

RU Engaged Spring 2011
Civility on Campus: Choosing Civility
February 7, 2011

Sixty-two participants filled the Eynon Ballroom to participate in the RU Engaged opening conversation for the spring 2011 semester. Dr. Carmen Jordan-Cox opened the session by providing a summary of the RU Engaged program that began in 2007-2008. Dr. Marie Tiemann introduced the keynote speaker for the opening program, Dr. P.M. Forni, cofounder of the Johns Hopkins Civility Project.

Dr. Forni's presentation began with video clips that highlighted the perceived increase in rudeness and insensitivity toward others. He termed this a "crisis of civility" and indicated that 75% of Americans feel that uncivil behavior is worst now than it was twenty years ago. Dr. Forni became interested in this topic in the mid-1990's (he terms it a midlife crisis), and now dedicates his research to the benevolent attention to others.

His presentation, which was peppered with personal stories, highlighted the main reasons for making civility a part of your life: connection to ethics, connection to violence, and connection to quality of life, and outlined the causes of the increased incivility we are witnessing: lack of self-restraint, stress, anonymity, lack of time, and insecurity. His presentation ended with nine rules for a civil life:

1. Slow down
2. Empathize
3. Have a positive attitude
4. Respect others
5. Refrain from arguing
6. Get to know the people around you
7. Never raise your voice
8. Never lose your temper
9. Don't shift the burden of your insecurities onto others.

The session was then opened up to comments and questions from the audience.

Comment – There is a lack of accountability. We should hold others accountable for their behavior – our friends, our roommates.

Dr. Forni – Yes, I agree, and that takes courage and may have consequences

Question – What is the relationship between legitimate power and civility?

Dr. Forni – Having legitimate power is not grounds for being uncivil. There are no grounds for uncivil acts.

Question – How can we help our students be more civil?

Dr. Forni – This should be an institutional response. As part of the orientation or first-year experience, expectations and rules of engagement should be made clear. I have students sign a 'Covenant of Civility' in my courses. The rules of behavior are situational.

Question – How do you respond to people who are being rude to you even if you are being civil?

Dr. Forni – The rules of civility are true for every type of environment. Ask yourself – Do I know the person? Was the act inconsequential? If so, ignore the behavior. If the person is known, use **SIR** – **S**tate the problem, **I**nform them how it affected you, **R**equest that it not be repeated. Be assertive.

Question – What is a good act of civility that you witnessed in your travels?

Dr. Forni recounted an experience in Los Angeles where people getting on and off of a city bus greeted the bus driver. This shocked him because he perceived Americans as being very rude.

Dr. Jordan-Cox concluded the session by thanking Dr. Forni and reminding students that Dr. Forni would hold informal conversations in Mimosa Lounge later that evening.