

Controversy and Community: The Effect and Affect of Student Values Expression

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Abstract

The following is a practitioner's description of issues involved in managing campus values controversies. This paper is intended to offer a lens through which those who are confronted with issues may gain insight into key dimensions and dynamics of the kinds of incidents that confront campus leaders.

Overview

As campus leaders we often find ourselves in the uncomfortable position of leading responses to campus controversy. These campus incidents will often differ in dynamics and specifics, but all have the common feature of involving people. Because people are involved, invariably emotions are involved. The most significant aspects of incident response and management with which I find myself wrestling are how to manage the effect and affect of controversies. By *effect*, I mean both the visible and invisible consequences of the behavior, while *affect* refers to the emotional or psychological impact of the situation on community members. In every vexing campus controversy I have dealt with or observed, there has been a dynamic interaction among students' values expressions, an ensuing controversy, the quest for campus community, the effects of the incident, and the affect experienced by community members as a result of the incident. In the narrative that follows I will share brief examples of campus controversies with which I have been confronted and offer my observations and learning related to the common attributes of those incidents.

Vignettes

T*erminal surgery for animals* – A group of students on our campus engaged in an extended protest of a course titled VM 757, a course in small animal surgery offered by our College of Veterinary Medicine. The protests occurred during a length of time of

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more than two years and involved such incidents as picketing the laboratory storage facility, leafleting the campus, writing campus editorials, and other efforts to bring attention to the incident. The more dramatic efforts, which were greater sources of controversy, were picketing the home of the Dean of the College of Veterinary Medicine, staging a takeover of the Dean's office, and engaging in a several day fast on the university's quad (inside animal cages) to draw attention to the protesters' concern about the plight of animals. This incident was highly disruptive, both in terms of the flow of academic activity and campus processes and in terms of the feeling of physical and psychological well being of those associated with the College of Veterinary Medicine and VM 757. The protests were in response to a small animal surgery class where animals used for invasive surgical procedures were euthanized as a result of trauma created by the surgery.

Anti-Muslim Editorial – In late winter 2006 an editorial was published in our campus newspaper entitled “The Islamic double-standard.” The article was extremely critical of Islam and was laced with numerous unfavorable references to the Prophet Mohammad (e.g., pedophile prophet) and references, including words such as “savages” and “barbarous,” to Muslims. This editorial created a great swirl of response on our campus, including protest, letters to the editor and face-to-face meetings among concerned parties. The effects and affect of this incident were experienced widely.

Shooting of a Homeless Person – In late fall 2006 a homeless man who was rummaging through a dumpster in an alley behind several fraternity houses was shot and injured by an unknown individual. Because the assailant was not immediately identified, the occupants of the three houses nearest the dumpster were pursued as possible perpetrators. During the investigation it was determined there had been a history of individuals shooting at the homeless, as well as targeting the homeless with name-calling and thrown objects. The responsible person was eventually identified and charged. This incident created a great deal of on and off-campus response.

Controversy and Community

In each of the incidents a common sequence played out. This cycle included the following

- Interaction among differing world views/life situations

Each of the incidents involved the interaction of individuals with different perspectives, life situations or values. In diverse communities such personal differences will be a common dynamic, which suggests our communities are always ripe for conflict and controversy.

- Confrontations among groups

Where differences surface, confrontations are likely to occur. In most cases community members manage differences in a way that keeps large-scale confrontations just beneath the surface in interactions. However, in some situations community members desire to illuminate differences so as to illicit change, reactions, or some specific outcome.

- Real and perceived power differentials

Power dynamics are a key feature of campus controversy. In general, the persons who are targeted will feel powerless to respond to the “attacks” of the persons who are seen as the aggressors. On the other hand, the aggressors will often describe feelings of powerless to respond to some issue over which the targeted persons (or group) have control. As leaders we will find ourselves having to make sense of the perceived or real power differences.

- Activating behavior

There is always some activating behavior, the incident that represents the controversy. In the vignettes the activating events included taking over the Dean’s office, publishing the editorial, and shooting the homeless person. The behavior gives concrete dimensions to the feelings, beliefs, and values that reside beneath the surface within our communities.

- Community reaction

Following every incident there is some reaction within our campus community. A number of variables influence the breadth and depth of the reaction. However, it is safe to bet that few campuses will not have some incident in a given year that inspires broad and intense response from members of their community.

- Expectation of institutional response (punitive)

Every situation I have managed has brought a demand or outcry from members of our community for an institutional response; typically, the demand is for a punitive response. It is also characteristic of community response to demand a specific message or declaration of values by the university’s president.

- Under-performance by institution

In the end, because controversies have values differences as a key ingredient, no matter what response the institution offers, it will be inadequate to satisfy the needs and expectations of all community members. In this regard, the institution will always

under-perform in response to community expectations for how incidents should be handled.

Effect

As I mentioned earlier, the incidents that we find ourselves managing have visible and invisible consequences. Too often we fail to understand and explore the depth and extent of these effects, and as a result, we fail to address the long-term or cultural impacts they can have. Below are examples of the kinds of effects the incidents in the vignettes exposed on our campus.

- Creates the “other”

In each incident some person or group was construed to be the “other,” such that they were positioned as an out-group relative to the person(s) who targeted them. Once the person was thought of as the “other,” it was easier for the aggressor to justify treating that person differently than the aggressor would have treated a member of his or her own group .

- Constructs own mythology about the “other”

Once one is seen as being different in less than admirable ways, beliefs or mythologies about those differences are constructed among those who want to target that group or person. In the incidents described in the vignettes, mythology (non-factual beliefs) was created about the homeless, Muslims, and those who were teaching the small animal surgery class. In each situation the mythology made the “other” the object of fear, blame, negative judgments and other unfavorable attributes that became the rationale to justify negative behaviors.

- Marginalizes the “other” and makes the person *less than*

The outcome of making another individual the “other” and creating a mythology about that person is that justification is developed to marginalize, which essentially pushes a person to outsider status in his or her own community. Marginalization reduces the emotional and psychological well being of the target. Campus controversies target some members in such a way that they lose status and are denied dignity rights.

- Adopts and uses language to align with behavior towards the “other”

As leaders we should be conscious of the language some individuals use to describe and talk about others. Language is a strong indicator of what we think and how we feel about others. At the same time, language often provides justification for the behavior shown towards others.

- Behavior disrupts community and individual lives (Real and metaphorical shots are fired)

Each of the incidents created concrete disruptions for individuals and the community. The incidents represented real and metaphorical shots being fired at another, in which case all of the targeted individuals responded their own version of “ouch.” Controversies have human impact that go beyond emotional reactions. The consequence of being marginalized and dehumanized influences how community members feel about themselves, feel about the community, and how they behave in regards to others.

- Response from the “other” and the community

When campus controversies transpire, a range of reactions ensue. Typically we see responses from the individuals and groups targeted by the behaviors, as well as those who consider themselves allies and supporters of the targeted group. In these situations we will also see people come to the defense of those who initiate the controversy. As leaders we have the responsibility to respond and support our community in resolving the varied responses to campus controversies.

Affect Associated with Incidents

Campus controversies are fraught with emotion. Those who initiate incidents are often influenced by their deeply held feelings about the person or group towards which they direct the disruptive behavior—feelings that may be known or unknown to the person who holds them. The intensity of the person’s emotions and beliefs about the “other” become evident when she or he is given the opportunity to discuss feelings about the targeted group. Common themes emerging in the controversies detailed in vignettes that dealt with perpetrators’ affect are

- Threat - A sense that the group in question represented a threat
 - Fear – a feeling that something bad or worse could happen to the person or others because of the group’s presence in the community
 - Anger – in some case rage at something the group has done, is believed to have done, or believed likely to do
 - Frustration – a sense of irritation or helplessness that there is something the person is unable to influence in regards to the presence or behavior of the group
 - Righteousness – a sense that the person is more moral, virtuous, or decent than the group in question; whatever he or she does is a show of commitment to the right values
 - Rights-centered – whatever action taken is within his/her rights; as long as what is done is legal, it is justifiable
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Those who are construed as the “other.” likewise, experience significant affect as a result of being targeted by unwelcome behavior. This uninvited behavior influences how they feel about themselves, their sense of place, and their feelings about their relationships with other community members. Being the object of negative, ill-intentioned behaviors can often times create a sense of imbalance for those who are targeted. Through conversations with individuals who perceive themselves as being assailed by other members of their community, we were able to identify a number of common themes, including:

- Fear – feelings that these individuals are in harm’s way, a feeling that others desire to do harm to them
- Anger – deep annoyance and irritation that another would feel and act towards them in such a way
- Disillusionment – a loss of hope about their community, the claims made in their institution’s mission and other values espoused by institutional leaders
- Betrayal/Hurt – the feeling that their faith in the institution and belief in what the institution stands for has been betrayed; a feeling that their faith in the institution has been misplaced
- Marginalization/Powerlessness – a sense that they are unable to influence the situation, that they are now outsiders in their own community
- Uncertainty – confusion about what to do next, an almost paralyzing experience that impairs the ability to act and move forward
- Responsibility-centered reaction – whatever action they take and others should take should be based on one’s responsibility to the community, just being legal does not make behavior justifiable.

Learning

Each of the campus controversies produced unique learning. Below is the most salient learning I gained through my interaction with the controversies:

- Beliefs are formed and cultivated within the context of isolated communities

On our campuses we have sub-communities and constituent groups that have been formed based on shared values, beliefs, and commitments of members. Often these groups are self-directed and self-perpetuating. On occasion isolated communities produce behaviors that are counter to the campus ethos expressed in our aspiration statements. In most of our most challenging controversies, the individuals who initiated the behaviors found their support, inspiration, and encouragement in isolated sub-communities.

- Language is a powerful expression of values—listening and sensing are crucial
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As this paper has stated previously, language is a powerful representation of personal values. Educators can gain great insight into student beliefs and values by listening intently and cultivating sensing qualities. In the cases of the homeless person being shot and the veterinary education situation, language became a tool by which the targeted individuals were constructed to be something other than human. For example, students' feelings about how a person should be treated differed greatly when students regarded the individual as a bum versus when they considered the person to be homeless (from the students' perspective, "bums" are much less deserving of humane treatment than are the homeless). Likewise was the case when students described the outcome of the surgery on animals as euthanasia versus when it was described as murder. When veterinary faculty and students were regarded as "murderers" inhumane treatment was seen as justifiable.

- "Shooters" don't believe they are targeting a real *human being*

In all of the situations in which individuals were targeted, the aggressor did not acknowledge the human qualities of those being assailed. The metaphorical shots were aimed at a group, a threat, a murderer, or some other descriptor that denied the humanity of the target.

- There are always requests embedded in the controversy

In all of the controversies there was a request embedded in the behavior of the aggressor. Only through conversation did it become clear that students were asking for help or to be heard about an issue important to them. As we resolved each of the controversies we acquired a clearer sense of how we could produce greater educational value for the sub-communities in which the students were engaged.

- Reputations, humanity and dignity are at stake
- Views of the world can be reconciled
- Importance of leading from the center

Educational Challenge

- Distinguish between responding to the *incident* and responding to the *issue*—we must do both.
- Transform "do we or don't we?" conversations into "how can we, while at the same time?" conversations.

Conversation Ground Rules (What We can Teach Students)

- Everybody should come out of the conversation in better condition than he or she entered
 - Listen generously
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- Be on each other's side
- Speak your truth
- Take care of each other
- Manage each other's humanity as if it were your own

The following text from an email message sent by my university's president, Paul G. Risser, following the sit-in at the Dean of Veterinary Medicine's office describes in simple terms the challenge we have of bringing together the best thinking of our campus to address the dynamics that face us during times of controversy:

There are several leadership challenges for us. First, we cannot skim over issues superficially, thinking that they will just go away or everything will be all right if we just persist. People (including us) care about issues deeply. This means we must have the courage and will to think as hard about these issues together as we were forced to think yesterday. We must enlist the help of the faculty. And these actions must visibly demonstrate that we deeply understand these issues and have the leadership capability and the will to lead.
