

What Private Colleges Can Learn From Public Universities About Public Spaces

By CAROL T. CHRIST

It's not a glamorous metaphor, but I'm often tempted to liken my role as a college president to that of a landlord or small-town mayor. The constituents may be different, but the contexts are much the same: thousands of diverse individuals, living and working in proximity, leading essentially private lives in a communal setting. That point was driven home to me recently when a dispute about noise between students in adjoining rooms -- neighboring tenants, so to speak -- helped ignite campuswide demonstrations about racism. What seemed at first like a personal conflict between a black student and a white student quickly became symbolic of the college's attitude toward race. When people live together in a community, interactions that are fundamentally private and personal, the stuff of daily life, are quickly transfigured into public issues.

Since becoming the top administrator several years ago at Smith College, a small, private, liberal-arts institution, I have given a great deal of thought to private and public space. The history of political protest at my former institution -- the University of California at Berkeley, where I served as provost -- has made that institution almost synonymous with the public staging of issues. The campus has a flamboyant, often theatrical, tradition of public debate. Sproul Plaza, the great open space on which the Free Speech Movement took shape in 1964, symbolizes Berkeley. That era in the campus's history defines an important element of its culture: Issues get debated, vigorously, in public space. The private lives of students are almost invisible. Although Berkeley may occupy an extreme on the political spectrum, its tradition of public debate is very much a part of the culture of virtually all of our

public institutions.

The situation at most private colleges is quite different. In those residential enclaves, the private, indeed, predominates. At Smith, the spaces that most resonantly define the college for alumnae -- and often for prospective students -- are the houses, designed to look like family homes, in which 95 percent of the students live. On the one hand, the experience of living in a relatively small, homelike setting can create deep institutional loyalty and provide an important entry point for new students into the campus at large. On the other hand, intense private communities and their centrality to institutional identity make it difficult to create public spaces for robust debate.

I have come to believe that public space is vital to building a healthy and rich sense of diversity -- diversity not only in racial and economic terms, but also of political opinion, religious belief, sexual orientation, and cultural background. Such space provides an opportunity for people to disagree about matters of political conviction without personalizing the debate. That is particularly true at this moment in academic life, when students come to college steeped in the politics of identity and affiliation, and suspicious that disagreement can be expressed or received in anything but personal terms.

In part, public space is just that: a physical space. Some of the spaces, like Sproul Plaza, are the product of evolution and tradition. Others, like the campus center that just opened at Smith, are intentional attempts to create public space where little existed before, and to declare -- with the full force of clapboard, glass, and steel -- that this is a place specifically erected to foster the free and open exchange of ideas.

The new building at Smith is not a student center, but a campus center. With the exception of the student government, no group

owns any space within it. In designing the building, the architects envisioned a roofed-over marketplace, a village square, full of open walkways and gathering spaces in which everyone could see themselves as part of a community, engaged in a wide variety of activities. The campus center tries to create the sense of an urban street in a small town.

But public space on a campus is also, and more pervasively, a function of climate and mind-set. Classrooms and lecture halls are, and should emphatically be, public spaces in which debate is modeled, provoked, and complicated, without threat to one's feelings or identity. Sadly, the reality is often very different. As one of my Smith colleagues has observed, "One can attend a public lecture almost anywhere, ... many dealing with provocative topics, and rarely witness an equally provocative intellectual challenge from the audience to the ideas that have been presented. Critical views ... never seem particularly welcome and always appear a bit out of place."

It's often beyond the classroom -- in the dormitory, the locker room, the dining hall -- that the personal collides with the public. Lacking both expressive space and rhetorical confidence, many of today's students freeze when faced with disagreement. They take it personally -- "You're silencing me!" -- or conclude the exchange by apologizing to their adversary -- "I didn't mean to hurt your feelings."

Such reactions echo closely the findings of a 1998 study at Grinnell College, in which students were asked whether it would be possible to discuss a range of diversity-related issues, like racial differences and multiculturalism, with civility and balance. "The majority of students," the survey found, "not only thought that balanced discussion of these issues was impossible but feared that a single viewpoint would dominate -- and feared reprisal if one spoke against that perspective."

At many institutions, students' difficulties with public debate became clear at the start of the Iraq war. Panel discussions and other campuswide events sometimes became strongly polarized. Supporters of the war claimed that their voices were marginalized on predominantly liberal campuses. At Smith, students sponsored forums on the war in their houses, an important step in opening essentially private space to public debate. However, they instituted elaborately structured debate rules, including balanced representations of all views and equal applause for all speakers, that seemed to signal their generation's discomfort with principled public argument.

How we talk about public and private space is as important as how we create it. When private colleges produce admissions literature replete with metaphors of family and community, of connection and belonging, it's not surprising to find students of all backgrounds expecting intimate connections and social ease. When we market student residences as near-private homes, imitating the structures and functions of the family, we posit a harmony and a bond that probably don't, and probably shouldn't, exist. As the Grinnell researchers aptly observed, "Promising our students that we will make them comfortable" -- in this sense, emotionally and psychologically -- "may simply confirm them in their view that they have the right not to be challenged."

While public universities can learn a good deal from private colleges, the reverse seems true with respect to recruiting a socially and ethnically diverse student body and developing a sense of public space. The dialogue about public responsibilities that informs our public universities locates those institutions firmly within such public space. Those of us in private colleges need to build a more robust sense of public culture by identifying our public commitment and exploring our public responsibilities.

In public institutions, students feel that they have a right to belong by virtue of being citizens of their state. Public charters promise inclusivity. Private colleges define their student bodies differently. The desire to build institutional loyalty leads us to emphasize a more exclusive sense of belonging. The sense of belonging is not always the best starting point for understanding and embracing diversity as part of the college's mission.

The metaphors of family and community that we so readily use can become obstacles. A model of diversity that says our goal is to create a harmonious and loving unity is not going to succeed. After all, public arguments with strangers are easier than family fights. Private colleges need a set of metaphors that use their own more familial environments to encourage debate within the context of longer-term relationships.

A model that acknowledges the possibility of respect without love, opposition without apology, will take us much further. We need to imagine a more urban sense of diversity, one that understands the variety of difference as the very texture of our lives. To achieve an urban sense of diversity, we must become more adept at moving from the private house to the public space, where we welcome debate, with the expectation that strong argument not only affirms belief but changes it.

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