



Campus Climates and Public Life

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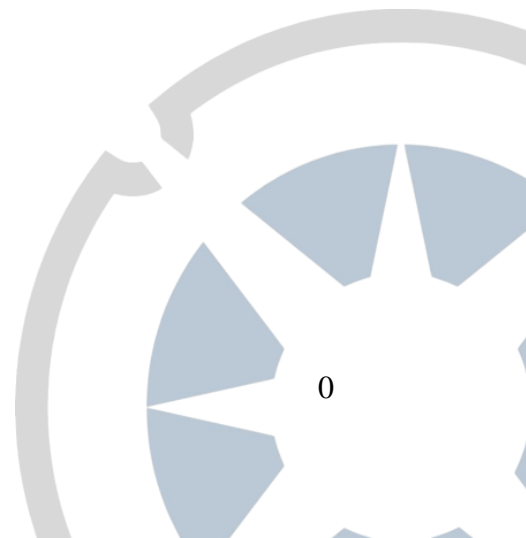
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The theme of this ten-year anniversary conference is the importance of integrative cross-disciplinary research to advancing our knowledge and pursuit of “character, virtues and values in the interest of human flourishing” – the flourishing of individuals and the societies they collectively comprise.

The flourishing of societies and the flourishing of their individual members are deeply related. One might consider the former – the flourishing of societies – to be no more than the sum of the latter – the flourishing of their members. Yet, societies are functional wholes in which the flourishing of many as individuals requires that many flourish in ways that create opportunities for others to flourish. There are several dimensions to this dependence and interdependence, some intimately interpersonal, some civic, some mediated by observance or erosion of norms, and some mediated by institutions. (These are not mutually exclusive categories, nor do they exhaust the possibilities.) There are dynamic psycho-social, epistemic, and institutional aspects of the part-whole relationships – ways in which people are both individually enabled to flourish by the institutions, norms, and resources of the society, and ways in which people collectively build and sustain those institutions, norms, and resources. A key aspect of this flourishing – or absence of flourishing – is our relationships to each other, both intimate and civic, and the ways our personal and civic relationships interact. Another key aspect is the ways these relationships shape, and are shaped by, trust and the flows of knowledge that are regulated by the presence or absence of trust.

A recurring theme of my work has been the roles of psychological *need support* in mediating the internalization and reinforcement of norms and the impact of institutions on individual and collective well-being. Another theme has been *civic friendship*, or mutually recognized mutual goodwill that enables the members of diverse groups within a society to

engage in collective self-governance. I will address civic friendship in what follows, while noting some connections between these themes.

My topic is more specifically the troubling state of civic life, its reflection in controversies surrounding higher education today, and how the climates of university campuses might be shaped in ways that benefit public life. Many colleges and universities recruit diverse student bodies in the expectation that doing so will yield valuable civic learning. They aim to create campus climates conducive to a less polarized and more amicable quality of public life, and I will argue that their efforts could be strengthened by research on intergroup contact. The progress of such research can inform efforts to facilitate civic friendship, and I want to argue that the facilitation of civic friendship is essential to rebuilding trust in public knowledge – the very idea of public knowledge – and our ability as a democratic public to constructively address the problems we face.

Our Campuses Today

Free speech v. safe spaces. The public image of universities today is often shaped less by their actual efforts to promote free and fruitful inter-group dialogue, and more by the fact that they are a battlefield of choice on which culture wars in the society at large are fought. The conventional framing of the free speech v. cultural sensitivity debate is on one side that universities have abandoned free speech in the pursuit of ‘political correctness’ and on the other side that free speech advocacy may license hate speech that seeks to exclude and suppress the participation of unwelcome voices. Philosopher of education Sigal Ben-Porath argues persuasively that we need both free speech and safe spaces for all members of our campus communities, or in other words

inclusive freedom for all to participate in the intellectual, cultural, and civic life of our campuses (Ben-Porath 2017). She argues that colleges and universities in the U.S. are doing better in this respect than it may seem. Student speech is nevertheless inhibited by:

- awareness of polarization and culture war minefields
- fear of saying the wrong thing and being called out
- the burdens of stereotype threat and the energy it takes to speak for an unwelcome perspective.

These obstacles must be overcome, if the educational potential of diverse student bodies is to be realized.

Accusations of indoctrination. Colleges and universities are also being accused of engaging in systematic left-wing indoctrination. While some indoctrination surely occurs at both ends of the ideological spectrum, these accusations are largely answerable, argues Tony Laden (2022). He argues persuasively that the accusations reflect realities of epistemic balkanization in a society deeply dependent on forms of knowledge and expertise that are not widely shared:

- Colleges initiate students into to epistemic trust networks – the most reliable ones we have.
- These epistemic trust networks are also social networks – the people and institutions we are willing trust as epistemically reliable.
- The farther from “elite” epistemic networks students begin, the more transformative and socially disruptive the initiation into the world of elite knowledge can be.
- And the more likely it is that students’ families and friends back home will feel less trusted.

- When a person who trusted you on important topics returns from a distant institution and no longer does – and now trusts people and institutions that you do not – that can look like indoctrination.
- And it can be especially painful if you perceive those “elites” as not respecting you and not acting in your interest (Laden 2022).

Are Colleges to Blame? College Haves and Have-nots

The global expansion of educational systems has made the difference between having and lacking a college degree economically and culturally fundamental to an extent it never was in the past (Baker 2014). Work has been transformed and civic tensions have acquired a worrisome geographic dimension as the four-year college degree has become a requirement for middle-class status in the U.S. People with college degrees are less likely to live in the same neighborhoods, share the same pastimes, or have friendly interactions in other venues with fellow citizens lacking college degrees than they did a generation ago (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). Life expectancy has risen in the U.S. generally but is declining for those without college degrees, owing to deaths of despair by suicide, drug overdose, and alcohol (Case and Deaton 2020). These deaths of despair and the rise of white supremacist and nationalist authoritarian movements are both largely attributable to the disappearance of work that is consistent with civic equality and provides a sense of meaningful and respected contribution to society (Gest 2016; Kruglanski 2021). These patterns have a geographical aspect, involving a rural ‘brain drain’ and far higher concentrations of college educated Americans living in cities than in rural areas. One result of this new geography of opportunity and growing physical separation of college haves

and have-nots is the emergence of *rural v. urban polarization* in the U.S., and a politics of resentment directed toward colleges and college-educated ‘elites (Cramer 2016; Curren, 2023).

In these circumstances, is it not surprising that colleges and universities are objects of mistrust and that the project of public knowledge is in trouble. The underlying geography of opportunity and crisis for men without college diplomas is largely a reflection of evolving labor markets in an era of globalized higher education. Racial and gender considerations in college admissions (aka, affirmative action admissions) have long been an element in the politics of resentment, but: (1) colleges can scarcely be blamed for these attempts to broaden opportunity; (2) white men, who underperform women in high school, benefit from affirmative action far more often than they are disadvantaged by it (Diana Hess); (3) the personal and civic benefits of educating diverse students together can be substantial, if they interact as equals, in cooperative, non-competitive, and rewarding ways, and persist in this long enough to form friendships. Friendships that bridge the growing social and epistemic distances will not solve all the problems, but their power to inform and change minds is profound.

Elizabeth Anderson helpfully distinguishes four stages of inclusion or integration:

- *formal desegregation* (the abolition of legal separation)
- *spatial integration*, or “common use on terms of equality of facilities and public spaces by substantial numbers of all [groups]”
- *formal social integration*, involving cooperation in accordance with ground rules that require equal treatment
- *informal social integration*, involving substantial inter-group friendships, trust, and cooperation that go beyond what the ground rules of formal integration require (Anderson 2010: 116).

The hope in establishing formal social integration, in schools, colleges, and elsewhere, is that the intergroup contact it requires will enable members to learn that they like and can trust, rely on, and be at ease with members of other groups.

Let's consider an example before addressing some key aspects of the theory and research on intergroup friendship.

The Derek Black Story

Derek Black grew up at the epicenter of white nationalism. His father founded Stormfront, the largest racist community on the Internet. His godfather, David Duke, was a KKK Grand Wizard. By the time Derek turned nineteen, he had become an elected politician with his own daily radio show—already regarded as the "the leading light" of the burgeoning white nationalist movement. "We can infiltrate," Derek once told a crowd of white nationalists. "We can take the country back."

Then he went to college. At New College of Florida, he continued to broadcast his radio show in secret each morning, living a double life until a classmate uncovered his identity and sent an email to the entire school. "Derek Black ... white supremacist, radio host ... New College student???" The ensuing uproar overtook one of the most liberal colleges in the country. Some students protested Derek's presence on campus, forcing him to reconcile for the first time with the ugliness of his beliefs. Other students found the courage to reach out to him, including an Orthodox Jew who invited Derek to attend weekly Shabbat dinners. It was because of those dinners—and the wide-ranging relationships formed at that table—that Derek started to question the science, history, and

prejudices behind his worldview. As white nationalism infiltrated the political mainstream, Derek decided to confront the damage he had done. (Saslo 2019: cover synopsis)

Why Colleges Recruit Diverse Student Bodies

For some decades now, colleges and universities in the U.S. have sought to recruit diverse students in the interest of:

- Broader opportunity
- Enhancement of learning
- Benefits for civic life

Breadth of opportunity is a basic aspect of fairness, and it contributes to the breadth and civic import of what students can learn from each other.

The justices of the U.S. Supreme Court are scheduled to hear arguments in a pair of affirmative action cases in its November 2022 session.¹ At stake is the high court's recognition, established in its 1978 ruling in *Regents of University of California V. Bakke*, 438 U.S. 265 (1978) that the diversity of college and university student bodies is a compelling state interest. The National Academy of Education writes in an amicus brief filed on behalf of the respondents that:

¹ The cases brought by Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. against the President & Fellows of Harvard College and against the University of North Carolina, et al.,

This Court has repeatedly held that universities may consider race in admissions so long as that consideration is narrowly tailored to achieve the goal of obtaining the ‘educational benefits’ of a diverse student body. . . . Considering race as one element in a range of factors – including “geographic origin” or “life spent on the farm,” *Bakke*, 438 U.S. at 316 – allows universities to “select those students who will contribute the most to the robust exchange of ideas” on campus. (NAE 2022, 5

The educational benefits for the society are arguably more personal and embodied than the language of “robust exchange of ideas” suggests. Trust is crucial to the credibility we accord ideas and their sources, and networks of trust and also, and crucially, social networks. Sustaining friendly contact between diverse students (and others) is ultimately the social basis on which the politicized state of knowledge and civic polarization can be overcome.

The Importance of Civic Friendship²

There is a widespread perception that in many countries of the world today there has been an erosion of the norms of public life that sustain democracy and cooperation. Norms of goodwill, trust, civility, forbearance, honesty, willingness to listen, reasonableness in evaluating people’s statements and evidence, and concern for the common good are flaunted. As this progresses, members of different political parties and social groups come to be regarded as enemies to be vanquished by any means and whatever the cost, rather than as fellow citizens with equal rights and legitimate perspectives on the public interest. These conditions of factional conflict are often inflamed by demagogues at the expense of democratic constitutional norms. This has occurred in

² This section and the next adapted from Curren & Elenbaas 2020.

Europe and the Americas since the 2008 financial collapse and as migration of displaced populations has grown, but these phenomena were already systematically documented in the constitutional histories compiled by Aristotle and his school in the 4th century BCE. Aristotle's motivation in founding political science was to understand the role of virtues in societal flourishing, and he concluded that civic friendship (*politikê philia*) and education that promotes it are what best unify a society and protect it from painful and destabilizing factionalism.

Aristotle devoted a remarkable proportion of his ethical and political writings to the topic of friendship, and the influence of his ideas in recent ethical thought has made these writings the primary point of departure for current discussions of civic friendship. He wrote that “goodwill when it is reciprocal’ and mutually recognized is friendship (*philia*), and that friendship is ‘the greatest good of states and what best preserves them against revolutions.”³ Civic friendship unifies a society by sustaining goodwill between its many and diverse members. It also supports honest communication, trust, shared governance, belief in a common good and the possibility of impartial justice, and cooperation in achieving shared goals. It prevents a society from dissolving into warring factions. As Aristotle depicts the unification of a society thorough civic friendship, it requires that each individual have some civically significant friendships that connect them in friendly ways to diverse others. The civic well-being of a society requires that most if not all of its members have a limited number of these substantial “civic friendships” and that individuals acquire through these friendships an aspect of civic virtue that could be called civic friendliness or a disposition to exhibit goodwill toward all the diverse members of the society.⁴ When the term *civic friendship* is used to refer to a civic virtue or aspect of civic virtue, it refers to this disposition. What is important to civic friendship unifying a society is how members of the

³ Barnes, 1984, pp. 1826, 2003 (*NE* VIII.2 1155b33-35; *Pol.* II.4 1262b7-8).

⁴ Curren & Dorn, 2018.

society speak of one another, whether they exhibit friendliness and goodwill when they encounter each other, and whether they exhibit a willingness to act for each other's good in the choices they make and policies they support.

Commentators on Aristotle's works have found it challenging to piece together a consistent understanding of his views on the relationships between justice and friendship and on the relationships between close friendships, civic friendship, and bonds of reciprocal goodwill that unify an entire society. A common observation regarding justice and friendship is that friendship seems to make justice superfluous, so that justice is apparently only necessary in the absence of friendship. This has led to some confusion over the relationship between Aristotle's ideals of civic justice and civic friendship. A major sticking point with regard to the relationships between different kinds of friendship is the question of what the basis of civic friendship is supposed to be. The truest, best, or most complete form of friendship is one based primarily on mutual appreciation of good character, according to Aristotle, but commentators often suggest this cannot be the basis of civic friendship. Friendships may also be based on shared pleasures or friends' usefulness, he argues, but he takes valuing people for themselves to be essential to true friendship, and he seems to equate valuing a person as such with valuing the person's character.

Aristotle says more than once that participants in every community of any kind are friends "to the extent to which justice exists between them."⁵ The implication of this is that people enact forms of mutual respect and willingness to act for each other's good to the extent that they deal with each other in ways that are just and mutually recognized as just. Justice requires mutual respect and regard for well-being, so Aristotle's conditions for friendship would be fulfilled when there is justice between two people. Such "friendships" could be as fleeting as

⁵ Barnes, 1984, p. 1833 (*NE* VIII.9 1159b25-31).

a single commercial transaction, but Aristotle's understanding of a just constitutional system is that requirements of mutual respect and goodwill would permeate the society and shape character. A just constitution is devoted to the common good and its laws establish norms of mutual respect that are favorable to the acquisition of virtues of mutual valuing and willingness to act for each other's good. Justice would thus establish a setting in which dispositions of civic friendship could take root.

What ideally takes root even in commercial transactions is not simply a mutual recognition of utility, moreover. In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle offers the empirical generalization that "civic friendship has been established mainly in accordance with utility," but he quickly adds that people "would have come together anyhow for the sake of living in company."⁶ This is compatible with his recognition in the *Politics* of a three-fold sense in which human beings are naturally *politikon zōon* or creatures for whom it is natural to live in a city (*polis*) or as part of an organized society: people need (find it *useful*) to be part of a larger society in order to flourish, they are drawn together by the *pleasure* of living together, and their powers of speech enable them to know what is good and just and cooperate in living well (valuing good *character* and contributing to each other's flourishing). Moreover, he explicitly regards societies as not merely economic or military alliances, but as properly concerned with the goodness of their members. We need to like or think well of the members of the groups to which we belong, taking pride in their accomplishments and feeling shame in their failings. These considerations point to the conclusion that Aristotle's ideal basis of civic friendship is not just the *pleasures* of social life and *usefulness* of cooperation but mutual liking or *appreciating the goodness in one*

⁶ Barnes, 1984, p. 1968 (*EE* VII.10 1242a6-9).

another. This would make civic friendship ideally a form of character friendship, in Aristotle's terms.

If a disposition to civic friendship is a civic virtue, then it is surely this openness to seeing the goodness in diverse members of one's society that it is most directly an antidote to the incivility, distrust, and mutual vilification that so often pervade public life. Being open to seeing and appreciating the goodness in one another is civically important. So too is listening to one another, trusting that people very different from ourselves may have legitimate perspectives and interests we have failed to consider. If civic friendliness is openness to seeing the goodness in diverse members of one's society and acting for their good, it is also an important foundation for the public conversations and deliberation essential to a healthy democracy.

Aristotle's view of the origins of the wide civic friendliness that can unify a society is that it begins in a small number of substantial friendships that are civically important. His conception of how these initial "civic friendships" with "kinsmen, comrades, [and] partners" can lead to a generalized disposition of friendliness toward all members of one's society is that it would involve forming some of these relationships in settings such as schools and clubs that bring different kinds of people together.⁷ In these settings people may become friends with people who are in some ways different from themselves, and those relationships would put a friendly face on kinds of people who might otherwise seem alien, strange, and threatening. This kind of transmission of friendliness was predictable from Aristotle's perspective, because we tend to like our friends' friends, "those who are like ourselves in character" and "those who desire the same things as we desire."⁸ If these are psychological facts, then the more venues there are in which different kinds of people interact in ways favorable to friendship, the more the

⁷ Barnes, 1984, p. 1968 (EE VII.10 1242a6-9). For textual and interpretive details, see Curren, 2000, pp. 129-139.

⁸ Barnes, 1984, pp. 2200, 2201 (*Rh.* II.4 1381a15-20; 1381b15 and 17-18).

society will tend to be unified by civic friendliness and the less likely it is to become civically and politically polarized and uncivil.

From the standpoint of contemporary political sociology, the conditions that lead to civic polarization are complex, but they typically do involve patterns of separation that align across many spheres and thereby inhibit different kinds of people from interacting with each other. These include residential, geographic, occupational, educational, religious, recreational, cultural, and other spheres. An important question confronting many societies today is how they can overcome the separation across all these spheres to promote civic friendship. Although I believe the U.S. has gone too far in expecting all young people to go to college (Curren, 2023), colleges and universities stand out as the institutions that presently provide the best opportunities for cultivating wide civic friendship.

The Research on Intergroup Contact

Aristotle's observations about the transmission of friendliness and how civic friendship (a virtuous disposition of civic friendliness) might develop, is substantially vindicated by contemporary research. Research related to Inter-group Contact Theory (ICT) has advanced our understanding of these matters quite a bit in recent years, especially with regard to the significance of intimate or close relationships and indirect or extended forms of contact. There are forms of inter-group contact that show promise in promoting civic friendship across a variety of identity group divides.

Environments that condone hostility across group lines undermine civic friendship. By contrast, it has long been thought that institutions that bring diverse people together as equals can

promote it. Aristotle identified intermarriage, brotherhoods, common religious rites, festivals, common meals, and common day schools as such institutions, believing that the promotion of friendly contact in these settings would cultivate dispositions of goodwill reaching across the whole society, through networks of overlapping group membership. Empirical work drawing on ICT largely supports these predictions. Bringing people from different social groups together can facilitate the formation of inter-group friendships when these factors are present:

- Participants are treated as equals
- Contact is interpersonal: i.e., repeated and characterized by reciprocal self-disclosure and building of trust
- Contact is pleasant or rewarding
- The authorities and norms of the relevant groups favor intergroup contact
- Those involved have cooperative goals for the contact (Amir 1969; see also Pettigrew & Tropp 2006; Turner & Feddes 2011; Bohmert & DeMaris 2015; Turner & Cameron 2016; Dovidio et al. 2017; Paolini et al. 2021; Turner, Hodson & Dhont 2020).

Inter-group friendships, in turn, protect against the development of prejudice by reducing anxiety about cross-group interactions, increasing empathy across group lines, and promoting respectful behavior. Intergroup friendships and forms of indirect intergroup contact, such as seeing interracial couples, are also helpful in overcoming existing prejudice (Cameron et al. 2011; Dovidio, Eller & Hewstone 2011; Dhont, Van Hiel, and Hewstone 2014; Marinucci et al. 2020).

Marco Marinucci and colleagues (2020) summarize some key findings, as follows:

Intimate relations [cross-group friendships, being roommates, romantic relationships, etc.] have been found to improve explicit and implicit attitudes, attitude strength and accessibility, perceived outgroup variability, empathy, trust, perspective-taking, comfort interacting with the out-group, intended behavior, and the perceived value of intergroup contact, and the reduce blatant and subtle prejudice, perceived outgroup threat, intergroup anxiety, and endorsement of outgroup discrimination in behavior and government policy. (66).

Research has also vindicated the idea I have attributed to Aristotle, that having a “civic friend” puts a friendly face on the outgroup to which the friend belongs. That is, it induces the projection of positive perceptions of the friend onto the entire group. This is known as “group salience” (Paolini et al. 2014). Further, there is evidence that positive effects of direct contact with the member of one outgroup can transfer not just to individuals not directly involved but to other outgroups and their members (the so-called secondary transfer effect; Boin et al. 2021).

Fostering Civic Friendship in an Age of Polarization

Creating college communities that are welcoming, collaborative, and fair to all students can provide settings in which inter-group contact can facilitate civic friendship that is beneficial for the tenor of public life. The resources that can be invested in initiatives grounded in the relevant research are limited on many campuses, but there are many possible strategies. Cynthia Berryman-Fink has enumerated several, beginning with faculty encouragement of cooperative learning experiences, incentives for student organizations to engage in collaborative projects,

pairing of students from different groups as roommates, heterogenous pairings of advisors and advisees, global study experiences, and exchange programs, including between urban and rural campuses (Berryman-Fink 2006, 514).

Examples of Intergroup Programs at the University of Rochester

- Expectations for Excellence, <https://www.rochester.edu/college/fsa/ee/index.html>. “The Expectations for Excellence is an initiative at the University of Rochester to create College-centered fraternity and sorority chapters on campus. The program follows a success-driven model that encourages organizations to become a larger part of the campus community rather than exist as insular groups on the periphery of the College. The program encourages co-sponsorship of events with other fraternities, sororities, and campus organizations as well as greater interaction with College faculty/staff and use of College resources.
- One Community Grants, <https://rochester.edu/college/bic/funding/index.html> “The One Community grant is designed to support culturally based programming and enhance the understanding and appreciation of diversity and inclusion initiatives. We encourage collaborative programs or activities that exemplify the spirit and purpose of supporting diversity and inclusion in our community.”
- United Religions Initiative, <https://www.rochester.edu/chapel/about/index.html>. The Interfaith Chapel at the University of Rochester is a recognized Cooperation Circle within the [United Religions Initiative](#) (URI). URI is a global grassroots interfaith network that works to promote enduring, daily interfaith cooperation, and religiously motivated

violence, and create cultures of peace, justice and healing. The *University Chaplin & Director of Religious and Spiritual Life* works with 10 different campus faith communities and 7 off-campus faith organizations to initiate and promote interfaith programs and education consistent with this mission

Conclusion

In conclusion, there is considerable untapped potential for capitalizing on the detailed knowledge emerging from research on intergroup contact to improve the climate of colleges and universities in ways beneficial to public life.

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