Final Report

Committee on Speech and Inclusion
Middlebury College

January 2018

Preface

Late in the spring of 2017, President Patton and I appointed a group of twelve individuals – four faculty, four students, and four staff – to serve on a committee to explore issues relating to the March 2nd campus visit by Charles Murray, the associated protests, and their aftermath. Immediately following those events, we sent a message to the community asking for recommendations about how we might productively respond to what had happened on our campus. The most frequently offered suggestion was the creation of a broadly inclusive group to help guide our efforts. We solicited volunteers to serve on this group, and the committee's members were chosen from among more than sixty students, staff, and faculty who stepped forward.

The Committee on Speech and Inclusion was charged with engaging issues that were challenging and intentionally broad, including "freedom of expression, inclusivity, and the educational and civic challenges of the 21st century." This was an ambitious undertaking for a group of people convening for the first time, especially given that they were chosen to reflect the broad array of opinions and perspectives that characterize our community. Moreover, the goal was for the committee to complete its work by the end of the calendar year, a short timeframe in which to achieve consensus about contentious issues. Within these parameters, the group's agenda was its own to create.

In many respects, this group and their deliberations have represented both the challenges we face and the opportunities ahead of us. The conversations the committee had were sometimes difficult and revealed differences of opinion that extended beyond the issues of speech and inclusivity. The group experienced and grappled with the differences in power accorded to faculty, staff, and students on our campus and how those differences influence who speaks up and what they are willing to say. They confronted their own and others' assumptions about what community means and how a fully inclusive intellectual community should function.

Speaking as one who had the privilege of sitting with them throughout their deliberations, their efforts are a potent reminder of the value of respectful, informed, and rigorous debate and engagement by a diverse group of individuals united by a sense of common purpose. This is, after all, what we are about in higher education, and it is foundational to our mission at Middlebury.

The results of their deliberations, about which you will read in this report, call upon all of us to be responsible – individually and collectively – for creating an inclusive community that not only tolerates disagreement, but engages it confidently, thoughtfully, and with humility. It is in this way that we can learn from one another and take fullest educational advantage of the wisdom, perspectives, and experiences represented by our diversity.

I want to thank the committee members for their time and energy, and especially for their willingness to step forward to do work that was ambitious, uncertain, and initially fraught with controversy. Thanks as well to Gail Borden, who provided very helpful support to the committee. The last year was a trying one for the College, but the work of this group represents Middlebury at its best, and I am confident that the community will benefit from their thoughtful recommendations.

Susan Campbell Baldridge
Provost on Leave

Introduction

Middlebury College has had a difficult year. Our community was deeply divided over Charles Murray's visit in March 2017. As a campus, we soon discovered that many of the questions raised by the events of early March are in fact long-standing concerns for Middlebury and other higher education institutions.

In April, the provost assembled a small group of college community members in an effort to identify a way forward. The members of the Committee on Speech and Inclusion (CSI) represent a wide variety of stakeholders and perspectives. As a coalition of faculty, staff, and students, we each brought our own experiences and priorities to our many formal meetings and informal conversations.

We have wrestled with the same issues that others on campus are confronting. We had conversations that were not always easy. Our role has not always been clear, which has led each of us to consider carefully our commitment to this process. Over time, however, we established a pattern of deliberation, one based on the sort of mutual respect and understanding that emerges in durable relationships. We have come to a set of strong conclusions about how members of the Middlebury Community should engage with one another.

The recommendations below highlight four places in which we can foster inclusive settings for robust dialogue and wide-ranging speech. We focus on community standards, continuing dialogue, classroom climate, and the role of visiting speakers.

These are only some of the tough issues that the committee has tackled. Fortunately, as we have been grappling with them, we have discovered that seemingly unbridgeable gaps between distinct positions are not quite as wide as we originally thought. While there will undoubtedly remain some irreconcilable positions among faculty, staff, and students, much of the acrimony has come about because of minimal dialogue and mutual misunderstanding. Robust disagreement is useful and necessary in higher education, but that disagreement must be based on respect and careful listening. We are each responsible for the way we speak and engage with other members of our community.

As a multi-stakeholder group, the committee has focused on college-wide ethics and practices. Thus, the suggestions below are not necessarily policy recommendations, but appropriate governance groups might choose to take legislative action to institutionalize some of these ideas.

Recommendations

Community Standards

Drawing on existing Community Standards, our committee has drafted a set of recommendations that we believe will promote a welcoming environment for all students, faculty, and staff. The core values supporting such a community are:

- Cultivating respect and responsibility for self, others, and our shared environment
- Encouraging personal and community growth in a challenging but respectful intellectual environment
- Manifesting integrity in all decisions and actions
- Creating a diverse and inclusive community that fosters empathy and open-mindedness

These standards have guided the committee members' engagement with each other during our deliberations, and we recommend that this revised language be adopted by all community groups on campus. These standards could be included in student, faculty, and staff orientation and training. They provide a framework for our everyday interactions with each other, and we hope that, given sufficient prominence, they can also inform our decision-making during times of crisis and disagreement.

Continuing Dialogues

We have a responsibility to one another to establish durable relationships within the community. To that end, continuous, deliberative, and potentially difficult dialogue is vital to a healthy community. This is our top priority. We have found that the best way to address any issue is to consider how we talk with one another - how we listen and how we express ourselves. To expand our knowledge and enhance our relationships, students, staff, and faculty should make space for deliberation within and across different sectors of our community.

Our breakfast and dinner events on November 15th offered one model that could be useful going forward. Over food and in small groups, our gently-guided discussions focused on a small number of pre-determined questions (see appendix). These conversations offered valuable insight for the committee and prompted open discussion. Both the topics and format provided opportunities to invite and amplify marginalized voices across the campus.

These types of dialogues could be set up before or after important events. There are a variety of formats that these deliberative conversations could follow, including but not limited to:

- A deliberative dinner or coffee hour held monthly, based on questions submitted by anyone on campus.
- In-depth discussion facilitated through short readings in advance.
- A day-long symposium by this campus, for this campus.
- Deliberative events before and after controversial speakers to promote open dialogue.

Middlebury is home to hundreds of people with expansive knowledge, life experiences, and perspectives. Many members of our committee and community have wondered how we can create space for deliberation in our busy professional lives. To have more deliberation, we will have to do less of something else. One practical way to create space for these dialogues on campus would be a moratorium on outside speakers for a discrete period. Engagement with outside perspectives is critical, but so is nurturing our educational community. To make space for community members to engage with one another, we suggest the month of January as a potential time to be regularly set aside for convening campus conversations.

Classroom Climate

In our small group discussions at the community events in November, we heard many students concerned about narrow or hostile views being expressed in the classroom, and a lack of avenues for addressing their resulting discomfort. We have heard from students across a range of categories – class, race, sexual orientation, political ideology – who report situations in which they have been made to feel that certain ideas are not welcome.

Both professors and peers can subtly or unintentionally reinforce one idea in a way that limits the range of views expressed. On occasion, people are also asked to represent an entire category of persons – white male athlete, woman of color, international student, and so on. This call for representation can place a substantial burden on those individuals while missing the opportunity to see a wider array of ideas.

To be clear, we cannot evaluate how frequently these issues occur in the classroom. We each know of many impressive examples of effective teaching, fair treatment, and effective inclusion. Yet the reports of limiting discourse in the classroom demand attention. Students' fear of repercussions from the professor can prevent them from reporting issues. Fear of social sanction from peers can keep students and professors from speaking up at all. We need to rethink the way that we build the community in each classroom on this campus.

What does an ideal classroom look like, and how do we reach it? There are many models on this campus and beyond, but we need a more intentional focus on negotiating difficult topics in the classroom at a small liberal arts college. Currently, the primary mechanism for evaluating courses is an end of semester evaluation. This system of input offers little insight into the quality of discussions, offers no immediate remedy for problems in the classroom, and generally comes too late as useful feedback. We lack a method for evaluating classroom climate and for facilitating teaching styles that encourage wide-ranging and respectful discussion.

We encourage our community to reflect on the unrealized potential of the classroom. We recommend that faculty and administrators invest in exploring approaches to dialogue, managing hot topics, and building community. One easy change for professors may be the adoption of voluntary anonymous mid-course evaluations, which can create opportunities for corrective measures and new discussions about difficult topics. We also suggest that students approach classroom discussions as a place to develop and test new ideas, allowing themselves and their peers to explore a wide range of evidence and arguments. This requires that the classroom be a space in which people feel free to speak openly while also being responsible for listening carefully.

Inviting and Engaging with Outside Speakers

As a final topic, the committee offers suggestions for how to handle cases of invited speakers who might be perceived by some segment of our community as controversial or offensive. We invite all members of the Middlebury community – hosts and audience members - to be more conscientious about the choices they make. As a matter of everyday ethics for engaging in respectful disagreements, we recommend consideration of the following claims.

Recommendations for Hosts and Sponsors

Our committee has continued to struggle with how to balance the ideal of a public sphere with the specific goals of an educational institution. We do agree that hosts and potential sponsors must think seriously about how issues of power and privilege complicate arguments about free speech. For marginalized groups, the ideal of a public sphere as a level playing field where all can freely express themselves is far from the reality of their experience. People from marginalized groups may not feel they can exercise their freedom of speech, and it can be counter-productive to call for more speech that adds to this sense of exclusion, particularly in a small community like ours.

Hosts may consider these issues and still conclude that some speakers can contribute to a productive conversation. If so, we urge them to offer ample time for the campus to prepare. This is not a call for

restraints on speech, but for respect for the community, so that visiting speakers can engage in productive dialogue and disagreement. In addition, we encourage hosts to consider formats and venues that facilitate the expression of opposing viewpoints. Finally, in the highly politicized and polarized environment of this country, we urge critical consideration of outside funding sources and the possible agenda behind such funding.

Recommendations for Potential Audience Members

Middlebury's new vision statement claims that we seek "a world with a robust and inclusive public sphere where ethical citizens work across intellectual, geographical, and cultural borders." Realizing this vision requires consideration of a wide range of ideas. We ask that community members consider how attempts to limit or regulate speech could establish precedents that move us closer towards a culture in which heckler's veto is accepted or where de facto censorship committees serve as gatekeepers. Attempts to curtail speech that is considered offensive or controversial by some can lead to a chilling effect, in conflict with the spirit of our vision statement. Consider the demographics of our setting. Our New England college is predominantly liberal and white, which may limit our students' exposure to a full range of political views and cultural values. In this setting, it is important that we create room for a range of perspectives to prepare our students for national civic life and equip them with tools for engaging in respectful dialogue.

Finally, as a practical matter, the committee urges members of our community to consider who benefits from dis-invitations and "no-platform" silencing of speakers. In the current national climate, campus disruptions have been cited or misrepresented by outside groups and media outlets to discredit higher education *in toto*. When there is disagreement with a speaker, we suggest finding creative alternative options for expressing disagreement. For a more constructive discussion and debate to take place, we recommend that students, staff and faculty organize alternative events where opposing opinions can be heard.

Conclusion

Middlebury means many different things to the members of this committee – a place of work, an intellectual community, an alma mater, a home. This difficult year has provided an opportunity to reexamine the foundations of that community and recommit to building habits of respectful dialogue and disagreement. CSI has provided one space in which students, staff, and faculty have tackled a few difficult questions.

The committee is dissolved, but our work is not done. Members of the committee will participate in a series of campus events convened by PEN America on January 11-12, 2018. We will also host a second round of small group conversations that repeat the format and content of our November events.

Moving forward, the committee members will also be working with various constituencies and governance bodies to advance the work described in this report. There are many other people at Middlebury that have been working on issues of speech and inclusion in parallel with the committee, and we hope our recommendations inform their work as well.

Appendix

About the Report

This report was collectively drafted by the committee during a half-day retreat in December 2017 and finalized for submission in January 2018. Questions about the report can be directed to the Office of the Provost or individual members of the committee, listed below.

Ata Anzali	Religion Department
Shannon Bohler	Art Events Manager
Kemi Fuentes-George	Political Science Department
Tammy Grant	Student Events Services Specialist
Razan Jabari	Class of 2018
Matt Jennings	Editor, Middlebury Magazine
Thomas (Graham) Kenter	Class of 2017.5
Ashley Laux	Program Director, Center for Community Engagement
Sandra Luo	Class of 2018
Sarah Stroup	Political Science Department
Marion Wells	English and American Literatures Department

Acknowledgements

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Attachments

The final two pages of this report offer information on the dinner and breakfast events hosted by the committee on November 15, 2017. The next page includes a copy of the handout that we circulated to all participants. The last page offers a one-page summary of a short follow-up survey. For a copy of the complete anonymized responses to the survey, contact Sarah Stroup (sstroup@middlebury.edu).

Guidelines

Below are suggested "rules of the road" for conversation, drawn from traditions of restorative practices, inclusive pedagogy, and civic discourse. Feel free to suggest others to your group.

<u>Helpful practices</u>

- Take turns – if you find yourself speaking too much, hold back (and vice versa)

- Voice arguments, not opinions. This allows discussion of merits of ideas, not of people.

<u>Types of helpful comments</u>

- Respond to another's comments with "what I hear you saying is…" (in your own words).

- Encourage others to elaborate on what they said.

- Ask cause-effect questions. Ex: "Can you explain why you think that if X is in place that Y will happen?"

- Connect two other people's comments.

- Put issues in the "parking-lot" (important but too big/tangential to take up now).

Questions

Consider the questions below. With the other people at your table, decide which to discuss, and in what order. You may not cover all these topics during today's session.

1. What does it mean to say that speech can be violent? What are the implications of a yes/no answer to this question?

2. What is the Middlebury community to you, and what is the role of free inquiry in that community?

3. Is disruptive protest a form of free speech?

4. In which area(s) do you think Middlebury has the most problems with marginalization – class, race, and/or gender? What steps could the institution take to address these problems?

5. As a student, do you feel comfortable debating topics in class, or taking an opposing position to the professor? For faculty and staff, what about with colleagues?

6. How should we balance the concerns of those who wish to speak and those in the audience that feel marginalized?

Summary of Responses to Survey Questions

Participants in November 15th events, breakfast and dinner

	Faculty	*Staff*	*Students*	*Total*
Breakfast RSVPs	25 (26%)	44 (46%)	27 (28%)	96
Dinner RSVPs	17 (17%)	14 (14%)	70 (69%)	101
Survey Responses	17 (24%)	25 (36%)	28 (40%)	70

"How satisfied were you with the overall event?" (1 low, 5 high)
- Average survey response: 4.03 (out of 5)
- Scores (share of total responses): 5 (26.8%), 4 (50.7%), 3 (21.1%), 2 (1.4%)

"Did you hear a variety of perspectives in the discussion?"
- 4 No, 51 Yes, 15 mixed/somewhat

"How comfortable do you feel talking about these subjects on campus?" (1 low, 5 high)
- Average survey response: 3.64. 63% of respondents answered 4 or 5.
- There may be some selection bias at work here, as these events were opt-in.
- Of 9 respondents that were *not* comfortable (1 or 2), 8 were staff and students, 1 junior faculty.

"Do you have one tangible take-away from this event?" (open response)
Select quotes from faculty:
- I'm not alone in the struggle to communicate across divides.
- This is going to be very difficult to address.
- Small group meetings are a better way to change culture than large forums!
- Academic perspectives on the issues at hand need to be compartmentalized and discussed separately from the emotional and social perspectives.

Select quotes from staff:
- "Class differences" - biggest and least talked about problem on campus.
- Small groups are the way forward, significantly more productive than town meeting style.
- There is no way this issue will be completely resolved but we need to be open-minded and listen and provided training to faculty/staff/students on how to do both.
- If the college focused on teaching tolerance and civil discourse, and insisted on those principles as a standard for everyone, people might be more comfortable discussing friction points with the goal of understanding other viewpoints.

Select quotes from students:
- Middlebury is not as politically homogeneous as I thought.
- There definitely is a gap between the old and new Middlebury.
- It may not be only the speaker that matters, the forum may be just as important.
- Discussions are personally productive, but do very little to produce real change in the community.

"Ways to improve these events" (open response)
- Have more of these (32), have less other stuff (2)
- Structure: need facilitators/training (6), promise confidentiality (1), food great (3), mix tables (8)
- Content: focus on policy changes (4), not speech *versus* inclusion (3)
- Increase participants: more conservatives (6), more faculty (1), more admin (2), more students (2), more students of color (2)