
PROLOGUE

On Learning to Disagree Agreeably

Some years ago there was a minister in Norman who was fond of admonishing his flock to “disagree agreeably.” He spoke from experience, literally having practiced what he preached. Among the issues of his time were desegregation of schools and public facilities and the repeal of prohibition in Oklahoma, both of which he advocated at some personal cost within his own congregation.

Such was his reputation as a mediator that the University of Oklahoma asked him to chair a human rights committee charged with studying the Little Red dispute. When the group recommended retiring that controversial but beloved mascot, the OU family demonstrated that they had mastered disagreement but flunked agreeability.

That good man and his seemingly unattainable goal have been on my mind quite a bit lately, for the University is becoming a battleground for differing agendas—political, economic, moral, social, ethnic—reflecting as always the conflicts within society. We seem to be in the midst of a cycle of overheated opinions, disdain for opposing views, pressure from special interest groups of every description, and yes, even character assassination and threats of retaliation.

University campuses are ready-made for such controversy. Nowhere else can you find such a fertile field for ideas, creativity, differing viewpoints, youth-driven enthusiasms or freedom to experiment. The faculty is packed with authorities in every field of thought and practice imaginable, an inexhaustible resource for their students—but also for the media. They are called upon for comment or analysis every time the world shakes with another international incident, a crazy takes a hostage or blows up a building or hijacks an airplane, a congressional committee holds a newsworthy hearing, a major political appointment is considered, sweeping eco-

nomical proposals surface, or some new medical or scientific discovery offers hope or fuels alarm.

Of course comment invites opposing comment, especially at public institutions where the tax-paying public has every right to comment, criticize—or even occasionally to praise. Most academicians understand that. What is more difficult to comprehend is the frequent misinterpretation of the very nature of a “university,” which by definition is “comprehensively broad,” encompassing all or many subjects.

Differences of opinion, internal or external—or controversy, if you prefer—even criticism does not harm a university that is responsibly pursuing its mission. Harm comes from acceptance of the idea that somehow a university should not accommodate differences of opinion, and when, believing that, old friends become disaffected or lost.

How often do our alumni and friends say, “This just isn’t the same university anymore?” Well, no, it isn’t; it never has been.

A campus buffeted by clashing views is nothing new. The founding of the University was marked by a tug-of-war between North and South—geographically, politically and religiously. In 1892 parents worried about their progeny falling on evil ways in Norman’s “notorious” saloons. Parents in 1945 had similar concerns about the welfare of their daughters when the battle-hardened veterans of W.W.II returned to the campus. President Bizzell had his own parental problems; his son-in-law publicly backed the losing candidate in the 1938 gubernatorial race, and the new governor—an alumnus—killed the OU dormitory construction bill.

You can’t get much uglier than the reaction to the application of the first black to the OU law school. At one point in 1948 students demonstrating in her

support assembled on the north oval, tore up the 14th Amendment to the Constitution of the United States and burned the pieces in a cookie can. The anti-Vietnam War demonstrations in 1970 threatened to bring in the National Guard to take over the Norman campus.

The Hunt for Red Professors in 1949 turned up nothing but newspaper circulation, but 40 years earlier faculty members had been fired for cigarette smoking and Republicanism. Remarkably, through it all, the University has survived—despite conservative alienation when eastern liberal Herb Hollomon became OU’s president or liberal dismay when the office went to the fundamentalist preacher Bill Banowsky.

A few summers ago, a friend of mine took her soon-to-be-a-senior daughter on a cross-country college shopping tour. The mother was looking for something in a liberal arts institution—small, serene and safe, preferably ivy-covered, nestled in the rolling, grassy hills of a secluded, typical college town. The daughter had other ideas. She opted for more cosmopolitan surroundings, a university in a large city with a full complement of academic and extracurricular activities and opportunities.

As a mother, I sympathized with my friend; in these times of turmoil, most of us would like to find a safe haven for our children—and for ourselves. Safe from the violence of cities, from questionable values, from controversy and disturbing ideas. An ideal place, a picture-postcard place.

We used to have ivy-covered buildings at the University of Oklahoma—until someone discovered that ivy weakens the mortar that holds the bricks together.

—CJB