spencer, and others have resisted the push for incivility, other scholars have identified positive case studies of incivility. In our view, these examples actually illustrate some limitations of the confrontationalist critique and underscore the enduring importance of civility, particularly when confrontation and civility get counterposed as opposite and categorical choices. For instance, Jeffrey Kurtz's rhetorical criticism of Congressman Joe Wilson, who (in)famously yelled, "You lie!" during a speech delivered by President Obama, celebrated that "In shouting 'You lie!,' Wilson made the case for the authentic and outrageous in political discourse, and the ways in which authenticity and outrageousness may be used to unsettle political convention."<sup>25</sup> Unfortunately, Kurtz's essay lacks a systematic reflection on the racial politics and privilege inherent in the outburst. *New York Times* columnist Maureen Dowd picked up on the subtext Kurtz missed:

The congressman, we learned, belonged to the Sons of Confederate Veterans, led a 2000 campaign to keep the Confederate flag waving above South Carolina's state Capitol and denounced as a "smear" the true claim of a black woman that she was the daughter of Strom Thurmond, the '48 segregationist candidate for president. Wilson clearly did not like being lectured and even rebuked by the brainy black president presiding over the majestic chamber.<sup>26</sup>

Only a colorblind reading of Wilson's speech can celebrate his incivility without recognizing that in this case, *incivility* becomes the bludgeon, a tool of racist oppression in a vast network of white supremacist strategies for delegitimizing Obama's presidency.<sup>27</sup>

Susan Herbst's analysis of the 2008 presidential campaign likewise celebrates Sarah Palin as a successful example of incivility. Palin refers to Obama as a terrorist, a socialist, and as un-American. Palin then offers a defense of her incivility. In Herbst's words, "Palin does not simply criticize but justifies doing so, sometimes as preface to remarks and sometimes immediately following an attack," such as when Palin says, "It's not mean-spirited...to call someone out on their record, their plans, their associations."<sup>28</sup> Herbst, too, remains breathtakingly silent on the white supremacist logics that underlie Palin's incivility.<sup>29</sup> These examples reveal the dubiousness of any dichotomy between civility/oppression and incivility/activism. Rather than seeing civility and incivility only as a categorical binary, we submit that in some circumstances, civility constitutes not only a fitting rhetorical response, but also one that paves the way for more free expression.

### **Civility, Free Speech, and Academic Freedom**

The claim that calls civility a threat to academic freedom resulted specifically from the case of Steven Salaita, whose academic job offer the University of Illinois rescinded because of messages Salaita posted on Twitter about conflicts in the Middle East. The university's provost, according to Cloud, "invoked the norm of civility as a warrant" for retracting the employment offer and thus

<sup>25</sup> Jeffrey B. Kurtz, "Civility, American Style," *Relevant Rhetoric* 3 (2012): 8.

<sup>26</sup> Maureen Dowd, "Boy, Oh, Boy," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2009, WK17.

<sup>27</sup> For more on the problem of colorblind racism, see Charles A. Gallagher, "Color-Blind Privilege: The Social and Political Functions of Erasing the Color Line in Post Race America," *Race, Gender & Class* 10, no. 4 (2003): 22–37.

<sup>28</sup> Herbst, *Rude Democracy*, 56–57.

<sup>29</sup> For more nuanced analyses of Palin's (un)civil discourse and its relationship to free speech, see Beth L. Boser and Randall A. Lake, "'Enduring' Incivility: Sarah Palin and the Tucson Tragedy," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* 17, no. 4 (2014): 619–51; Brett Lunceford, "On the Rhetoric of Second Amendment Remedies," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric* 1, no. 1 (2011): 31–39.

violated standards of academic freedom.<sup>30</sup> We acknowledge that in this case, the university attempted to hide its effort to silence Salaita behind the veneer of a call for civility; our argument suggests that civility ought and need not always function as it did in this case, but can instead contribute to a freer and more expressive climate for all persons. In this section, we consider the relationship between academic freedom and freedom of speech.

Academic freedom and freedom of speech share an indirect link. The First Amendment guarantees rights granted to the individuals in the United States to prevent the government from overstepping, but with certain limitations. Even the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania understood this to be true as far back as 1790. As it states: “The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the invaluable rights of man; and every citizen may freely speak, write and print on any subject, being responsible for the abuse of that liberty.”<sup>31</sup> These limitations are based on civility and the desire to maintain a civil society. Benson explains, “Our shared concern with civility as a communicative practice also carries with it an implicit sense that talk has consequences and that uncivil speech is not merely rude but that it has effects.”<sup>32</sup> Describing such effects, Robert O’Neil underscored the difficult but necessary tension between fostering diversity and inclusiveness on university campuses and encouraging free expression. O’Neil concluded that “reaching the right balance is the inescapable goal” for campuses.<sup>33</sup>

According to the First Amendment Center, “the courts allow school officials to regulate certain types of expression. For example, school officials may prohibit speech that substantially disrupts the school environment or that invades the rights of others.”<sup>34</sup> This is a reason to consider civility as a condition for academic freedom and not always an obstacle. The courts have recognized that academic freedom applies not only to faculty, but also to universities as a whole due to the university’s responsibility to the entire campus population. The university has a responsibility and interest in creating an environment that ensures freedom of expression for all students, faculty, and staff. In the most often cited Supreme Court case about this, *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* (1957), both the majority opinion and concurring opinions recognized the “essentiality of freedom in the community of American universities.”<sup>35</sup> In this case, the court made clear that the universities should be independent of governing bodies (Church or State),<sup>36</sup> but also provides the additional protections of the university based on academic freedom: “It is the business of a university to provide that atmosphere which is most conducive to speculation, experimentation, and creation. It is an atmosphere in which there prevail the four essential freedoms of the university - to determine for itself on academic grounds who may teach, what may be taught, how it shall be taught, and who may be admitted to study.”<sup>37</sup> We suggest that calls for civility can assist rather than always impede such a goal.

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<sup>30</sup> Cloud, “‘Civility’ as a Threat,” 15.

<sup>31</sup> David J. Bodenhamer, *Our Rights* (Oxford University Press, 2007), 65.

<sup>32</sup> Benson, “Rhetoric of Civility,” 23.

<sup>33</sup> Robert M. O’Neil, “An Inquiry into the Legal and Ethical Problems of Campus Hate Speech,” *Free Speech Yearbook* 29, no. 1 (1991): 30, doi:10.1080/08997225.1991.10556129.

<sup>34</sup> First Amendment Center, “What Rights to Freedom of Expression Do Students Have?,” May 22, 2002, <http://www.firstamendmentcenter.org/what-rights-to-freedom-of-expression-do-students-have>.

<sup>35</sup> *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* 354 US 234 (1957).

<sup>36</sup> *Sweezy v. New Hampshire* 354 US 234 (1957), 262-263; Robert Margesson, “A Special Kind of ‘Right’: The Supreme Court’s Affirmation of Academic Freedom,” *First Amendment Studies* 49, no. 2 (2015): 92, doi:10.1080/21689725.2015.1078183.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

## Case Study: Civility and Free Expression on Campus

Our argument that civility can function as a condition for freedom of expression on campus—for students and faculty—draws on the success of a student group on our small, regional campus in the Midwest. The student group, Project Civility, emerged in response to incivility on campus and hosts a number of events that simultaneously encourage civil behavior (capaciously defined), democratic participation, freedom of expression, and civic responsibility. The range of events and programs the group sponsors covers the full spectrum of civility as defined by the rhetorical scholars cited earlier.

Students on our campus formed Project Civility in 2011 in response to homophobic bullying and other rude comments directed at students on campus earlier in the academic year. The initiative began when the student government organization discussed the incident of incivility on campus. Officers initially wanted to pursue a punitive response for the offending students based on the university's code of conduct, but after discussion the group decided instead to launch Project Civility in an effort to foster a greater sense of civility, broadly defined, on campus. While the group began with activities that drew on a narrow notion of civility as politeness, it eventually progressed to events and programs that invoked richer resources available under the large conceptual tent of civility.

### *Civility as Politeness: Wooden Nickels and Social Media*

One of Project Civility's first projects involved the printing of wooden nickels with the group's logo on them. Members of the organization carry a supply of wooden nickels and distribute them when they espy an act of civility. For example, members of the group have awarded wooden nickels to people who hold doors open for others, to members of the campus community who go out of their way to help strangers, and to a student who picked up litter in a campus parking lot. One member of Project Civility awarded a nickel to a staff member who helped to organize a naturalization ceremony on campus, especially because the staff member worked extra hours and went beyond the normal call of duty to make the event a success, but also because the group recognized the value of the event itself; the naturalization ceremony, held on Constitution Day, celebrates and extends *citizenship*.

In order to share the message of civility more broadly, group members who award civility nickels typically pose for a photograph with the awardee then upload it to the group's social media account. In addition to raising awareness about the existence of the campus group, the social media account reminds staff, students, and faculty as well as community members and followers from beyond the university about the importance of civility in social life. The group understands the social media page as a way to inspire future acts of civility among its audiences. In a world where many bemoan a lack of civility,<sup>38</sup> the wooden nickels and their (mediated) dissemination stand as a testimony to civility's power and perseverance. Although the wooden nickels represent the simplest form of civility, the group remains committed to recognizing and thanking people for their civil behaviors.

We view the relationship between civility nickels and freedom of expression as indirect but valuable. In a literal and denotative sense, the distribution of civility nickels obviously does nothing to *constrain* expression, but it does encourage certain kinds of expression. Particularly because

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<sup>38</sup> Jack Leslie et al., "Civility in America, 2014" (Weber Shandwick and Powel Tate, 2014), <http://www.weber-shandwick.com/uploads/news/files/civility-in-america-2014.pdf>.

Project Civility created wooden nickels as a response to behaviors and the impression of a campus climate that limited expression, especially queer and trans students' ability to express their identities, we contend that the wooden nickels and the overall project of increasing politeness on campus enables more (and more diverse) expression. Even while we celebrate this work, we agree with Stuckey and O'Rourke's assessment about the status of politeness as one of the shallowest definitions of civility.<sup>39</sup> Fortunately, Project Civility has expanded beyond wooden nickels to engage the campus more deeply in thinking about civility and living civilly.

*Civility as Political Friendship & Democratic Participation: Guest Speakers, Community Activism*

Project Civility has a more charitable view than Stuckey and O'Rourke of civility as politeness, but the group does not stop there. They also host programs that invite the campus to understand civility at a deeper level of intellectual and civic engagement. Because Project Civility emerged in response to bullying and harassment of minoritized students on campus, Project Civility intentionally created programming that addressed social justice and countering systemic oppression. The group brought a speaker to campus who grew up in Nazi Germany. The speaker explained how she and a close friend, as members of the Hitler Youth, eventually realized that the songs they had been taught to sing were more than merely patriotic: Indeed, these songs forwarded the agenda of the Nazi regime. Living in a country where people faced severe punishment for criticism of the government taught this speaker the importance of a civility that goes beyond politeness to political engagement, then on to active involvement in the world in a way that reduces the suffering of others. Notably, this speaker's definition of civility, one that she invited Project Civility to embrace for its own work, recognizes civility as necessary for the resistance of oppression. True civility means sometimes rejecting messages from the government or others in power; that rejection itself can constitute or contribute to civility.

In addition to on-campus involvement, Project Civility has caught the attention of the community. The mayor of our city recognized student leaders of Project Civility and launched a citywide initiative to make the community more civil. Project Civility's officers attend monthly meetings with the city and representatives from local service organizations, the school district, chamber of commerce, and several community residents. Local school districts have even started creating their own chapters of Project Civility, a move that promises to introduce and encourage civility, broadly defined, among children and adolescents.

Building on the relationship with the mayor and whole community, Project Civility has hosted a number of panel discussions on campus that feature students, community members, faculty, staff, and administrators, including the campus dean. The first such panel discussion featured the mayor as moderator. Discussions focus first on getting panelists' perspectives about civility and incivility on campus, in the community, and in current events. Then audience members have the chance to ask questions of the panelists. Conversations the questions inspire have been robust without reaching unanimity. Panels and audience members disagree respectfully and model a dialogic process that welcomes dissent and freedom of speech while also maintaining a celebration of the full dignity and humanity of everyone involved.

These events demonstrate directly how Project Civility facilitates expression on campus. Panel discussions like these feature a variety of diverse views; speakers share their perspectives without demonizing those who disagree. Civility functions, in conversations like these, in the words of

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<sup>39</sup> Stuckey and O'Rourke, "Civility, Democracy, and National Politics."



Arentt and Arneson, “to keep conversations going,” rather than stifle expression.<sup>40</sup> For example, one particular forum featured a discussion of the role of (in)civility in politics, specifically focusing on presidential candidate Donald Trump. One man in the audience said mentioning Trump’s name and civility in the same sentence struck him as unconscionable. This man’s comment was one of passion and ire. Yet when he finished making his comment, another person addressed the facilitator of the forum, stating that we must address civility if we think critically about how candidates should and should not treat one another. If they cannot behave civilly with each other, how can they be civil to citizens of the very country they want to represent? How can they be leaders when they fail to lead in a positive manner? Other persons in the audience chimed in with the view that civility must be part of the campaign when considering candidates for president. Although Trump is well known, he is certainly not known for civility—whether toward another presidential candidate, a member of the media, or someone on the *The Apprentice*. Forum attendees disagreed about how civility should or should not be connected to the campaign, yet audience and panel members alike spoke respectfully to one another when sharing their thoughts and opinions. No one stifled, dismissed, or degraded the views of another. Those who participated in volunteering their words did so in a non-threatening atmosphere.

At another forum, a student talked about civility on campus. The student shared that a teacher walked across campus in the rain, not moving out of the way for others coming in the opposite direction. This same faculty member knocked over another student unintentionally, but did not stop to help the person get back up off the wet ground. After hesitation from the audience and panel members of the forum, the facilitator asked for comments on how the incident should have been handled. When asked if the incident had been reported to the appropriate administrative personnel, the student said that it was. As one person shared, although the faculty member did not intentionally mean to knock over a person, he was aware of doing so, but neglected to stop. Another person said that maybe instead of pointing out the incivility of the situation, it would be helpful to stop the professor to make certain he was okay. Maybe something terrible happened so that he was in a rush to take care of an emergency. Even if there was no emergency, those around the teacher could have shared that he inadvertently knocked someone over, but they were sure he did so accidentally. Chances are the professor would admit he did not mean to do this and show remorse for doing so. Again, people at the forum contributed ideas respectfully, even though they did not agree with all the steps that could have been taken to rectify the situation.

In the discussions of political incivility and the professor on the rainy day, we perceived that people seemed to listen closely to one another, modeling the civility the topics prompted the panelists and audiences to discuss. The variety of viewpoints shared invited audience members to reconsider their initial ideas about politics and Trump in particular or internal versus external attributions for the professor’s behavior on the rainy day. Conversations that initially began about civility as politeness (i.e., Why is Trump rude to reporters?; Why did the professor behave so brusquely?) blossomed into dialogues that engaged civility more deeply (i.e., What role ought civility have in electoral politics?; What role might civility play in our response to the professor if we decide not to ascribe motives?). These forums, then, discuss civility but simultaneously enact it and push on its boundaries.

Taking the conversations beyond the forums, Project Civility created a Civility Wall on campus. The wall includes the group’s mission statement and a dry eraser board that is a permanent fixture in the student cafeteria. This board provides a place to put weekly civility quotations, share civility essays, promote opportunities to volunteer in the area, and allow others to comment about

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<sup>40</sup> Arnett and Arneson, *Dialogic Civility*, 54.

civility. The wall thus serves as a forum for free speech and source for opportunities to serve the community, engaging the more rigorous sense of civility as democratic participation.

On the whole, Project Civility embraces a capacious definition of civility that includes many of the scholarly approaches discussed here in some form. In exhibiting and advocating for civility as politeness, as political friendship, and as democratic participation, Project Civility demonstrates that we need not choose among different understandings of civility, but that each relates to the others by extending, challenging, and offering correctives. Tellingly, the group began with the most basic understanding of civility: Passing out politeness nickels, but that seemingly small gesture has led to more serious conversations about the role and importance of civility on campus and in the community. Whether holding doors open or sharing disparate points of view on the Civility Wall, members of Project Civility call the whole campus to a higher level of civility in the full diversity and richness of its potential meanings.

Even more important than how Project Civility defines its central term, though, is the question of free speech and its relationship to civility. We offer four observations to begin answering such a question. First, we highlight that student leaders founded Project Civility specifically because students' freedom of expression felt threatened on a campus that ostensibly tolerated homophobia—a reality that makes campuses toxic, especially for minoritized students.<sup>41</sup> The call for civility recognized that the freedom of students to express their identities required a more civil campus climate. Civility makes these students more able to speak, not to mention choose clothing and otherwise perform their genders, sexualities, and gender identities without fear. In this way, Project Civility challenges the conceptions of politeness as shallow. Considered acontextually, defining civility as politeness undersells civility's importance and neutralizes its message to something as benign as "be kind." Yet Project Civility asks us to consider that alternatives to civility may go beyond the denotative opposite of politeness (i.e., rudeness). For some students at least, the alternative to civility included language and behavior that threatened their inclusion, identities, and perhaps even (perceptions of) physical safety.<sup>42</sup> We take as axiomatic that these conditions do not give rise to greater levels of free expression. In our context, calling for civility *enabled* free expression, perhaps serving as a condition for the emergence of such liberty.

Second, drawing inspiration from the guest speaker who addressed her experience growing up under the Nazi regime, Project Civility has a mission centered on civility as emancipatory. An engaged citizenry keeps informed, asks questions, and speaks out without fear of censure from legal strictures. Understandings of civility that cluster around political friendship or democratic participation require communities who rise to the challenge the guest speaker offered, not to use civility to excuse injustice but to reverse its course. By making the campus safer for all students,

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<sup>41</sup> Leland G. Spencer and Joshua Trey Barnett, "Touring Homophobia: Understanding the Souforce Equality Ride as a Toxic Tour," *Southern Communication Journal* 78 (2013): 25–41, doi:10.1080/1041794X.2012.717683; Ann M. Gill, "Revising Campus Speech Codes," *Free Speech Yearbook* 31, no. 1 (1993): 124–37, doi:10.1080/08997225.1993.10556157; G Patterson, "The Unbearable Weight of Pedagogical Neutrality: Religion and LGBTQ Issues in the English Studies Classroom," in *Sexual Rhetorics: Methods, Identities, Publics*, ed. Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes (New York, NY: Routledge, 2016), 134–46; Juanita Johnson-Bailey, "Academic Incivility and Bullying as a Gendered and Racialized Phenomena," *Adult Learning* 26, no. 1 (February 2015): 42–47, doi:10.1177/1045159514558414.

<sup>42</sup> On the importance of establishing safe campus climates for queer and trans students, faculty, and staff, see Ragan Fox, "Homo'-Work: Queering Academic Communication and Communicating Queer in Academia," *Text & Performance Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2013): 58–76, doi:10.1080/10462937.2012.744462; Patterson, "Unbearable Weight"; Spencer, "Engaging Undergraduates in Feminist Classrooms"; Leland G. Spencer and Jamie Capuzza, "Centering Gender Identity and Transgender Lives in Instructional Communication Research," *Communication Education* 65, no. 1 (2016): 113–17, doi:10.1080/03634523.2015.1096949.

particularly minoritized students, Project Civility has already embraced and embodied this call; as Project Civility spreads its message through the community, more people can hear the invitation toward liberatory civility. We aver that the invitation makes space for more expression.

Third, Project Civility invokes civility as a way to invite conversation and debate about issues of importance to the community. Research on public fora and other contexts for citizens to speak has concluded that these kinds of settings often result in frustration and anxiety for leaders and citizens alike, particularly when passions surge.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, Project Civility panels have featured robust conversation, even about controversial topics, without falling into the traps that characterize less civil types of public meetings. Students, staff, faculty, administrators, and community members came together to have real, serious conversations about issues that matter, and did so productively.

Fourth, we emphasize that the relationship between free speech and civility we observe Project Civility to facilitate works in our particular context. We suspect the lessons learned apply in other contexts as well, so we offer our perspective about civility as one option, not in categorical opposition with any other. We acknowledge that Cloud explains a different part of the universe than Project Civility. As such, our effort here works not so much to negate Cloud's perspective as to point out that hers is one perspective—among others. The example of Salaita illustrates that in some contexts, a call for civility may attempt to limit expression; our case study suggests that in other contexts, the call for civility functions as free expression's condition of possibility. Determining the most appropriate response may indeed depend on the power differential in the situation. The discussion of the professor who knocked over a student illustrates that Project Civility's approach can account for some differences in power, but we recognize that Cloud's approach becomes more compelling as the gap in power widens. Neither view, then, constitutes a totalizing or grand theory of civility that can explain every instance.

### **Conclusion: What Can Civility Be(come)?**

We began with the confession that civility, like so many terms that capture scholarly attention and refuse to let go, eludes easy and unanimous definition. We conclude by posing the question in another way, asking what civility can be(come). Perhaps, if we attempt to embrace civility in the many senses described in the literature, we arrive at an understanding of civility that focuses on its worldmaking function. Michael Warner describes worldmaking this way:

the activity we undertake with each other, in a kind of agonistic performance in which what we become depends on the perspectives and interactions of others, brings into being the space of our world, which is then the background against which we understand ourselves and our belonging. I find this a compelling account because it stresses historical activity and human creativity, but without falling into a naive view of individual agency or intentionality. The world made in public action is not an intended or designed world, but one disclosed in practice. It is a background for self-understanding, and therefore something not purely individual.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Susan L. Senecah, "The Trinity of Voice: The Role of Practical Theory in Planning and Evaluating the Effectiveness of Environmental Participatory Processes," in *Communication and Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making*, ed. Stephen P. Depoe, John W. Delicath, and Marie-France Aepli Elsenbeer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 13–33.

<sup>44</sup> Annamarie Jagose, "Queer World Making: Annamarie Jagose Interviews Michael Warner," *Genders* 31 (2000), [http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/IAV\\_606661/IAV\\_606661\\_2010\\_52/g31\\_jagose.html#n11](http://www.iiav.nl/ezines/IAV_606661/IAV_606661_2010_52/g31_jagose.html#n11), paragraph 38; We appreciate Warner's definition, although we owe a debt of gratitude to Charles Morris and others whose work have introduced

If, indeed, we understand civility as performative, public, and relational, we can see how civility “make[s] more livable lives for all people” by opening not just doors, but spaces for identities and ideas to flourish.<sup>45</sup> Our case study of a student group at one university campus—which now finds itself growing to include other schools and the community as a whole—illustrates how civility makes not only speech, but life, more opportune where incivility forecloses possibilities.

On our campus, too, we have found civility to inspire speech. Because of Project Civility, our campus has become a more welcoming place for all identities, especially those of multiply minoritized students. Project Civility has made the campus a more livable space and simultaneously an environment more academically engaging and intellectually generous. To the degree that universities have an investment in worldmaking projects, we therefore conclude that civility may serve as an asset, including and especially for its relationship to freedom of speech.

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the communication discipline to the project of worldmaking, especially for trans and queer folks. See Charles E. Morris, “ACT UP 25: HIV/AIDS, Archival Queers, and Mnemonic World Making,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 98, no. 1 (2012): 49–53, doi:10.1080/00335630.2011.638658; Charles E. Morris, “Sunder the Children: Abraham Lincoln’s Queer Rhetorical Pedagogy,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99, no. 4 (2013): 395–422, doi:10.1080/00335630.2013.836281; Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “Sex in Public,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 2 (1998): 547–66; Karma R. Chávez, “Spatializing Gender Performativity: Ecstasy and Possibilities for Livable Life in the Tragic Case of Victoria Arellano,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 33, no. 1 (2010): 1–15, doi:10.1080/07491401003669729; K.J. Rawson, “Transgender Worldmaking in Cyberspace: Historical Activism on the Internet,” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 1, no. 2 (2014): 38–60, doi:10.14321/qed.1.2.0038.

<sup>45</sup> Leland G. Spencer and John Lynch, “Possibilities for Inclusive Family and Community in Beth Stroud’s ‘Walking in the Light,’” *QED: A Journal in GLBTQ Worldmaking* 3, no. 1 (2016): 75.