

ON CIVILITY

Every fall for the last many years, we have issued statements concerning the virtue of civility on campus. This principle is one of several that Berkeley staff, students, faculty, and alumni themselves developed and today regard as “fundamental to our mission of teaching, research and public service.” To quote further from our “principles of community”: “We are committed to ensuring freedom of expression and dialogue that elicits the full spectrum of views held by our varied communities. We respect the differences as well as the commonalities that bring us together and call for civility and respect in our personal interactions.” For a full list of these stated principles, please see <http://berkeley.edu/about/principles.shtml>.

In this year’s email, I extended this notion of civility to another crucial element of Berkeley’s identity, namely our unflinching commitment to free speech — a principle this campus will spend much of this fall celebrating in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the Free Speech Movement.

My message was intended to re-affirm values that have for years been understood as foundational to this campus community. As I also noted in my message, these values can exist in tension with each other, and there are continuing and serious debates about fundamental issues related to them. In invoking my hope that commitments to civility and to freedom of speech can complement each other, I did not mean to suggest any constraint on freedom of speech, nor did I mean to compromise in any way our commitment to academic freedom, as defined both by this campus and the American Association of University Professors. (For the AAUP’s Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure, please see <http://www.aaup.org/issues/academic-freedom>.)

I did, however, express my conviction that in the ongoing debates on campus about these and other issues we might collectively see the value of real engagement on divisive issues across different perspectives and opinions. By “real engagement” I mean openness to, and respect for, the different viewpoints that make up our campus community. I remain hopeful that our debates will be both productive and robust not only to further mutual understanding but also for the sake of our overriding intellectual mission.

Sincerely,

Nicholas B. Dirks
Chancellor