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Can We Agree to Disagree?

A. Scott Henderson
Furman University

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Can We Agree to

In the aftermath of inflammatory campus debates over controversial issues and speakers, a task force examines the state of civil discourse at Furman — and how to improve it.

BY A. SCOTT HENDERSON

The French philosopher Voltaire is often credited with stating, "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

Although Voltaire never used those precise words, few would dispute his broader point: Freedom of speech is crucial for intellectual inquiry and debate. Indeed, the spread of knowledge itself cannot occur without free speech.

Freedom of speech, however, is rarely unlimited. Even on college campuses — institutions where pursuit of truth demands openness to virtually every viewpoint — ill-chosen words can sometimes stifle instead of promote dialog.

Because such an outcome would defeat the central purpose of higher education, academic communities should regularly review how they discuss important issues. Furman's Constructive Disagreements Task Force (CDTF) did just that during the winter and spring of 2009.

Reactions to two events in particular provided the impetus for the creation of the task force. In the spring of 2007, the Furman University Student Activities Board (FUSAB), the Residential Life Council and the student group Encour-

aging Respect of Sexualities (EROS) funded an appearance by the Kinsey Sicks, an *a cappella* group of four men who perform bawdy satirical songs in drag (women's clothing). Another Furman group, Conservative Students for a Better Tomorrow (CSBT), launched a petition objecting to the use of student fees to bring the Kinsey Sicks to campus. In response to CSBT's petition, more than 60 faculty signed their own petition, which asserted that withdrawing funding for the Kinsey Sicks would be a form of censorship.

Within two weeks of these developments, more than 11,000 words had been posted on a discussion board on FUnet, Furman's internal Web site, about the evolving controversy. Students and faculty hurled charges and counter-charges between and among one another. Some claimed that it was wrong to use students' money to sponsor what they considered a "politically motivated" group that was "hostile" toward Christianity, while others — without endorsing defamation or libel — insisted that free speech would be meaningless if Furman funded only non-controversial events.

Ultimately, funding was not rescinded, and more than

Disagree?
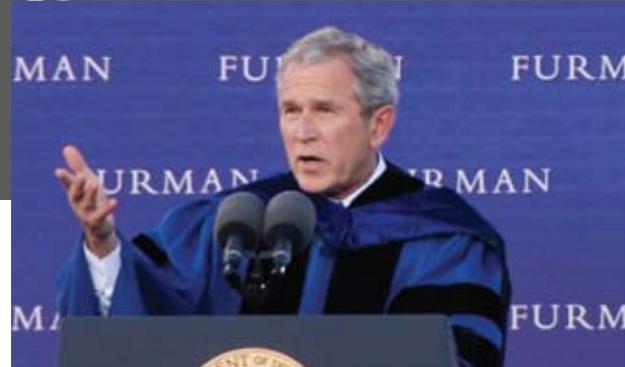
1,400 people attended the Kinsey Sicks' performance in McAlister Auditorium. Bitter feelings nonetheless lingered on both sides.

A year later, Furman announced that President George W. Bush had been invited to speak at graduation. A group of faculty responded by drafting and circulating a letter titled "We Object" that criticized various actions taken by the Bush administration. The letter was posted on Furman's external Web site, www.furman.edu. CSBT immediately objected to the faculty letter and received permission to add its own statement, "Support Our Seniors," to the Web site.

As with the Kinsey Sicks, the most acrimonious discussions about Bush's visit took place on FUnet. The exchanges soon created their own controversy, primarily because some faculty were troubled by what they believed were belligerent postings. Elsewhere, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* published an article about the student-faculty feud that generated more than 200 on-line comments, including some from Furman alumni.

Back on campus, several educational programs were conducted that focused on the Bush administration's record; community members protested on Furman Mall prior to Commencement; and 14 faculty stood in silent protest during Bush's remarks. Rancor remained even after Commencement, with a follow-up FUnet article generating more than 60 heated postings.

The imbroglios over President Bush and the Kinsey Sicks left many on campus feeling demoralized and dispirited. In the space of just a year, two relatively innocuous events had precipitated an outpouring of vituperation and accusations. Meanwhile, other visitors to campus, such as conservative pundit Ann Coulter and liberal firebrand James Carville, generated similarly heated if less extensive discussions.

Some at Furman began to worry that, if the tone and conduct of campus discussions about controversial or inflammatory issues remained unexamined, future conflicts might produce even greater — and potentially long-lasting — enmity.

With this concern in mind, Tom Kazee, the university's provost and executive vice president, created the Constructive Disagreements Task Force in the fall of 2008. Composed

Conservative pundit Ann Coulter's appearance in the spring of 2008 generated plenty of publicity and a packed house in McAlister Auditorium, even if it didn't quite match the uproar caused the previous spring by the Kinsey Sicks. Different student groups were involved in bringing the programs to campus, but both had two co-sponsors in common: the Furman University Student Activities Board and the Residential Life Council. Previous page: James Carville, the tart-tongued Democratic strategist, spoke on campus just three weeks before President Bush addressed the 2008 graduates.

of 10 professors, three staff members and three students, the task force was charged with formulating recommendations on how the Furman community ought to engage in discussions and debates.

One of the CDTF's ongoing challenges was that its own membership reflected many of the same fault lines that had emerged during the Bush and Kinsey Sicks incidents. Thus, the first thing the CDTF had to do was to agree on how to disagree. In essence, it had to practice what it would subsequently preach. The need to do so underscored the importance of being open to the possibility that the views of others might influence one's own opinion, an assumption that eventually informed several of the CDTF's final recommendations.

Among the toughest problems the CDTF confronted was the issue of language itself. Exactly what kinds of discussions should be promoted on college campuses? Plenty of adjectives came to mind: *Civil, constructive, critical, mindful, reflective, respectful* and *thoughtful*. None was perfect. Each has meanings that are hard to operationalize. For example, while most people would think that it is disrespectful to say, "President Smith is an idiot," they might feel differently about the statement, "President Smith is an idiot because he supports massive deficits."

Shortcomings notwithstanding, the CDTF decided to use the words *civil* and *constructive* in describing the kinds of discussions that ought to be fostered at Furman. Although neither term is actually defined in the CDTF's recommendations, *civil* generally refers to speech that avoids threatening, harassing, intimidating or *ad hominem* language. *Constructive*

refers to speech whose tendency is to advance a particular conversation by agreeing or disagreeing with specific points that have been raised.

The CDTF believed that these attributes could serve as relatively clear, reasonable guidelines for debating salient issues within the Furman community. These guidelines also seemed consistent with Furman's Statement of Character and Values, which asserts that the university seeks "to strengthen community ties through open communication and mutual respect."

The CDTF did not recommend an actual speech code, believing that such proscriptions can lead to excessive self-censorship and are often hard to enforce. For example, partial spellings and asterisks can always take the place of banned words.

Instead, the CDTF recommended creation of an internal communications advisory board. This board, composed of faculty, students and staff, would provide regular advice concerning the content and operation of Furman's internal communications, including FUnet and *Inside Furman*, the faculty-staff newsletter. It could also help ensure that internal news coverage would represent a broad cross-section of campus groups and interests.

Perhaps no issue consumed more of the CDTF's time than the question of whether to permit the use of pseudonyms — a common practice on Internet boards and chat rooms — in FUnet postings. Some students, leery of potential retaliation from faculty, administrators or peers, might be more inclined to post candid comments — or any comments at all — if they

could use pseudonyms. This might be especially true for GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender) students, who are often wary of publicly revealing their sexual or gender orientation.

On the other hand, an analysis of the postings made during the debates over Bush and the Kinsey Sicks revealed a fairly high correlation between pseudonyms and the most disrespectful comments. Moreover, research suggests that anonymous electronic communication significantly diminishes an individual's perceived obligation to refrain from abusive, antagonistic language.

The CDTF also strongly believed that university communities should serve as models of reasoned, logical dialog. In short, conversations promoted on a college campus should not be confused with those in a locker room or a local bar. As a consequence, the CDTF recommended that pseudonyms be prohibited on FUnet.

The student members of the task force provided valuable insights and suggestions. They urged us to consider ways of broadening opportunities to address issues of concern. The idea of regular town-hall forums for the entire Furman community emerged from this discussion. These forums, the students reasoned, might help to diffuse possible conflicts and reduce the likelihood of misunderstandings by renewing the lost art of face-to-face conversations.

The CDTF recognized that diversity of thought and action can and probably should result in a certain amount of disagreement. Forced consensus on every issue is not a victory, but a defeat, for academic freedom and free speech. Yet the CDTF also realized that the process of resolving disagreements — which might include accepting their irreconcilability — is perhaps more important than the substance of those disagreements. By stressing this point, the CDTF affirmed the proposition that people of good will can remain true to their own beliefs without preventing others from practicing theirs.

In her book *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle Allen argues that the "appropriate metaphor with which to discuss the aspirations of a democratic populace" is "wholeness, not oneness." Oneness denotes homogeneity but potential incompleteness and coercion, while wholeness suggests coherence and integration of multiple perspectives. Following Allen's lead, the CDTF's recommendations seek to bring about wholeness when disagreements emerge, recognizing that the more limited notion of oneness is not always possible — or desirable. |F|

A. Scott Henderson is an associate professor of education. He served as chair of the CDTF and is a former president of the South Carolina Conference of the American Association of University Professors.

Recommendations of the CDTF

The Constructive Disagreements Task Force was charged with formulating recommendations to promote civil and constructive discussions and debates of issues deemed important by the Furman community. The results of its deliberations:

1. The university's rules, policies and other guidelines for students, faculty and staff should explicitly reject sexism, racism, homophobia, intimidation and harassment. While acknowledging that religious and other cultural norms may provide grounds for objection to others' beliefs and practices, university policies should be clear that such objection to others' beliefs and practices is no excuse for intimidation, harassment or *ad hominem* attacks. Such policies may go further and counsel that objections should be phrased in ways that promote tolerance of others' right to practice their beliefs, even or especially when one does not agree with them.

2. First-year Orientation should reflect Furman's Statement of Character and Values (www.furman.edu/personnel/vpaa.htm). In particular, Orientation should not sponsor events that marginalize certain students, but instead create an environment that fosters and celebrates diversity and difference.

3. The university administration (the president and/or provost) should issue timely and decisive responses to any incident or issue that seems intended to make members of the university community feel unsafe or otherwise unwelcome. Such responses should be grounded in Furman's Statement of Character and Values.

4. There should be consistent enforcement of Cultural Life Program policies requiring a commentator, moderator and/or other sources of information to ensure that any given CLP event is placed within an appropriate intellectual, cultural and/or educational context.

5. Students and faculty should be made more aware that a faculty sponsor and/or moderator has the ability to terminate a CLP event and/or rescind CLP credit for an event if behavior during that event is disrespectful or otherwise inappropriate.

6. CLP events should, whenever possible, be organized in response to urgent issues generating significant concern or distress on campus. Proposers, sponsors and the CLP committee should act quickly on all such proposals, recognizing that the four-week deadline for proposals can be waived by a two-thirds vote of the committee.