

An Open Letter to Members of the Centre College Community
August 20, 2018

The College leadership—specifically its senior administrative team and the College’s trustees—has spent considerable time this summer focused on how we respond to the student demonstration activity of May 2-4, being certain that we make something good and productive of these conversations. I believe that the community at large shares a commitment to use this moment as a time to add strength to the College, all the while preserving the culture that makes Centre’s campus a place where community members can be heard and express themselves, are safe and valued, and agree to conduct themselves in ways that are respectful, civil, kind, and caring.

As noted in the Centre College Work Plan for Diversity & Inclusion, Fall 2018 and Beyond, developed this summer, “The College will continue to encourage freedom of speech and expression and, as noted in other parts of this Work Plan, will redouble its effort to provide students opportunities to be heard.” At the same moment, and in the interest of protecting the institution’s academic and general student life programs, as well as its respect for civil discourse, we will work to prepare standards for engagement with our community members that fit within the College’s policies. Of course, these standards will need to be measured and clear and also in line with Centre’s culture, where new ideas are welcomed and where all members of the community are treated with dignity and respect.

So, having been clear that we—the College community at large—are not only committed to our Statement of Community but also are determined to “be better and do better with those things that are distinctly Centre,” then it falls to us to identify the standards for how we will conduct ourselves in ways that underscore the community’s commitment to being a place known for its honesty, spirit of adventure, hard work, kindness, fairness, respect, accountability, forgiveness, and joy. The four standards for engagement are shared below in a manner and spirit that holds the promise of making Centre College a better and stronger place for all students.

Before calling off those standards, let me add that our College community has some healing to do as a result of May 2-4. While some number of our community members participated in the activities of those days, a larger number did not, and there are some who believe that the May 2-4 conversations did not represent their views or their estimation of how the College should conduct itself going forward. The very culture of this College is of great value, and it will fall to each of us to find ways to engage each other in civil conversation; to find ways to forgive and reconcile with each other that are honest and kind; and to find opportunities to celebrate our common values and goals—ones that supersede our differences of opinion.

1. Community members, as has always been our practice, are invited and welcomed to visit with me, with others members of the Senior Staff, or other administrative officers. These people stand ready to make time for such meetings. If you have questions about “whom to call,” you are invited to contact either Dr. Andrea Abrams in her interim role as Associate Vice President for Diversity Initiatives or Mr. Jamey Leahey, the College’s Vice President for Legal Affairs & Planned Giving. Moreover, community members, beginning in fall 2018, may also share their thoughts and provide feedback on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion at the College via an online form located on the Diversity page within Centrenet. The form may be submitted anonymously, but it also includes an opportunity for respondents to share their contact information if they desire follow-up. When submitted, the form will be distributed automatically to the three diversity and inclusion staff members for review and either direct action or for routing to the appropriate office for action. A summary of what is reported via this mechanism will be compiled each semester. While a bias-incident reporting tool—a more formal reporting mechanism—is in development, I hope this new form will serve as a useful tool for community members to share their views.

2. Community members, as has long been our practice, are encouraged to work through the governance bodies that serve the College: the Faculty Steering Committee for faculty members, Staff Congress for staff members, and the Student Government Association for students. The leadership names and phone numbers for these three groups are readily available on the College's website or can be obtained by calling Dr. Abrams or Mr. Leahey. As well, I will work with SGA to attend two student open forums—one in each of the long terms—so students will have set points in time to come and ask questions, share comments, and hear those of their peers.
3. Community members have always enjoyed the freedom to speak and to express their views, to demonstrate, to protest, and to march in support of their views. These are hallmarks of our democratic way of life and, similarly, of an institution of learning. However, there have always been limits to these freedoms when they disrupt the normal operations of the campus for others. The Student Conduct Code prohibits disruption of the College's academic or general student life programs in the broadest sense, and such actions will result in consequences administered by the appropriate administrative officer or the campus committees and councils charged with these responsibilities. As a private, independent institution, Centre has the privilege to establish guidelines or standards by which members of the community can express their stated right to free speech and expression. As such, community members should understand that their participation in demonstrations, marches, and occupations that disrupt the College's normal operation and policies will be subject to measured and appropriate consequences that are spelled out in the College's Conduct Code. Examples would include a choice to stay in a College building after that building's closing hours, a choice to physically block the entrance to a College building, or a decision to disrupt a scheduled College event.
4. With regard to the academic program, community members who choose to miss class in order to participate in an organized demonstration should recognize that their absences or any missed assignments or examinations need to be attended to in the appropriate manner. Moreover, in all situations faculty, as has long been the case, are strongly encouraged to follow their syllabus and maintain their normal schedule of class meetings, as doing so ensures equal and fair treatment of the entire student body.

I close by noting that some number of those hearing or reading this message may agree or disagree with what I have laid out in this letter. You may be sure that I welcome you to stop me on campus or come by my office to talk with me about your point of view. What you have heard or read represents the College's attempt to put the "civil" back into civil discourse; to protect the academic and related student life programs that define the Centre experience; and to help Centre remain a place where people can disagree without becoming disagreeable.

My best,
John

*John A. Roush, President
Centre College
8/20/2018*