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Your Community College

It's time to listen | Kevin G. Walthers

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Kevin Walthers
Contributed

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Colleges and universities are designed to be bastions of free speech, including speech that we may find uncomfortable or even abhorrent.

It's no accident that Allan Hancock College's mission statement commits to an "inclusive learning environment" that welcomes diversity of opinion.

The horrific shooting of a Republican podcaster and influencer on a university campus strikes a blow against the very nature of what we stand for.

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Since January of this year, there have been at least two dozen shootings on college campuses, and political violence seems to be growing in ways we haven't seen in half a century.

Just the past year has seen two assassination attempts on a presidential candidate, an assault on the husband of a congressional leader, and the execution of two Democratic state legislators in Minnesota.

Before these events become the new normal, we should try something new: listening.

Politics is more divisive than ever. Yes, some historians may draw parallels by pointing to the early days of American electioneering or the race-baiting politics of the 1900s to say it's the "same as it ever was."

But it's not. Modern political arguments travel at almost the speed of light as social media drives an insatiable desire for quick takes, clicks, and views. The algorithms push an "us versus them" mindset, fueling outrage based on which "team" we belong to.

More worrisome, the "outrage machine" is literally a machine. Unsavory actors — including state sponsored organizations in China, Russia, and Iran — build online bots that have one function: to divide.

Pick a topic and you will find thousands of these bots looking to drive a wedge between us, and no issue is too small for the artificial outrage machine.

The online magazine Gizmodo reports that the recent fury over Cracker Barrel's logo change was fomented and spread by bots. Moreover, cable media of all persuasions amplifies the divisiveness by paying "contributors" to represent opposing viewpoints on every issue imaginable.

Our collective conversations have been intentionally reengineered to monetize outrage.

Working on a college campus often gives me a front row seat to how we should address our differences. One of my first friends at Hancock was the late Kate Adams. An English professor, Kate sponsored our Gay/Straight Alliance student club and was active in progressive causes throughout our community.

I don't remember how or why, but Mark Evans, a longtime local leader and occasional conservative guest columnist for the Santa Maria Times, asked to have a conversation with Kate. I was fortunate to host the meeting in my office.

I expected a rowdy and vigorous debate, but for more than three hours, Kate and Mark listened to each other. They asked questions. They looked for understanding. They were respectful. They demonstrated the very essence of critical thinking.

That afternoon replays in my mind often these days. How different would our culture be if we sought first to listen?

The people across the street who voted for a different candidate are not my enemies — they're my neighbors. We BBQ together, keep the street safe so our kids can play, and help each other out with our trash cans.

Maybe we see the world from different perspectives, but we fundamentally agree on the most important issues we face. By listening, we enhance community.

We should also be ever mindful that others, including our children, are listening to us.

The outrage machine paints groups with a broad brush and declares them to be evil, immoral, lazy, or uneducated. When we amplify such messages, we directly attack our neighbors (and our children) who are part of those groups.

We isolate young people who are struggling with anxiety, social pressures, and personal identity. Time after time the perpetrators of violence in the United States are young men who have fallen into the darkest of online rabbit holes.

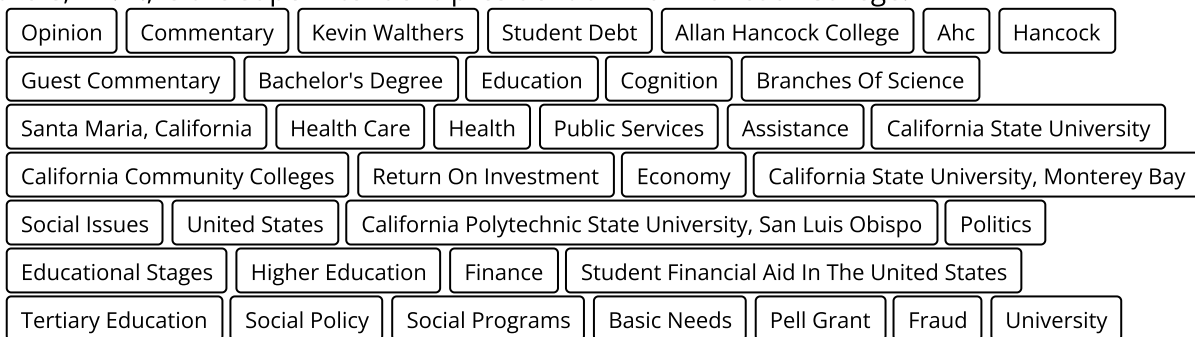
When we speak in absolutist terms of good and evil, our kids hear us — and look elsewhere for understanding and validation. Families should be a refuge of unconditional acceptance, where no burden or fear is ever too great to be shared.

Allan Hancock College remains committed to an environment that “values, nurtures, connects, and engages students” through thoughtful and respectful dialog.

Perhaps we can call it the Adams-Evans Doctrine: listen first, because understanding is a daily journey rather than a destination.

Kevin G. Walthers, Ph.D., is the superintendent/president of Allan Hancock College.

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