WHEN do interactions on campus involving strong words or questionable conduct reach the point of incivility? What is the line between legitimate freedom of speech and lively debate versus that which causes classroom disruption? What constitutes unacceptable behavior?

Although there might not be universal agreement on what standard to use to define civility, there is widespread acknowledgement that it is eroding at the nation's colleges and universities. There are countless reports of aggressive and belligerent student behavior as well as incidents of racist and degrading remarks shouted out loud or scrawled on boards or posters around campuses.

Faculty members have reported numerous confrontations with students over grades. A student at Washington State University challenged a professor to a fight because he was upset with his grade. Sometimes students leave angry messages on voice mail or e-mail, berating professors for low test scores or unsatisfactory final course grades.

While the majority of professors have not been verbally assaulted, many complain about offensive classroom behavior that is rude and disruptive. This can include students who engage in ongoing side conversations or use cell phones or text-messaging devices despite being asked to turn them off. Then, there are those who just get up and walk out of class.

"We're all talking about the problem of a lack of civility on college campuses," said Delaney Kirk, a professor at Drake University who maintains a web site with tips on "taking back the classroom." Kirk runs workshops urging faculty to understand the causes of student incivility and coaching them on how to create a teaching atmosphere that fosters respect and responsibility.

There are several theories as to why campuses have become increasingly uncivil. Some blame the freewheeling media environment, including television, radio, and the Web, where obscenities and insults are popular forms of communication. Others believe that younger people have been raised without a sense of manners and common courtesy. Psychologists say that uncivil behavior also might be caused by an underlying need for attention.

P. M. Forni, a professor at Johns Hopkins University and author of Choosing Civility: The Twenty-Five Rules of Considerate Conduct, says it is probably all of the above and more.

"We can invoke the continuing decline of the principle of authority, the fact that the new generations have not received serious training in good manners at home, genuine ignorance about expected behavior, and the rising costs of college tuition with the attendant rise of a consumer mentality among students," said Forni, in an interview in the Baltimore Sun last year.

Civility Codes

Colleges are fighting back by adopting civility statements or codes of conduct, asking students and employees to accept personal responsibility for their speech and actions. Campus civility statements often are introduced as a means of preventing intolerance by reducing bias and
prejudice. The goal of these civility standards is to curb hate speech, such as racial slurs and anti-Semitism.

At the University of Chicago, the code connects diversity, civility, and equity. While acknowledging the "marketplace of ideas," the policy asks everyone to foster an environment of acceptance, respect openness, and strive for understanding. Students are given examples of unacceptable actions plus instructions on how to report incidents, such as derogatory messages scribbled on boards or personal attacks based on race or ethnicity.

American University launched its campaign to heighten awareness of the relationship between personal conduct and campus life. It offers the three principles of "choose, act, and behave," meaning that to increase civility, individuals should make conscious choices about how to behave, act thoughtfully as if they were in the other person's shoes, and reflect on how the way they behave might make others feel.

The University of Miami in Florida and many other institutions tie civility statements to policies about sexual and verbal harassment.

**Limitations of Code**

But codes have their limitations. The line between trying to prohibit behavior and punishing those who violate a civility code is difficult to straddle. Civility codes that infringe on controversial speech have been opposed by both liberal and conservative groups and have been struck down in court, especially when colleges use the codes to discipline students. The University of Michigan, University of Wisconsin, and Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania lost court cases when they disciplined students who violated speech regulations dealing with intolerance and malicious intent.

When California State University, a system with 28 campuses, tried to enforce a civility standard, the courts issued an injunction barring the university from using disciplinary proceedings. The case involved students who stomped on two flags bearing the name of Allah during an anti-terrorism rally at San Francisco State. The ruling stated that even though the university might find these actions offensive, this type of expression is protected by the First Amendment.

"It might be fine for the university to say, 'Hey, we hope you folks are civil to one another,'" U.S. Magistrate Wayne Brazil said in announcing his decision. "But it's not fine for the university to say, 'if you're not civil, whatever that means, we're going to punish you.'"

In an issue of Lex Collegi, attorneys Kent Weeks and Joel David Ecker advise universities contemplating adoption of a civility code to use broad, aspirational language that does not restrict protected speech. They say students should not be subjected to a penalty for a violation of the code.

On the other hand, they encourage professors to publish a classroom management policy that will allow possible disciplinary action for those who disrupt the academic freedom of others and
interfere with learning through threatening words or behavior. Some have taken the strategy further and are asking their students to sign a contract on classroom behavior.

**A Model for Civility Initiatives**

Ocean County College in Toms River, NJ, defines civility as "respect for others, basic courtesy, and behaviors that create a positive environment in which to learn and to work." The expectation is that the role models for civility begin at the top with college trustees and administrators charged with fostering civil behavior through leadership.

Its civility statements were developed by the Campus Civility Team. Janet Hubbs, facilitator of the team and assistant to the president for institutional quality, said the team was formed in 2006 when President Jon Larson asked them to serve as a discussion center on the topic of civility as a professional behavior.

"Our specific purpose was to develop a report, a series of recommendations to address the question: What expectations can we as employees have, and what strategies can we embrace?" said Hubbs.

When the group began to meet, there were concerns about the purpose of the civility initiative and its potential clash with individual rights, such as freedom of speech.

"There were naturally a few people who voiced some doubt about our motives and, in fact, I actually received three refusals from faculty members in answer to an invitation to participate on the team," said Hubbs. "We assured the campus community that it was not the team's intent to attempt to legislate behavior but, rather, to have a conversation with many points of view represented."

Once the team began to meet and make its work and outcomes public, the voices of protest began to quiet. There has been no formal objection to any of the work done by the team.

"Our team (drawn from all campus constituencies except students) met and talked openly and frankly about the topic, and we developed our recommendations to the president by consensus. We built trust within the group, agreeing to repeat nothing that we talked about outside of our meetings and to make our draft report to the president public as soon as it was finished, inviting comment and input," said Hubbs.

The statements adopted by the team and ultimately approved by the president are offered as guideposts, not rules, that seek to honor diversity and tolerance. Free expression is also encouraged, as long as it is "without meanness."

Hubbs says that the team's primary focus is civility among and between employees; however, their campuswide forums often include discussions of student incivility. Faculty members are required to incorporate expectations regarding students' classroom behavior in their syllabi. However, no formal discipline procedure exists that serves to punish students or employees who cross the civility line.
Striving for Civility

Given recent court cases and judgments, Hubbs says she would advise other institutions against trying to legislate civility or to punish those who seem to be in violation of civility expectations. "Our approach has been to create a set of guidelines, and we try to promote these at our civility activities," said Hubbs.

The team has become a permanent entity that meets four times a year and sponsors an annual "civility event" to continue to raise awareness. A recent workshop featured civility-related improv theater skits presented by the student drama club that were used as a starting to point to encourage participants to talk about the issues in groups.

Hubbs said that one group at the workshop talked about how to manage the effects of incivility, which usually requires a healthy dose of patience. Participants stressed that "countering uncivil behavior with equally uncivil behavior is inflammatory and will have very predictable negative consequences." However, acknowledging that "patience can wear thin when uncivil behavior persists," the group recommended using tact instead of anger and possibly turning to a third-party arbitrator for help.

Above all, there was general agreement that to create a civil environment, all individuals have to strive toward civility and think carefully before acting or reacting in a confrontational situation. In other words, the old golden rule maxim, "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," still applies.

Condensed, with permission, from The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education, 18 (June 30, 2008), 8-9. Published at 210 Route Four East, Ste. 310, Paramus, NJ 07652.