

## The Ethical Professor #26: Work Place Civility & the Campus Climate

One of the functions of the Academic Senate's **Professional Ethics and Responsibilities Committee** is *to promote understanding of and adherence to our Code of Ethics*. To this end, we are initiating an occasional series of brief emails to faculty which will present a variety of common **ethical dilemmas** or problems that faculty members may face. Rather than telling people what they must do, we present these scenarios in order to stimulate reflection on our own individual conduct. Our presumption is that each of us is committed to being an "ethical professor," but that reflection on our practices might reveal opportunities for improvement or help us to better handle such situations when they arise.

Posted in most every SMC classroom is our college's Statement on Professional Ethics. About midway down--below such items as 'motivating students' and 'keeping office hours'—is a list of our obligations to our colleagues. They include:

- encourage and respectfully support our colleagues in all aspects of academic life.
- respect and defend the free inquiry of associates.
- strive to be objective and fair in our professional judgment or evaluation of colleagues.
- do not discriminate against or harass colleagues.
- accept our share of faculty responsibilities for the governance of our institution, including attendance at department meetings and participation in the Faculty Association and Academic Senate.

Perhaps our rules for collegial engagement should be listed at the top. After all, semesters and students come and go, but our colleagues provide a powerful and enduring context for every aspect of our professional lives.

Along with the discrete "phases" of our work life (i.e., the semester), our academic culture is distinctive in several ways. Peer colleagues volunteer to serve as Department Chairs, the "middle managers" in our organization, then return to the rank and file. Tenured faculty benefit from an unusual degree of job security and professional mobility is relatively low. As a result, we often work together for decades, through the birth of children, the illness of a spouse, the death of a parent. Colleagues often celebrate with us, support us, mourn with us, educate us, and inspire us toward our best work. Yet, our long relationships and "power structures" may come with hefty price tags: greater risks of incivility, acrimony, and sometimes outright bullying.

Over the last 20 years, research on negative workplace interactions has increased exponentially. The cost of disrespectful conduct is estimated in the billions of dollars per year—in lost productivity, greater employee turnover, and increased healthcare cost. In academe, professors who are persistently treated disrespectfully by their colleagues tend to disengage—by working at home and refraining from active engagement in service to the College. Moreover, toxic effects extend beyond specific targets and can degrade and demoralize an entire department. Because disrespectful conduct is antithetical to a culture of trust and cooperation, it erodes the climate professional faculty need to function optimally and makes it more difficult to meet our obligations, such as those outlined in our Statement on Professional Ethics.

Facing this significant problem, organizations have searched for solutions. Punitive measures that focus on sanctions can be risky. Employees intent on harming a colleague are known to co-opt such measures by claiming victimhood and naming their target as the perpetrator. In contrast, positive/pro-active strategies have been proven to be less risky and often more effective. For example, UC Davis has developed a civility code for respectful engagement. This system was developed collectively and was mutually agreed-upon. Like honor codes, the civility code has proved to be a helpful guide for more productive conduct. Other Universities are also implementing strategies to improve collegiality and promote respectful interactions. Their efforts and their outcomes can be very informative for those who intend to pursue this issue.

We have attached a list of resources in various media or formats for those who are interested in improving the climate of our workplace. We hope you will find it useful and we look forward to continuing this conversation at the **Spring Flex Day workshop on Work Place Civility**. It will be led by our own Professor of Psychology, Dr. Lisa Farwell, who has done extensive research on this topic.

[THIS ATTACHMENT WILL ARRIVE IN A SEPARATE EMAIL]

Please don't respond to this email; if you would like to comment or participate in the threaded discussion go to: **FAC 101** in eCompanion, "Faculty Forum" unit.