

Words need not create storms

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Sunday, April 15, 2007 7:02 PM MDT

As I write this, the gusty winds of spring are upon us and the University of Colorado's 59th Annual Conference on World Affairs has just kicked off, bringing diverse minds and perspectives from across the globe to debate the great issues of the day.

Later this month, the campus will be the site of a weeklong anti-abortion protest, an "affirmative action" bake sale and countless other demonstrations by those from left, right and all points in between, on issues that they feel passionately about. This, it seems, is the natural state of things in April at the University of Colorado.

This is as it should be here and on the campus of any other great university. Though cyberspace is perhaps today's largest and most pervasive conduit to the global exchange of ideas, it is not necessarily the best. I prefer the "real" space of a university campus as a far better venue for discussing and debating ideas and ideologies.

Why? Simple: on a university campus, you can enjoy the privilege of sitting across from the person you are engaging in debate or discussion. You can see the expressions and gestures of their person, hear all the nuances and inflections in their voice, and more fully comprehend how they process what you say and how it affects them.

This proximity means that in face-to-face discussions, the stakes of debate are higher. You might have to go to class, or share a room or residence hall lounge with the person with whom you are debating, so the necessity for observing those nuances, along with the basic protocol of respect, is high, indeed.

This openness and accountability represents the best of our universities and they are an integral part of our university community, whether expressed through the formal structure of events like the Conference on World Affairs or the more spontaneous events or statements made by other campus groups. It is often a thing of beauty to watch communities or individuals, organized around different political ideologies, race, class, gender, geography or some other shared pursuit, encounter and directly engage one another on difficult issues.

In this process, even a casual observer can watch bridges of mutual interest being built or unfortunately, sometimes dismantled, based upon the fine points of policy, belief or merely upon personalities in agreement or conflict. There is a richness to this dynamic that simply cannot be found in the detached, unaccountable and often vicious debates of cyberspace, the blogosphere or even on the editorial pages of newspapers.

I would like to encourage our entire campus community that, during this month, of all months, we make an individual and collective commitment to rededicate ourselves to the values of free speech and free exchange of ideas in a climate of respect for one another. In doing so, we live up to the highest purposes, principles and ideas of our university.

This is not a plea to divorce ourselves from our passion, our life experiences, or hard truths as we confront thorny issues or controversial ideas. Rather, it is a rejoinder to remember that we are a community that, even as it probes and challenges itself, must at the end of the day, remain a community.

When the debate is over, the issue settled or simply transformed, we will all be left to face one another, to live together and to inhabit the same community in which the variations of ideas are valued. Who knows, but that we might find ourselves transformed into allies with people we originally thought of as determined foes?

The mere possibility of this demands that we treat the process of free speech on campus with a respect that seeks a balance of robust free speech and open inquiry with values of tolerance, respect and a welcoming community. Burning bridges with flames of rhetoric and hyperbole works against the fostering of this type of academic community.

So, as April moves along and we enter the final month of focused study and academic work before finals and graduation arrive in May, I am hopeful that the parade of ideas on campus will be one that attracts notice for its quality and not just its decibel level, and for the attention it draws to the ideas raised, not just to the personalities involved or the agendas presented.

In the end, April, is about things like the Conference on World Affairs, and with its thunder, lightning and gusty winds, is noisy enough without our needlessly adding to the storm. Storms, we should remember, just make people take cover. So whether it is the formal structure of the conference or the spontaneity of students' expressions, we must respect all free speech, in all of its forms, no matter how it presents itself.

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