INQUIRY, RESPECT, AND DISSENT

by Manuel N. Gómez

THIS INITIATIVE AT IRVINE COMBINES COURSEWORK, PUBLIC EVENTS, AND LEADERSHIP TRAINING TO FOSTER RESPECT FOR DIVERGENT VIEWS.

Like most other research universities, the University of California, Irvine, has found its way into the headlines over the years. Most of our coverage has been favorable, but some of it has concerned and perplexed us. Take two events held on campus this past February 27 and 28. The first was a discussion between the Palestinian ambassador to the United Kingdom, Manuel Hassassian, and Edward Kaufman, former executive director of the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace at Hebrew University. The two men explored the possibilities for peace between Israel and Palestine, often forwarding distinctly opposing viewpoints with the civility one would expect in an academic setting.

The following evening, the UCI College Republicans and the United American Committee (an external organization) co-hosted an exhibition of the Danish cartoons that had so recently been the focus of rioting and international controversy. The UCI Muslim Student Union strongly opposed this event, and campus administrators received multiple calls and e-mail messages from community members protesting it. Exchanges inside the event were decidedly spirited and coalesced primarily around articulations of outrage, insult, and unmediated conflicts of opinion.

Although participants addressed many of the same issues on February 27 and 28, the atmosphere at the two gatherings was palpably different. One fostered thoughtful and civil discourse, while the other gave rise to resentment and hostility. While the dialogue between Hassassian and Kaufman received no press coverage beyond the UCI student newspaper and a local newspaper, the second event found its way into media outlets in London, Taipei, Tel Aviv, Washington, and elsewhere and brought CNN and other television news stations to the campus.
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That the media found only the second event—the “unveiling” of the Danish cartoons—newsworthy reveals an irony perhaps missed by our society: despite compelling, lamenting, dramatic calls for more avenues to understanding and reconciliation, we tend to congregate most habitually at the intersections of conflict and controversy. We seem to have become, paradoxically, more comfortable in our distress and in the disturbance of others than in those places where common ground and reconciliation are more likely to occur.

Although the price higher education pays for becoming the focus of discord is not as steep as the cost of our educational purpose is at times seen as “dangerous.”

The bitterest irony for higher education is that it is the very freedom of our forum that permits a hearing for extremist ideas. But only when we have a true diversity of ideas—even those that offend our most basic sense of decency and democracy—can we find the balance that promotes peaceful resolution of the most contentious conflicts facing us, whether they are religious, social, or political. Of course, the openness of the public higher education forum also allows members of the broader community to engage issues of interest to them. Over the years, UCI has increasingly

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conflict to societies, the toll on colleges and universities is rising. Campuses like UCI are increasingly seen as trouble spots of intolerance and boiling pots of extremist ideologies, as exemplified by conservative activist David Horowitz’s recently published book, The Professors: The 101 Most Dangerous Academics in America. Increasingly, professors like the ones Horowitz targets are characterized as anti-American and, in some circles, even terrorism sympathizers.

The intervention of interested constituencies external to the university has meant that our university’s educational programming and conscientious attention to the state of our campus community and security are often overlooked. Instead, the public sometimes perceives us as woefully out of balance or on the wrong moral path. The academic freedom we know to be fundamental to our mission and reached out to individuals, organizations, and groups off campus.

Toward Common Ground

It is fortunate that although universities often find themselves at the center of controversy and conflict these days, they are also uniquely positioned to work openly and directly toward dialogue and common ground. With funding from the Ford Foundation’s Difficult Dialogues Initiative, UCI has embarked on “Imagining the Future: Dissent, Dialogue, and the Freedom to Inquire,” a comprehensive intracampus partnership designed to model and maintain our tradition of free intellectual inquiry, open debate, and dissent.

The idea for the project arose gradually over the past few years, as tensions on our campus increased following the attacks of September 11, 2001. Although political and ideologi-cal conflict had erupted from time to time on the campus before September 11, the arguments became increasingly contentious afterward, especially over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and differences among Christian, Jewish, and Muslim ideologies nationally and internationally.

Campus debates also attracted more attention from organizations and individuals external to the campus community, some of whom have taken a keen interest in how students and faculty have handled these issues. Questions about the limits of free speech and academic freedom have been posed, often with strong opinions on the subject, attended by concerns about how the university administration has managed, negotiated, mediated, or otherwise responded to demands that various student-sponsored programs, protests, and other expressive events on campus be forbidden, intervened in, or condemned.

The events of February 27 and 28 only underlined the purpose and need for “Imagining the Future.” The February 27 dialogue between Manuel Hassassian and Edward Kaufman was one of the first “Imagining the Future” events. It was well attended by a diverse audience, including some members of the press (local media had been invited). During an intense, engaging, and civil discussion, Kaufman offered a striking and ambitious proposition: he suggested that instead of “importing” the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians to UCI, we should all be striving to “export” the values of civil dialogue and mutual understanding to the Middle East.

This “paradigm shift” (Kaufman’s terms) is, of course, part of what “Imagining the Future” is meant to facilitate. But even if we do not aim so high as to influence Middle Eastern society and politics, we hope to instill respect for the values intrinsic to aca-
academic communities—free inquiry, rigorous and rational analysis and debate, and diversity of viewpoints and intellectual interests—in discussions of provocative, complex, and all-too-often polarizing issues and events.

The Project
"Imagining the Future" involves several academic and administrative departments and incorporates coursework, public events and forums, undergraduate student leadership development, and graduate teaching assistant training. It started in January 2006 with three new undergraduate study options. The first undergraduate component, a lower-division survey course, "Religious Diversity and Conflict," was developed by religious studies professor Joseph McKenna and UCI's conflict resolution faculty. The second is a two-quarter pilot seminar, "Imagining the Future," and the third is an upper-division seminar series, the "Politics and Ethics of Difference," taught by Kristen Renwick Monroe, who describes the seminar elsewhere in this issue of *Academe*. Edward Kaufman and Manael Hassassian are also participating in "Imagining the Future" as visiting faculty from the University of Maryland, where they have co-taught a course titled "Conflict Resolution: The Israeli-Palestinian Experiment" since 1992. Because conflict resolution is central to the prospect of furthering dialogue, Paula Garb, an expert on conflict resolution and co-director of UCI's Center for Citizen Peacebuilding, is developing teaching seminars for faculty and graduate teaching assistants.

The campus was fortunate to already have an infrastructure in which to situate this program, although the level of coordination, support, and participation the Difficult Dialogues initiative makes possible is a model on our campus. It is also helpful that the project's goals coincide with our overall academic mission: we aim to foster academic engagement and civic leadership among our students, create a greater understanding of academic freedom, sustain intellectual diversity and vitality within the UCI community, and promote ties between the campus and the larger community.

One of the project's first major events touched on several parts of this mission. In May, UCI hosted a conference titled "Why Israel? Why Palestine?" It was co-sponsored by the National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership (CLAL), the American Society for Muslim Advancement (ASMA), the UCI Difficult Dialogues initiative, the UCI Center environment in which the expression of such feelings was channeled into productive exchange instead of disintegrating into unanswered accusations and unchallenged monologues.

Not surprisingly, as the event drew near, questions were asked about the appropriateness of the title and other details. We understand that our commitment to free and open inquiry means that little will go unchallenged within "Imagining the Future," either internally or externally. Responding to queries, Hirschfield pointed to the potential of such events, couched in the context of Irvine's own development. "If it is possible to transform this space [UCI] in forty years," he said, "then, by definition, if we applied that kind of imagination to the Middle East, imagine what the next forty years would bring." As for the event's title, Rauf provided this insightful analysis: "There is a power in asking why that no other question unlocks, because, at the end of the day, to ask other people why is to tell them that they count more than their ideology."

And although "Why Israel? Why Palestine?"—like the exchange last February between Kaufman and Hassassian—enjoyed less media coverage than the College Republicans' unveiling of the Danish cartoons, we will continue to foster meetings on the common ground of free expression and passionate participation, convinced that we can build stronger community ties in dialogue rather than in conflict. 

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