

Escaping the morass of incivility

Our 2012 Iowa Character Awards dinner was held on August 3.

Among the 13 award recipients was Dr. David Maxwell, president of Drake University. The following is an excerpt from Dr. Maxwell's speech.

"In 1993, the Drake University Faculty Senate approved a tremendously important document, the *Statement of Principles*, that as served—certainly in my tenure—as a constitutional document that provides invaluable guidance situations that often require extremely thoughtful, careful and nuanced decision-making, and in closing I'd like to share part of that document with you.

'Drake encourages and protects diverse perspectives and the free flow of ideas and discussion among its members. Such diversity and *differences of opinion generate debate that produces knowledge and a greater understanding of what it means to be fully human . . .*

' . . . We realize that freedom of thought and freedom of expression produce conflict and challenge. We encourage civil debate and discussion of divergent perspectives and opinions in a manner that affirms our community. We seek to create a community in which shared purpose transcends difference and respect for human dignity transcends conflict. . .

'The encouragement of civility does not, however, mean that Drake seeks to avoid public debate or suppress open and candid discussion of troubling and controversial issues. Nor do we seek to discourage or chill the expression of unpopular opinions or challenging perspectives. To preserve the university's central role as a public forum of ideas,

Drake upholds the right to express unpopular and provocative viewpoints, including expression that may be dramatic, emotive, or imperfectly articulated. . .

‘While cherishing and defending freedom of speech to the full extent protected by the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, Drake University declares its abhorrence of statements that demean, denigrate, humiliate, or express hatred toward members of the university community. Words do indeed have consequences. Words may be hurtful. Speech should be a thoughtful process. Speaking irresponsibly can negatively affect morale, motivation, and community. Responsibility calls us to be sensitive to the harmful effects of hostile speech and to refrain from speaking in demeaning and discriminatory ways. . .’

“I’m sure that you’ve noticed as I’ve read these passages that there is a troubling disjuncture between the core values of Drake University, the role of the University in a civil society on the one hand, and contemporary public and public policy discourse. The challenge for us as the higher education community, for us as Drake University, and for me as Drake’s president, is to find ways to regain our previous position in the public consciousness, to find ways to influence to quality of debate, to find ways to escape from the morass of incivility and hostility in which we have immersed ourselves. It’s a difficult and complex challenge, but one that we have to manage if we are to reclaim and fulfill our central responsibility in a civil society.”

You can read the full version of his remarks [here](#).

Learn more about character education.