

Rules Are Just the Beginning

by Kay Norton

One of the great things about a university is its role as a marketplace of ideas. As university leaders, we have a responsibility to create the kind of marketplace where campus community members feel valued, welcome and safe. We can't rely merely on rules and laws to foster this type of environment. We can create it by building community.

Even if we could hire endless numbers of people to enforce our rules, they would be insufficient. As someone who practiced law for many years in a corporate environment where compliance was absolutely vital, I quickly learned the dramatic limitations of approaching compliance as an end unto itself. The law is a tool—a structure intended to keep us from harming each other—but laws alone can't prevent harm. Laws alone don't create a productive learning environment.

As universities, we have obligations that are much broader than those addressed by laws and rules. To meet those obligations, we must rely on the fundamental principles at the foundation of a teaching and learning community. Power and authority are not enough.

A true university community is not only a place where members feel safe, but also a place they value and are willing to protect. This kind of community doesn't just happen. It has to be built, maintained, encouraged and periodically re-examined. We have to ask ourselves how it feels to be a member of our campus communities and how it feels to be a member of the communities surrounding our universities. And if we don't like the answers to those questions, we have to ask ourselves what we're going to do about it.

What can we do? We can teach (and show) students how to engage in a spirited exchange of ideas without becoming adversarial. We can embrace diversity in its broadest sense—in thought and culture as well as in race and ethnicity. We can create processes for hearing and responding to complaints from students and employees. We can stop thinking about winners and losers and resist the urge to keep score. We can stop explaining and start listening—talk with others instead of talking to them.

The underpinnings of this campus community rest on the question, "What can we do for each other?" rather than, "What have you done for me?" Campus community members understand how individual behavior affects the entire community, and when someone violates the community's values, they say, "That's not who we are."

Building this kind of community is a journey that requires continual self-examination. This means taking an honest look at all we do and participating in public dialogue even if it sometimes feels like we're under attack. As a former attorney, I know all about playing defense. But what I've learned as a university president is that defensiveness limits our ability to move forward.

Complaints often represent an undercurrent of frustration on campus. Frustration tends to arise from feeling powerless, so the community we build must be one where campus members know they are heard and can make a difference. In other words, to protect the rights of those who enter our marketplaces of ideas we must encourage questioning and engage in uncomfortable conversations; we must embody what it means to be a university. **P**