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# Living in Public

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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 when a noise dispute between students in adjoining rooms — neighboring tenants, so to speak — helped ignite campus-wide demonstrations about racism. What seemed a personal conflict between a black 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 transfigured quickly into public issues.

Since becoming the top administrator several years ago at Smith College, a small, independent, 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. Its 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 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, for example, the spaces that most resonantly define the college for its alumnae — and often for prospective students — are the houses, designed to look like family homes, in which 95 percent of students live. Smith's founders intended this system of residential housing — called the “cottage system,” in contrast to a “congregate system” that housed all college activities, including residential quarters in a single building — to integrate students in the residential and familial life of the town. This house system shapes campus culture; at commencement students receive their diplomas not in alphabetical order, or by order of their major, but by house. Smith students' experience of living in a relatively small, home-like setting

creates deep institutional loyalty and provides an important entry point for new students into the campus at large. However, the intense private communities of the houses and their centrality to institutional identity can sometimes make it difficult to create public spaces for robust debate.

## Building Public Space

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 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 could be expressed or received in anything but personal terms.

In part, public space is just that: a physical space. In designing Sproul Plaza, for example, its architects made a deliberate attempt to create the kind of public square characteristic of European cities, and to bring the pattern of surrounding city streets into the campus itself. The Free Speech Movement demonstrated that they were, perhaps, more successful than they imagined.

Other college spaces, like the campus center that recently opened at Smith, are intentional attempts to create public space where little existed before. The building 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 architectural firm of Weiss/Manfredi envisioned a roofed-over marketplace, a village square full of open walkways and gathering spaces, in which the community could see itself as a community, engaged in a wide variety of activities.

Activities housed in the building bring people inside — the post office, the campus store, a cafe, open Internet terminals. It also has many small seating areas — areas in which to read, to talk, to share a cup of coffee. In shaping such spaces, the building makes extensive use of glass; indeed, many of its meeting rooms are transparent to those passing by. Moreover, a curved walkway extends from the sidewalk in front of the building, through its middle level, out to a large lawn defining one of the campus's principal quadrangles. From the walkway it is possible to see much of what is going on in the building. As such, the architects successfully managed to create an urban street in a small town.

Students congregate at the entrance to the new student center at Smith College.  
Photo courtesy of Weiss/Manfredi Architects. Photographer Jeff Goldberg/ESTO.



### Supporting Public Life

But public space on a campus is also, and more pervasively, a function of climate and mindset. 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. 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, in the locker room, in 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 issues like racial difference or 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 during the Iraq war. Panel discussions and other campus-wide events sometimes became strongly polarized. Supporters of the war claimed that their voices were marginalized on predominately 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 representation of all views and equal clapping 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 admission literature replete with metaphors of family and community, of connection and belonging, it’s not surprising to find students — of all backgrounds — expecting intimate connection 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 bond that probably doesn’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.”

### From Private House to Public Space

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 responsibility that informs our public colleges and universities locates these institutions firmly within public space. Private colleges need to build a more robust sense of public culture by identifying their public commitments and exploring their public responsibilities.

In our 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. Their desire to build institutional loyalty leads them to emphasize a more exclusive sense of belonging. This sense 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 private colleges so readily use can become obstacles. A model of diversity that says that 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 “familiar” environments to encourage debate within the context of longer-term relationships. A model of diversity that acknowledges the possibility of respect without love, opposition without apology, will take us far 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 public space, where we welcome debate, with the expectation that strong argument not only affirms belief, but changes it.

**Opposite:** The central skylit passage through the new student center at Smith emphasizes the public quality of activities that occur there. Photo courtesy of Weiss/Manfredi Architects. Photographer Jeff Goldberg/ESTO.