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Thorny Exchanges on Campus Can Hold Educational Value

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Politically charged ideas are a mainstay on many campuses. So is the controversy they provoke.

When handled poorly, such incidents trace a familiar arc: Initial expression begets umbrage, which spurs real or perceived overreaction, followed by vows to better handle highly charged disagreements the next time.

Caryn McTighe Musil, director of civic learning and democracy at the Association of American Colleges and Universities.

"We've always had to exist with this contradictory commitment to inquiry," says Ms. Musil, whose organization in 2012 published a report, "[A Crucible Moment](#):"

Jeffrey B. Kurtz, an associate professor of communication at Denison University, calls the moment of dissonance a "rupture point."

One such moment happened this past fall, when students in his course on rhetoric, sports, and culture proposed discussing the notorious rape by two high-school football players, and humiliation in social media, of a girl in Steubenville, Ohio. The Denison students debated to what extent blame should be placed on football culture.

Several students, including football players and residents of football-crazy hometowns, initially ascribed responsibility to the athletes alone but found themselves growing uncomfortable, Mr. Kurtz says.

Questions arose: Was there something to the case against football culture? "We were stopped in our tracks," Mr. Kurtz says. When the class session ended, he told his students that they could no longer retreat to bland agreements to disagree.

Such interactions can be particularly fruitful when they happen with people from outside the campus.

Students in some political-science courses at Wake Forest

Deliberate and the Work of Higher Education, published by the Kettering Foundation in 2008.

The power dynamic between teacher and student often short-circuits any pretext that equals are freely exchanging ideas. And professors who have developed expertise in a subject are not always good at getting out of the way of a discussion or at being neutral moderators.

Above all, such discussions are very hard to conduct effectively, says Nancy L. Thomas, who directs the initiative for the study of higher education at Tufts University's Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

"We know that discussion-based teaching gets results. To avoid it is bad teaching," she says. "But we don't do it, because we don't really know how."

One stumbling block for many professors is confusion between the political and the partisan.

Examining the power dynamics underlying given issues is often thought to be acceptable; advocating for ideological positions is not.

Writing in *The Chronicle* in 2003, the outspoken professor Stanley Fish warned faculty members not to "teach peace or war or freedom or obedience or diversity or uniformity or nationalism or antinationalism or any other agenda."

"Of course," he continued, "they can and should teach about such topics—something very different from urging them as commitments—when they are part of the history or philosophy or

Establish ground rules. Spend time with your students at the beginning of the semester agreeing on how to engage in debate, says Jeffrey B. Kurtz, an associate professor of communications at Denison University. Generate a list of rules and post it. If the effort to set ground rules sputters, try

