Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice

A Campus-Wide Initiative to Foster Civility

By Daniel B. Griffith and Khadija Khaja
Many higher education institutions have developed initiatives focused on fostering a positive environment for civility on campus. But what are the characteristics of an effective civility initiative? How are such initiatives sustained so that a focus on civility becomes a mainstay of campus culture and conversation and not just another short-lived directive?

At Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), the promise for a sustained campus-wide commitment to civility has come from the development of the IUPUI Common Theme “Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice: Creating Civil Conversation,” a two-year discussion and deeper exploration of civil discourse in the classroom, workplace and public sphere. In creating and implementing the civil discourse common theme, IUPUI found that the ultimate success and sustainability of a civility initiative of this kind depends on three components:

1) Collaboration among many campus community members seeking to bring attention to the importance of an institutional commitment to civility.

2) Engaged and vibrant efforts of a committed team to plan and implement the initiative over the course of its two-year lifecycle.

3) Development of infrastructure to leave a legacy that will sustain the energy and focus on campus civility beyond the life of the initiative.

Collaboration as Catalyst

While conversations about the importance of civility in all aspects of campus life at IUPUI have occurred over many years, the most focused attention leading to the creation of the Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice initiative arose through the institution’s equal opportunity (EO) council. The EO council is the advisory council for the university's office of equal opportunity and consists of representatives from IUPUI’s major administrative units and 19 campus schools. The council meets monthly to discuss legal, regulatory and internal policy updates involving equal opportunity and affirmative action matters and address specific issues across campus concerning matters of equity and inclusion and also serves as a conduit of information between the EO office and the campus community.

Over the past few years, the council has placed specific focus on campus civility or, more to the point, incivility. Though incivility per se is not within the purview of EO and affirmative action policy compliance, it is certainly a behavioral factor for many policy violations. In this context, the council has had two areas of focus — one that is fairly specific and one that is broader in scope. Its specific focus has been to promote the reinstitution of a campus statement on civility. In 1997, the former IUPUI chancellor developed such a statement, which was intended as an aspirational, non-policy-driven statement calling for civility among all campus community members while embracing differences, academic freedom, freedom of expression and the robust exchange of ideas. The council has endeavored to revamp this statement to reflect current campus community needs and constituent interests and is in the process of obtaining feedback from various student, faculty and staff leadership groups before encouraging adoption by the current chancellor.

As a representative body for schools and departments on campus, EO council members have expressed on their constituents' behalf a sincere desire for a deeper exploration of civility at IUPUI, to include the classroom, the workplace and the public square. To that end, the council's broader focus has been on identifying ways to engage the university community regarding the issues and concerns related to civility and to provide information, resources and education accordingly. It was in the course of these broader discussions that the suggestion arose to propose “civil discourse” as a topic for the IUPUI Common Theme Project.

The Common Theme Project, which took root in 2009 and is administered through the IUPUI Honors College, is designed to promote campus unity, conversation and collaboration on timely issues that connect the institution to central Indiana and the world. Each theme runs for a two-year cycle, and the civility theme is the third to be addressed in the project. And while the principal audience for the common theme is first-year students, with the intent of encouraging broad incorporation of concepts, principles and learning objectives related to the theme within first-year curriculum, the given theme is promoted campus-wide and involves events, programs and learning opportunities that serve to engage the entire campus community. Each two-year program is overseen by a steering committee and a faculty member with expertise on the subject matter.

Planning and Implementation

Initial planning for the civil discourse theme began with the facilitation of focus groups to assess perceptions among campus constituents about the state of civility and civil discourse in society and on campus, as well as to gain
insights and suggestions regarding topics and themes to address during the two-year common theme cycle. During the planning phase, 33 face-to-face, semi-structured, qualitative focus groups were conducted involving a total of 193 participants, including staff, faculty members, students, community service providers and others.

The following questions were posed: What sparked your interest to attend these focus groups on civil discourse? What does civil discourse mean to you? When and why do you think civil discourse breaks down? What activities, resources or events help to promote civil discourse on campus or in the community, and who are potential partners in collaborating or holding events?

From these meetings, it was clear that the topic of civil discourse resonated with participants. They were deeply concerned about the state of civil discourse (or the lack of it), whether in society, media, work, neighborhoods or in the classrooms and on campus. Themes emerged around myriad issues, including treatment of minority, disadvantaged and international students and other groups; how students feel they are treated by faculty and, in some instances, how faculty feel they are treated by students; feelings of exclusion by staff involving institutional decisions over basic issues like parking and healthcare; broader issues of uncivil discourse in culture, media and politics; and basic frustrations about how to manage uncivil roommate, classmate and coworker situations. It was also evident that a wealth of opportunities could be made available to engage on the topic through programs, events and conversations covering multiple perspectives, experiences and issues. (The full report on the focus group data is available on IUPUI’s common theme website at http://commontheme.iupui.edu).

Part of the common theme program entails the promotion of two featured books on the topic at hand. The books are promoted on the common theme website and are designated as required reading in certain first-year classes. The two books chosen for the civil discourse theme were Saving Civility: 52 Ways to Tame Rude, Crude and Attitude for a Polite Planet, by Sara Hacala, which addresses fundamental concepts, skills and attitudes for civil conduct and discourse, and Beyond Forgiveness: Reflections on Atonement, by Phil Cousineau, which delves into deeper issues around forgiveness, repairing broken relationships, and atonement in human relations, communities and global settings.

The capstone of the common theme program is a visit to campus by the authors of the featured books. Hacala visited the campus for two days last fall and, in addition to a keynote that was open to the entire campus, she co-facilitated a workshop for staff on issues involving workplace civility and also met with a number of student groups, classrooms and the EO council. Cousineau will visit the campus later this year to lead discussions on his book.

As the principal audience for each IUPUI common theme is first-year students, steering committee members whose roles involve curriculum development and instructional design work directly with faculty to support their efforts to incorporate concepts suggested by the theme and selected books into first-year-experience courses. The committee also works year-round to develop, plan and facilitate many other campus events, programs and conversations, large and small, around the theme. For the civil discourse theme, these events have ranged from short presentations to introduce the theme and encourage participation to longer training sessions on topics related to civility and civil discourse for student and employee groups. In addition to the author visits, other events involve formal presentations by invited speakers on theme-related topics.

The collaborative spirit that developed during the theme proposal process between EO council members and the faculty member chosen to serve as fellow for the duration of the two-year program has continued to evolve and has helped extend the reach of the theme beyond the primary audience of first-year students to embrace other campus community members. Many EO council members are also members of the common theme steering committee. And although the faculty fellow drives the programming for the initiative, because of their already-cemented commitment to civility and civil discourse, committee members share
buy-in and ownership in the shaping of programming. And steering committee members’ broad-based representation of constituencies beyond student populations has expanded possibilities that the ongoing conversation around civility and civil discourse may blossom into a community-wide conversation.

**Building an Infrastructure and Leaving a Legacy**

A common theme initiative such as Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice helps generate focused engagement on issues that matter to the campus community around a specific topic. Its format builds energy and excitement around conversations in a compressed timeframe and then concludes, making way for the next theme. The Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice theme will conclude in 2015. Then what? One hallmark of a successful common theme cycle, indicating that the theme is indeed something the campus cares about, is that it creates a legacy. What legacy will Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice leave and how will the focus on civility and civil discourse be perpetuated and survive the life of the theme?

The hope is that the civil discourse theme will be woven into campus culture like the 2009-11 common theme on sustainability has been. As a result of that initiative, IUPUI created an office of sustainability, whose mission is, in part, “to model wise stewardship of environmental resources across an array of campus decisions and activities.” The development of this office is directly connected to implementation efforts for the sustainability theme. The office now has a staff, operational support, a full committee structure, and a host of initiatives, strategies and programming in process.

And so far, the civil discourse theme seems to be following a similar path. In January 2013, the office for intergroup dialogue and civil community (IGD/CC) was formed. Although this office’s development is not directly connected with deliberations for the common theme, it has evolved concurrently with it, and many supporters of the common theme, including the EO office, were also advocates for the creation of this office. Organizationally, the IGD/CC office is jointly supported by the office of the executive vice chancellor and chief academic officer and the division of finance and administration. As implied in its title, the IGD/CC office’s mission is twofold. Regarding intergroup dialogue, the campus has endeavored for the past five years to develop programming focused on improving intergroup relations through structured, sustained, facilitated dialogue processes among and across different social identity groups.

In discussions among various campus leaders about creating the IGD/CC office, it was agreed that a need for championing issues around campus civility and fostering a civil community was also important. As described in its mission statement, the IGD/CC office “supports IUPUI’s vision for an inclusive campus culture where all campus community members feel welcomed, supported, included and valued by the campus and each other. The office supports this vision through [intergroup dialogue and] ongoing efforts to promote campus civility, collegiality and civil discourse among all community members.”

The office is integrally involved in the civil discourse common theme planning and also develops and supports other programming and initiatives relating to fostering a civil community. Some examples include:

- Supporting EO council efforts to draft and advocate for a reinstated statement on civility;
- Partnering with the EO office to develop and facilitate mediation training to develop individuals to serve as in-house mediators to address basic conflict issues and communication challenges within schools, departments and units;

Attend the concurrent session “Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice: A Campus-Wide Initiative to Foster Civility” at the CUPA-HR Annual Conference and Expo 2014 in San Antonio this fall to learn more about IUPUI’s civil discourse initiative. Visit [www.cupahr.org/conference2014](http://www.cupahr.org/conference2014).

Unable to attend the conference? No worries! We’ll be live tweeting and blogging from sessions and events, so be sure to follow along! The conference Twitter handle is #cupahr14, and you can find The Higher Ed Workplace blog at [blog.cupahr.org](http://blog.cupahr.org).
• Developing forums for civil discourse on important topics. The IGD/CC office partnered with the office of diversity, equity and inclusion to co-facilitate a forum on the aftermath of the Trayvon Martin case. It further convened multiple sponsors, including the LGBT faculty/staff council and other faculty and staff councils, to co-facilitate a campus forum on the significance of sexual orientation and gender identity at IUPUI.

The IGD/CC office is in the process of creating a more formal leadership structure, including a standing steering committee, to better ensure the sustainability of its efforts. These commitments by the office and its partners better ensure that issues surfaced through the civil discourse common theme receive ongoing institutional attention and that the civility theme leaves a strong legacy.

Learning From IUPUI’s Journey

IUPUI’s Find Your Voice, Hear My Voice initiative provides a promising path to ensure that a sustained focus on civility, civil discourse and civil community becomes embedded within campus culture. The institution’s journey demonstrates that sustained efforts of this sort develop from years of conversations among numerous campus constituencies wishing to work collaboratively to address common interests and concerns. It then takes planning, timing and the seizing of an opportunity to bring broader focus and attention to the issues involved. And the initiative’s long-term success depends on providing resources and infrastructure to ensure the focus is sustained once the initial energy and push subsides.

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