April 1, 2008

MEMORANDUM

TO: Executive Committee of Academic Council (ECAC)
FROM: Kim Wilcox, Provost
RE: Student-Faculty Commission on Civility

In the summer of 2007 a small ad hoc group of faculty addressed the question of whether or not there was a culture of incivility on the campus. They reviewed reported incidents, interviewed various faculty leaders, and concluded that there was no real epidemic of incivility. They reported their findings in fall, 2007 to ECAC and to Faculty Council.

While I would concur that our campus is not characterized by a culture of incivility, I remain concerned about the gap between our stated values and the behaviors of some on our campus. In fall, 2007, I asked the Women's Advisory Committee to the Provost to look at the issue as it related to the recruitment and retention of faculty. In their report they stated:

Civility is a term that is open to interpretation. Concomitantly, there are different levels of incivility, e.g. some behaviors are offensive whereas others cross over into being discriminatory and illegal...the vast majority of students, faculty, and administrators model exemplary behavior and reflect University values of respect. However, even without clear definition, it was apparent...that behaviors that violate acceptable codes of conduct occur at all levels of the university structure. They are multidirectional with students engaging in uncivil behavior to faculty and visitors, faculty being uncivil to students and staff, and administrators both unwittingly and openly being uncivil to and discriminating against faculty and peers.

The committee cited ample examples to support their contentions.

Incivility offends and alienates. Hostile environments impact learning and productivity. A lack of sensitivity for others negatively impacts climate, morale, retention and public reputation.
There are inherent tensions where persons with diverse views and perspectives gather. Yet our goal is to find the balance between a tolerance for disagreement and the disagreeable, with respect for one another. What we want for ourselves, we must be willing to share with others. We need also to be accountable to one another for our behavior. Community standards work only when there is collective commitment.

The Women’s Advisory Committee and the 2007 Ad Hoc Faculty Group were quick to identify University policies and state and federal laws that protect individuals from harassment or discriminatory behavior. Both groups identified an array of campus resources which foster and support an inclusive campus environment. Both groups identified messages from the President and Provost which encouraged civil behavior. What has perhaps been missing is a cross-University commitment to building the kind of environment in which most of us hope to work and learn. To that end, I am asking that ECAC seat a commission of at least six faculty and students, who will be charged with creating a joint statement on the importance of civility on our campus. I am asking that the Faculty-Student joint statement be written in such a way that it can be endorsed at all levels of academic governance, by students and faculty.

The endorsement of a common statement by students and faculty may not solve individual incidents of intolerance or disrespect, but it can articulate our aspirations and expectations. It will also allow us to hold one another accountable for our good intentions. Finally, I hope it will serve as important evidence of our commitment to our stated values to those on and off campus.