

Academic Civility: Improving Workplace Relationships

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Conceptualizing Academic Relational Civility

Academic Relational Civility (ARC) is a critical construct within higher education, defined as the manifestation of respectful and considerate behavior in interactions among students, faculty, administrators, and staff within the academic environment. It transcends mere politeness, representing a commitment to fostering a positive, ethical, and intellectually stimulating climate where all participants feel valued and safe to engage in rigorous discourse. ARC is fundamentally proactive, requiring individuals to actively choose behaviors that promote mutual respect, fairness, and collegiality, even--and especially--during moments of disagreement or conflict. This concept acknowledges that the academic enterprise relies heavily on **relational trust** and effective communication, making civility not a superficial courtesy, but a core professional competency essential for institutional flourishing and mission achievement.

The scope of ARC is broad, encompassing both formal and informal interactions across the entire institutional ecosystem. It applies equally to classroom discussions, departmental meetings, committee work, email communications, and performance reviews. Unlike general social civility, ARC is specifically contextualized by the unique demands of academic life, which often involve intense scrutiny, intellectual challenge, and high-stakes evaluation. Therefore, true academic civility requires the ability to critique ideas rigorously without attacking the person, maintaining professional boundaries, and exercising **intellectual humility**. When ARC is present, it acts as a foundational lubricant, minimizing friction and allowing energy to be directed toward learning, research, and service rather than conflict management or navigating passive-aggressive behaviors.

Defining ARC often involves distinguishing it from simple compliance with rules. While policies against harassment or bullying set the minimum acceptable standard, civility demands an elevated level of engagement. It is the voluntary adherence to an ethic of care and respect that goes beyond legal or contractual obligations. This voluntary nature is crucial because organizational climate is shaped far more by the daily, routine interactions--the micro-behaviors--than by formal policies alone. A civil academic environment is one where individuals consistently demonstrate patience, listen actively, and seek understanding, thereby reinforcing a culture where vulnerability and honest intellectual exchange are encouraged rather than penalized. This sustained effort builds the social capital necessary for effective collaboration and conflict resolution within complex, hierarchical institutions.

The Foundational Dimensions of ARC

Academic Relational Civility is multi-dimensional, built upon several interlocking behaviors and attitudes that guide professional conduct. The first foundational dimension is **Respect for Persons**, which dictates that every individual, regardless of their position, background, or

intellectual viewpoint, is treated with dignity. This means recognizing the inherent worth of colleagues and students, even when their opinions are fundamentally opposed to one's own. In practice, this manifests as attentiveness during conversations, acknowledging contributions, and avoiding dismissive or condescending language, which are often subtle hallmarks of academic incivility that erode morale over time.

The second critical dimension is **Fairness and Procedural Justice**. Civility demands that processes--such as grading, tenure review, resource allocation, and committee assignments--are transparent, equitable, and applied consistently. When academic processes are perceived as arbitrary or biased, even isolated incidents of incivility can escalate quickly, leading to widespread cynicism and distrust. A civil environment supports the principle that disagreements should be resolved through established, impartial mechanisms, and that all parties have the right to be heard fully and without prejudice. This dimension ties civility directly to organizational ethics and governance, requiring leaders to model and enforce just practices consistently.

The third dimension is **Constructive Communication and Discourse**. Academic life is centered on the exchange of ideas, and civility ensures that this exchange is productive rather than destructive. This involves the ability to deliver difficult feedback tactfully, utilize "I" statements to express concerns without assigning blame, and prioritize clarity and professionalism in all written and verbal communications. Crucially, constructive discourse means engaging with the substance of an argument rather than resorting to *ad hominem* attacks or utilizing sarcasm and passive aggression as tools of intellectual combat. Civility transforms potential confrontations into opportunities for mutual learning and problem-solving, sustaining the intellectual mission of the university.

Finally, **Empathy and Emotional Intelligence** form the psychological bedrock of ARC. Civility requires recognizing that colleagues and students are dealing with personal and professional pressures. Emotional intelligence allows individuals to modulate their own reactions, recognize non-verbal cues indicating distress, and respond compassionately to others' needs. This is particularly relevant in high-stress situations, such as deadline crunches or difficult advising sessions. A civil individual understands that while academic rigor is paramount, it should never be pursued at the expense of human well-being, demonstrating flexibility and understanding when appropriate while still maintaining high standards of performance.

ARC in Contrast to Incivility and Toxicity

Academic Relational Civility is often studied in opposition to academic incivility, but it is important to recognize that civility is a positive, active force, not merely the absence of negative behavior. Incivility refers to low-intensity deviant behaviors that violate norms of mutual respect, such as ignoring emails, arriving late to meetings, interrupting speakers, or failing to acknowledge the work

of others. These behaviors, while seemingly minor, accumulate over time to create a hostile and draining work environment. Toxicity, on the other hand, represents a more pervasive and entrenched state, often involving patterns of bullying, harassment, and deliberate attempts to undermine others' professional standing or psychological safety.

The continuum of behavior ranges from high civility (proactive support and respect) through neutrality, mild incivility (rudeness), to extreme toxicity (bullying/harassment). ARC is fundamentally concerned with moving the institutional culture toward the proactive end of this spectrum. When civility is merely defined as "not being rude," the organization settles for mediocrity. True ARC requires individuals to intervene positively when they witness incivility, rather than remaining passive bystanders, thereby reinforcing the communal commitment to respect. This active intervention distinguishes a truly civil environment from one that is merely compliant.

One of the most insidious forms of incivility in academia is **passive aggression**, which often masks hostility under a veneer of professionalism. This can include withholding necessary information, giving backhanded compliments, or subtle sabotage disguised as oversight. Because ARC emphasizes transparency, directness, and genuine respect, it acts as a powerful antidote to these covert forms of aggression. Institutions committed to ARC must develop clear behavioral expectations that address these subtle forms of disrespect, ensuring that professional conduct is judged not just by output, but by the manner in which interpersonal relationships are managed and maintained.

Theoretical Underpinnings and Ethical Imperatives

The importance of Academic Relational Civility is supported by several robust theoretical frameworks. **Social Exchange Theory (SET)** posits that relationships are based on a cost-benefit analysis. In a civil academic environment, the benefits (relational trust, cooperation, positive morale) far outweigh the costs (emotional labor, stress). When incivility dominates, the costs skyrocket, leading to withdrawal, reduced organizational commitment, and high turnover as individuals seek environments where the social exchange is more favorable. Civility, therefore, is an investment in human capital that yields significant returns in productivity and loyalty.

Furthermore, ARC is deeply intertwined with concepts of **Organizational Justice**, particularly interactional justice. Interactional justice relates to the fairness of interpersonal treatment received during decision-making processes. When faculty or students feel they have been treated with dignity and respect, even if the outcome of a decision (e.g., a grant rejection, a failed course) is negative, their commitment to the institution and their willingness to accept the outcome remains higher. Civility provides the mechanism through which interactional justice is enacted daily, ensuring that respect mediates all organizational processes.

Ethically, ARC aligns strongly with professional codes of conduct that emphasize collegiality,

integrity, and responsibility. The imperative for civility stems from the unique role of the university as a custodian of knowledge and a trainer of future professionals. Faculty members, in particular, have an ethical duty to model civil discourse, as they are teaching students not only how to think but also how to interact professionally in complex environments. By promoting ARC, institutions uphold their broader societal obligation to foster environments where ethical behavior and reasoned debate flourish, reinforcing the core values of academic freedom within a framework of mutual accountability and respect.

The Impact of Civility on Institutional Climate and Learning Outcomes

The presence or absence of Academic Relational Civility profoundly impacts institutional climate, which in turn affects virtually every aspect of academic operation. A highly civil climate is characterized by high levels of trust, open communication, and psychological safety. This climate fosters innovation and collaborative research, as faculty members feel secure sharing nascent ideas that might be vulnerable to critique. Conversely, environments plagued by incivility suffer from high interpersonal conflict, siloed departments, and reduced willingness to engage in cross-disciplinary projects, resulting in stunted intellectual growth and diminished research output.

For students, ARC is directly linked to enhanced learning outcomes and persistence. In a classroom where the instructor models civility--respecting student questions, facilitating debate fairly, and providing constructive feedback--students are more likely to participate, take intellectual risks, and report higher satisfaction with their educational experience. Incivility, whether exhibited by the instructor or peers (e.g., microaggressions, dismissive comments), creates a hostile learning environment, leading to student disengagement, anxiety, and eventual withdrawal from challenging courses or the institution entirely. Therefore, promoting ARC is a vital pedagogical strategy essential for maximizing student success.

Institutionally, civility plays a crucial role in faculty and staff recruitment and retention. Universities that are known for positive, civil working environments are more attractive to high-quality candidates, especially those from underrepresented groups who may have experienced incivility elsewhere. High rates of incivility contribute significantly to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and turnover, particularly among junior faculty and staff who lack the power to challenge negative behaviors. Investing in ARC training and enforcement mechanisms is thus a strategic necessity for maintaining institutional stability and minimizing the substantial financial and human costs associated with employee attrition.

Moreover, ARC affects the university's external reputation and its ability to secure funding. A reputation for internal conflict or unethical behavior, often stemming from unchecked incivility among powerful faculty or administrators, can damage relationships with alumni, donors, and legislative bodies. When internal communication is civil and constructive, the institution presents a

unified and professional front to the external world, enhancing its credibility and reinforcing its status as a reliable partner in research and education.

Individual and Interpersonal Manifestations of Civility

At the micro-level, Academic Relational Civility is demonstrated through specific, observable behaviors that govern daily interpersonal interactions. One key manifestation is the management of electronic communication. Given the reliance on email, ARC requires prompt, clear, and professional responses, avoiding emotionally charged language, and exercising caution regarding tone, which is often easily misinterpreted in digital formats. A civil colleague uses appropriate salutations, respects response times, and uses digital communication to clarify rather than escalate potential misunderstandings.

Another critical manifestation occurs in mentoring and supervisory relationships. A civil mentor provides honest yet supportive feedback, respects the autonomy of the mentee, and avoids exploitative or overly demanding behaviors. They model appropriate professional boundaries and celebrate the mentee's successes without jealousy or insecurity. Conversely, uncivil mentoring often involves gaslighting, taking credit for a subordinate's work, or using power differentials to exert undue emotional pressure, severely damaging career trajectories and personal well-being.

Furthermore, civility is crucial during academic meetings and committee work, which are often flashpoints for conflict due to competing interests and limited resources. A civil participant ensures that meeting protocols are followed, listens without interrupting, critiques ideas with evidence rather than emotion, and respects time constraints. They contribute proactively to finding consensus and avoid behaviors designed to dominate the discussion or marginalize dissenting voices. These small acts of respect transform potentially contentious proceedings into productive deliberative forums, essential for effective academic governance.

Strategies for Cultivating and Maintaining ARC

Cultivating Academic Relational Civility requires a multi-pronged approach involving institutional commitment, clear policy, and continuous training. Institutions must first clearly define ARC and articulate it as a core institutional value, ensuring that this definition is integrated into mission statements and communicated widely. This definition must move beyond vague concepts of "niceness" to concrete behavioral expectations that are measurable and enforceable.

Effective strategies for promoting ARC often include structured educational programs focused on behavioral skills. These programs should address:

Conflict Resolution Training: Teaching techniques for managing disagreements constructively, focusing on interests rather than positions.

Emotional Intelligence Workshops: Enhancing self-awareness and empathy among faculty and staff to improve interpersonal sensitivity.

Bystander Intervention Training: Empowering individuals to safely and effectively interrupt incidents of incivility when they occur, reinforcing collective responsibility.

Communication Protocols: Establishing clear guidelines for professional email etiquette and meeting conduct.

Leadership commitment is paramount. Administrators must model civil behavior in their own interactions, especially when communicating unpopular decisions. They must also consistently enforce civility standards, ensuring that policies addressing incivility are applied fairly and swiftly, regardless of the seniority or prestige of the individuals involved. When leaders tolerate incivility from high-status faculty, it sends a powerful, negative message that undermines all efforts to cultivate a civil culture. Accountability must be integrated into performance reviews, recognizing and rewarding civil behavior while addressing uncivil conduct through progressive disciplinary measures.

Finally, institutions should leverage formal structures to reinforce ARC. This includes establishing dedicated ombuds offices or conflict coaching services that provide confidential, impartial resources for navigating interpersonal difficulties before they escalate into formal grievances. Regular climate surveys are also essential tools, allowing institutions to diagnose specific areas where incivility is prevalent and tailor interventions accordingly, ensuring that the commitment to civility is continuously assessed and refined based on empirical data.

Measurement and Future Directions in Civility Research

The measurement of Academic Relational Civility typically relies on self-report instruments and behavioral observation scales designed to assess the frequency and severity of both civil and uncivil behaviors. Researchers often utilize instruments such as the Nursing Incivility Scale (adapted for academic settings) or custom-designed instruments focusing on relational behaviors, communication patterns, and perceptions of organizational justice. A key challenge in measurement is capturing the subjective experience of incivility, as the perception of disrespectful behavior can vary significantly based on cultural background, power dynamics, and individual sensitivity.

Future research in ARC needs to move beyond simply documenting the prevalence of incivility toward developing and testing sophisticated interventions. There is a strong need for longitudinal studies that track the efficacy of civility training programs on long-term institutional metrics, such as retention rates, research productivity, and improvements in student mental health. Furthermore, research should explore the intersectionality of civility and diversity, examining how incivility disproportionately affects marginalized groups and how ARC can be specifically cultivated to

create more equitable and inclusive academic spaces.

Another important direction involves the study of digital civility. As academic work increasingly relies on asynchronous and remote communication, understanding the unique forms of incivility that emerge in virtual environments (e.g., cyberbullying, tone policing, aggressive use of reply-all functions) and developing targeted digital civility protocols is essential. Ultimately, the goal of ARC research is to transition civility from a reactive management issue to a fundamental, integrated component of professional identity and organizational strategy within higher education globally.

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