"The Ordeal of Civility in Academe" [1]

Cheryl B. Leggon
Wake Forest University

As we enter the 21st century, there is some concern that the level of civility in American society is declining. Results from a recent survey indicate that Americans report that in their opinion this is a serious problem ("The American Uncivil Wars," U.S. News & World Report, April 22, 1996). This essay seeks to explore civility in a microcosm of society, academe. There seem to be two academes. One is the idealized representation of academe, (how academe is supposed to be), which, for the purposes of this paper, will be called "acadream". Acadream can be considered to be an utopia insofar as it is "not a place". The other representation of academe is all to often the reality that too many academics experience; this will be called "academon." For heuristic purposes, acadream and academon can be considered to be polar opposites; the one is the antithesis of the other. If acadream is the academe depicted in Dead Poets Society (Robin Williams, Thomas H. Schulman, Peter Weir, 1990), then academon is the academe depicted in Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf (Albee, 1962). These two versions of academe can be compared along the following dimensions: sense of community; performance appraisal (including perception of individual academic achievement); notions of collegiality; and civility. Before making this comparison, however, it is useful to discuss academic cultures and subcultures.

Academic cultures and subcultures. Despite significant differences among disciplines, there are certain commonalities in terms of academic culture that can be explored. Smelser (1994) describes the culture of academe as a strange historical mixture of different – and often conflicting—principles to maintain consensus, as well as leftover elements of a religious calling. Often, sociologists include this notion of religious calling in trying to distinguish between a profession and other occupations. Academics are among the last of the true believers. Indeed, many academics became academics because they believed that the ideal of academe is the way academe exists in the real world. This is especially true for people from marginal groups in society, such as, for example, African Americans, Hispanics, and women. When academic true believers who find themselves in academon (instead of acadream) behave in accordance with values and norms that characterize the academy at its best (acadream), they become strangers in the strange land of academon.

Academe has been described as an intricate and Byzantine world full of contradictions, in which nothing is as simple as it seems (Becher, 1996: 33). Expectations of the professoriate are vague and unclear; the public’s understanding of the professorate is even more so. (Ridley, 1998). Much of the research on academe focuses on departments and institutions in the top tier of the academic world. Little research is done on the lesser lights in the academic constellation. This essay discusses both categories.

Ranks of colleges and universities are not based strictly on such sources as the Carnegie classification and popular periodicals, such as U.S. News and World Report. Ranks are based on other reputational data. It is important to note that ranking departments based on reputational data also occurs within a college or university as well as within a discipline.
Within the context of a specific college/university, to the extent that a department is perceived by faculty, administration, and students as academically rigorous and intellectually sound, that department is viewed as making significant contribution to the institution's mission. Upper tier departments are perceived to make such contributions; lower tier departments are not. In acadream, upper tier departments abound; in academon, lower tier departments abound. Lower tier departments are viewed as "service" departments that provide courses for students to meet institution-wide requirements; this constitutes a very limited contribution at the lowest level to the college/university mission.

Disciplines constitute the core around which faculty subcultures form. Disciplines have distinctive cultures (or subcultures) consisting of customs, practices, beliefs, morals, rules of conduct, symbols and their shared meanings (Becher, 1996). These cultures function as lines of demarcation that separate one discipline from another, one subfield from another, and one department from the rest of the discipline and/or institution. Academic disciplines are characterized primarily by an abiding concern with defending their own intellectual "turf".

Regardless of discipline, academics act as gatekeepers as they determine areas and issues of "legitimate" inquiry as well as the accepted (acceptable) theory and methods for research. Academics control who becomes part of a community of scholars through controlling the course of study and certification, hiring, tenure, and promotion. As gatekeepers, academics emphasize the distinction between "they" and "we" (Rose, 1974). This distinction is not only between disciplines but also between members of a department in a single discipline. In upper tier departments, distinctions may be based on orientation, such as, for example, theoretical versus applied. In lower tier departments it is often based on political differences concerning departmental "politics." More than one former university president has noted that in university politics there is an inverse correlation between the level of viciousness and what is at stake.

The processes of establishing and maintaining these distinctions between "we" and "they" in the academy are similar to those among ethnic groups, insofar as group membership heightens feelings of being included in one group while simultaneously heightening feelings of being excluded from other groups. Members devise elaborate strategies and practices to exclude those deemed not to "fit in." The criteria for "goodness of fit" are determined by those who are already in the inner circle of the discipline or the department. In top tier departments, the goodness-of-fit criteria include such objective indicators, as an individual's track record of grants and publications. This is not to say that top tier departments do not use subjective criteria, they do. However, the difference is that subjective criteria are usually invoked in acadream as a last set of hurdles through which a candidate must jump, while in academon, they constitute the first set of hurdles. The following is a composite of discussions about a potential candidate that is not atypical for departmental hiring committees: They have creative research—but is it on the fringe? Their research is in one area—but is it too narrow? Their research is "all over the place"—but should it be narrower? They get good teaching reviews—but are they "playing to the audience" of students. The result is that the department ends up reaching a compromise and extends an offer to a non-controversial, inoffensive candidate—who is second rate at best.

First, top tier departments seek colleagues who are productive (or have the potential to be productive); then from
among the productive the final choice is made in terms of extant department members’ assessment of who will best fit with them. This final choice is based on factors ranging from professional considerations such as how many students a candidate is willing to supervise or advise, to such trivial personal ones such as whether the candidate plays golf.

Background characteristics—specifically who one is, from where one comes, one’s values and attitudes—are important. Studies of scientists in "hard" disciplines such as the physical and biological sciences, indicate that these background characteristics have a great impact on the scientific enterprise. Specifically, who does science is important in terms of: what topics are selected for research; the theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches applied to the research question(s); what questions are asked; and how the research will be used (Leggon, 1997). When the occasional outsider—e.g., woman, person of color, maverick, or a combination thereof—is given tenure, they are marginalized, insofar as they are on the fringes or in the outer circle (Zuckerman, 1992). In other words, the outsider is in the department but not of the department. This marginalization can be an advantage in academon. First, it excludes the marginalized from petty departmental politics. Second, it encourages and facilitates sustained interaction with professionals outside of the insular, lower tier department.

In the upper tier departments, those who do not fit are those who are judged as not being productive enough. In the lower-tier departments, those who clearly outshine the "elders" are viewed as threats to the established departmental order. Consequently, a covert but important criterion for hiring, is that the newcomer not be as good as the incumbent members of the department. Although this can work in upper tier institutions, carrying this out to its illogical conclusion in lower-tier departments results in a rapid and severe deterioration in faculty quality. Since the incumbents of lower tier departments tend to be low producers already, what occurs is a downward spiral in terms of both productivity and quality of the department.

**Community in Acadream and Academon.** Communities consist of people interacting regularly with each other over time. Communities are defined by their norms, i.e., the rules and expectations for behavior that they place on their members. The greater the extent to which a member of a community meets those expectations by following community norms and rules, the more reliable (and less threatening) that person is perceived to be by the community. In the utopia of acadream, the academic community is based on genuine and mutual trust and respect among members. Community members recognize differences among themselves in disciplinary subfields and intellectual interests (as well as political philosophy). They respect these differences instead of grudgingly tolerating them—or being outright intolerant. In academon, on the other hand, the academic community is based on a forced consensus, which creates a very precarious solidarity. Differences among community members—especially those concerning departmental politics—are viewed as threatening to the community. In acadream, departmental governance focuses on obtaining resources to enhance faculty's ability to discharge their professional responsibilities. In academon, departmental governance focuses on controlling department members through the strategy of divide and conquer—that is, playing on their myriad insecurities, feuds, and agendas.

Becher (1996) describes the academic community as fragmented and contends that this fragmentation of the academic community into discrete disciplinary subcultures is to blame for reducing the internal sense of community across
academic fields; this is also the case within departments. In acadream, the sense of community is based on mutual respect
and trust--despite any differences that may exist in terms of philosophy or politics. In academon, on the other hand, the
sense of community is artificial insofar as it is based on a forced sense of community that is created by the imposition of
"rules" of conduct and courtesy, and attempts to reinforce it through mandatory socializing.

**Collegiality and Colleagueality.** Academe is a profession. The hallmark of a profession is that it is an occupation that
has made a social contract with society's legal and political institutions (Hall, 1994). This contract gives academics the
power to govern their own professional affairs with a minimal amount of intervention by the state. This contract between
academe and the larger society is based on academics persuading both the legal and political systems that because academics
have highly specialized knowledge, competence, and expertise they should be able to "police their own." In other words, this
contract is based on the assumption that non-academics cannot determine whether or not academics are meeting their
professional and ethical standards.

Smelser (1994) describes the polity of the research university as consisting of a group of equals from whom civility
and mutual influence are core political values. However, he notes, this works only in the context of the shared belief that the
university is indeed a unified community. In formal parlance, "collegiality" refers to sharing authority among colleagues. In
common parlance, the word has evolved to "connote a live-and-let live mentality among colleagues and coworkers, an
atmosphere of reasonable bonhomic that keeps professional differences from escalating to personal animosity and crisis"
(Romano, 2000, p. B6). Given this definition, therefore, it is not surprising that most colleges and universities use the
criterion of collegiality in hiring, tenure, and promotion decisions. What may surprise the non-academic is that in some of
these decisions, collegiality is often invoked as the last criterion on which to base a decision--or more accurately on which to
justify a decision. Consequently, collegiality can be described as the last refuge of academic (academonic) scoundrels.

If collegiality is the ideal that characterizes acadream, then academon is characterized by the polar opposite of
collegiality. Romano (2000, p. B6) coined the term "colleagueality" to refer to this antonym, and defines it as "the normal
state of affairs among professors.... that includes backbiting, envy, irresolvable feuds, hidden agenda, contempt,
cowardice--all naturally laced into some of that good fellowship of 'collegiality.'"

**Cosmopolitans vs. Locals: Acadream and Academon.** Acadream is characterized by cosmopolitanism: academon is
characterized by localism. Departments in upper tier institutions of higher education or upper tier departments in a college or
university tend to be comprised of cosmopolitans, who set the defining values for the discipline and/or institution. Faculty in
some lower tier departments consists of locals, who set the defining values for the department, which can be--and often
are--at odds with those of the larger discipline and/or the college/university. Gouldner (1957) argues that highly professional
academics tend to identify more strongly with external colleagues in their extended professional networks than with
colleagues within their own department or institution, because they may have much more in common with the former than
with the latter. This is especially true in the information age, when technology enables academics to maintain contact with
colleagues who are geographically distant. Lower tier departments' isolation from the rest of their disciplinary world enables
them to create and maintain a fantasy world in which "a mutual admiration society" is created. This mutual admiration society creates an image of the department that tends to be both self-supporting and self-perpetuating. This is a prime example of "groupthink," which is the tendency of group members to conform to the opinions of the group, resulting in a narrow view of some issue (Macionis, 2001). In groupthink, the group discourages its members from challenging any of the group's ideas.

Lower-tier departments tend to be characterized by an "entrenched conservatism, the jealous guardianship of the status quo, especially among the more" senior members who act as an obstacle to promising innovations as well as to those who espouse them (Becher, 1996, p. 71). Senior members of upper tier departments command respect from both members of their college/university and their discipline for the totality of their intellectual contributions to the discipline and the institution. In lower echelon departments, senior members command respect for their longevity and localism. Often, they have not made much of an intellectual contribution to the discipline or the institution, nor have they ventured beyond the confines--intellectual as well as geographic--of their department.

Performance appraisal in acadream and academon. Inherent in the academic enterprise is the rating and ranking of subfields, research topics, departments, presses, journals, methodology, theoretical orientation--and, of course, scholars. Members of faculty tenure and promotion committees wield a great deal of power over not only faculty members' livelihood in the short term, but also their careers in the long term. In acadream departments, junior scholars are evaluated by senior scholars, who are their superiors in terms of productivity. In academon departments senior faculty are superior only in terms of longevity--i.e., time spent in the department--and are often inferior to junior scholars in terms of productivity.

In acadream objectivity reigns, and there is genuine freedom in research. Young scholars are free to choose their research topics based on intellectual rigor, canons of the discipline and, in some cases, relevance to policy. Academon is characterized by an illusion of freedom in research. Young scholars are constrained in choice of research topic not by intellectual or disciplinary considerations, but by political considerations. For example, research concerning less powerful and prestigious groups such as women and people of color--is viewed as "less legitimate" than research concerning more powerful and prestigious groups. Moreover, in academon, interdisciplinary journals are viewed as less prestigious than non-interdisciplinary ones. Interdisciplinary journals tend to be viewed as being on the cutting edge in acadream, and on the fringes or margins in academon.

Faculty evaluation is purportedly based on the objective appraisal of achieved characteristics of the performance, not the subjective appraisals of the ascribed characteristics of the faculty member. In the utopia of acadream, evaluation focuses on a scholar's performance--measured as objectively as possible. By contrast, in academon, evaluation focuses on such subjective traits as a faculty member's loyalty to their departmental group and adherence to that group's norms. This appraisal depends on the extent to which the scholar is perceived as paying sufficient homage or deference to the senior people in the department--the elders. (In contemporary common parlance, academon evaluation focuses on the intensity and frequency with which a junior scholar kisses senior faculty members' academic ring--metaphorically speaking, of course.)
acadream, there is a halo effect to the extent that the strong academic performance of one member of the department, reflects well on the rest of the members of the department. Conversely, in academon the stellar academic performance of one department faculty member is viewed as threatening to the other members because it highlights their low productivity and/or threatens their weak self-esteem. The insularity of faculty in academon engenders and nurtures ignorance about both the discipline and the profession. Such ignorance can severely negatively impact upon how the entire department is viewed by the discipline and/or home institution.

Historically, teaching--impacting knowledge--was the sine qua non of academe. How well teachers taught determined whether and how much they were paid. Then, a major shift occurred from teaching to scholarly productivity as the defining feature of academe. Yet, ironically, the standard route to a research career is still through a teaching appointment (Becher, 1996). In top-tier institutions, there appears to be an inverse relationship between a scholar's ratings as a teacher and as a scholar. Indeed, anecdotal data suggest that for an untenured person, receiving a teaching award is the "kiss of death" for tenure, because one's senior colleagues assume that one is spending too much time on teaching, and therefore, not enough time on research. In lower-tier institutions, teaching evaluations can be used selectively to support the "elders" case for inclusion--or exclusion (or their case for or against promotion) in the department.

Scholarly productivity has come to be defined operationally in terms of publications (and grants in the biological, physical, and social sciences). In the social sciences, for example, one measure of publications often used is the Citation Index, which keeps track of the number of times a publication (book, article, chapter) has been cited. First, citations are most frequently used to indicate that the scholar has done her/his homework insofar as they are aware of previous work in their research area. Second, citations serve to support a scholar's work by reinforcing their ideas. A third--and perhaps, less obvious--use of citations is based on what social scientists call the "halo effect"--that is, citations indicate the intellectual company that a scholar keeps (Becher, 1996). It is ironic that the citation index does not provide the context of the citation. That is, it does not indicate whether a publication was cited so many times because it makes a positive contribution to the literature, or because it is a good example of how NOT to make a positive contribution.

The emphasis on publications is so great that even lip service is often not given to teaching. This is especially true of the top tier research institutions. Anecdotal data indicate that some faculty at these top institutions boasts that if they had a choice between an excellent scholar and an excellent teacher, they would choose the scholar every time. This implies that the roles of scholar and teacher are diametrically opposed to one another, instead of being complementary--and even synergistic. Even for higher education institutions that define themselves as teaching institutions, there is a catch. Increasingly, they use publications as a primary criterion for tenure and promotion, yet they do not provide the infrastructure and support for faculty to publish. Many faculty members find this "catch-22" situation frustrating at best, and disingenuous at worst.

Civility and Incivility. [2] Civility is a persistent social concern. Stephen Carter (1998) contends that "Civility is a tool with which our society civilizes us" (213), and that the role of civility is to help make tolerable aspects of life that might
otherwise prove intolerable (181). "Civility enables us to cushion the impact of the many slights and indignities of everyday life" (184).

According to the Swiss sociologist Norbert Elias, rules of civility began to develop in Europe at the same time that the authority of the church began to be superceded by the authority of the nation-state. Rules of civility taught the importance of gaining control over individual instincts and acting for the common good. Indeed, "civility supposes an obligation to a larger if anonymous group of fellow citizens" (Carter, 1998, p. 280). The idea of the common good superceding the individual good is a hallmark of democracy. If a successful democracy requires disagreement and debate, civility provides the guidelines within which that debate should occur (Carter, 1998, p. 132).

To be civil, an individual must be generous when there is cost, and trust when there is risk (Carter, 1998, p. 94). One major prerequisite for civility is a sense of commonality. In acadream, this commonality is based on genuine mutual trust and respect among members, which comprise the source of genuine politeness. In acadream, ethics and etiquette are inextricably intertwined. In academon, commonality is based on a forced sense of community; consequently, rules of etiquette function as indicators of mutual respect and trust that do not exist. Academon exemplifies the negative consequences of disentangling ethics and etiquette; separating them weakens both (Schlesinger, 1946, pp. 64-65).

Civility builds upon itself; incivility builds upon itself (Carter, 1998, p. 231). Civility promotes the kind of genuinely open discussion that does not mask disagreements but gives all participants the opportunity to convince one another. Civility requires that each participant listens to others, and is willing to acknowledge the possibility that another is right and they are wrong. Incivility promotes "bounded discourse" in which some ideas can be expressed and others cannot (Carter, 1998, p. 134). Bounded discourse inhibits civility, because it suppresses or masks differences instead of acknowledging and working through them. Indeed, "the mean-spirited and closed-minded cannot hold the public discussions on which successful democracy rests (Carter, 1998, p. 80). From a power perspective, bounded discourse functions to keep some ideas from becoming dominant. Since those in power make the rules of discourse, they can control the ideas that are discussed thereby solidifying and/or increasing their power.

Civility in acadream and academon. Civility functions quite differently in acadream and academon. Disagreement and civility can co-exist peacefully in acadream, because the community is based on genuine mutual respect among its members. In academon, disagreement is perceived as threatening because the sense of community is contrived, insofar as it is not based on genuine respect and trust among its members. Consequently, collegiality and civility are invoked to mask or eliminate disagreement. This not only "protects" the group's integrity, but also reflects and reinforces the control of those in power.

In acadream, civility allows for dissensus on some things; in academon, civility requires consensus on everything. The precariousness of "solidarity" in academon drives community members to search only for additional evidence that supports their vision of the world--academic and otherwise, and never for evidence that may contradict that vision. In other words, they do not want to be confused with the facts because they have already made up their minds. Leonard (1999) finds
this ironic because as intellectuals, academics pride themselves on their critical faculties.

Civility allows for the constructive criticism of others in acadream. In academon, constructive criticism is viewed as threatening to the precarious solidarity of the group. In acadream, civility is based on respect and trust, and functions to remind community members to treat each other with respect—even when they disagree. In academon, civility is based on superficial rules of etiquette used to create and maintain an esprit de corps or a sense of community that does not exist. Indeed, in academon, there is no true civility. At best, there is a pseudo-civility that is actually incivility in disguise.

Conclusion. The central points in this essay are summarized in the table below. In light of the foregoing discussion, one can conclude that civility is necessary in academe to establish and maintain a true sense of community and collegiality. It is not easy for individuals to be civil because civility requires generosity when there is cost and trust when there is risk, (Carter, 1998: 94) This is exemplified in Thomas Moore's Utopia, which is "an ideal world in which everybody does the right thing, even when it is costly, and does it by instinct and without complaint" (Carter, 1998: 187). While it is difficult to practice, civility is not an ordeal. The true ordeal is being in an environment (like academon) in which incivility reigns.

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<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>ACADREAM</th>
<th>ACADEMON</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>is of community</td>
<td>Mutal trust &amp; respect</td>
<td>Forced conformity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of relations</td>
<td>Collegiality</td>
<td>Colleagueality</td>
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<td>Performance Appraisal</td>
<td>Objective</td>
<td>Subjective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faculty member's academic achievement</td>
<td>Supportive; &quot;Halo effect&quot; (reflects well on all)</td>
<td>Threatening to some</td>
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<tr>
<td>Choice of topic</td>
<td>Scholar is free to choose their research topic; legitimacy of topic is determined by the intellectual canons of the discipline. Genuine freedom in research.</td>
<td>Scholar is constrained by political considerations in choice of research Topic. Topics are hierarchized based on political not intellectual or disciplinary considerations. Illusion of freedom in research.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Freedom of action to pursue research issue or question</td>
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<tr>
<td>Basis</td>
<td>Genuine: based on mutual respect and trust</td>
<td>Forced: based on superficial rules of etiquette used to create &amp; maintain an esprit de corps that does not exist</td>
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<tr>
<td>Functions</td>
<td>Promotes genuinely open discussion Allows for dissensus on some things Encourages constructive criticism of others</td>
<td>Pseudo-civility = Incivility under the guise of civility Limits open discussion; promotes bounded discourse, which inhibits civility Requires consensus on everything</td>
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"The Ordeal of Civility in the Academy" http://web.archive.org/web/20060914141613/http://www.lsus.edu/la/jour...
WORKS CITED


Dead Poets Society (1990?). Touchstone Pictures w/Silver Screen Partners IV.


ENDNOTES
Any resemblance to any institution or department is not intended. Because this is an essay and not a research paper, citations will be kept to a minimum. However, some citations are necessary to show that the author's opinions and observations have not developed in an intellectual vacuum. This section is largely based on and influenced by Stephen Carter's *Civility* (1998).

It is not a coincidence that the discipline of sociology developed around this same time—i.e., the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the European countries that were experiencing the greatest change, namely, England, France, and Germany. These countries experienced the rise of a factory-based industrial economy, which led to the explosive growth of cities, and new ideas about democracy (Marcionis, 2001).