

Opinion

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“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievance.”

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

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michael gerson

The reason for civility

With Americans shocked into reflection on the desperate, divisive tone of their politics, it is worth asking: Why, other than upbringing, should we be civil in the first place?

In the Western tradition, one answer has been rooted in epistemology — the limits of knowledge. Citizens, in this view, should not be arrogant or intolerant about their political, moral and religious views because no one has the right to be certain of his or her views. What our public life needs is more ambiguity, agnosticism and detachment. The humble are less strident, more peaceful.

This argument is made by a certain kind of campus relativist, who views the purpose of education as the systematic cultivation of doubt. But it is also reflected in the conservative tradition, which is suspicious of ideological certainties that lead to radical social experiments. Both the liberal and conservative variants of this epistemological modesty can be traced back to classical liberal thinkers such as John Locke, whose overriding concern was to prevent wars of opinion, particularly religious wars. If no one believed their opinions were absolutely true, there would be less incentive to attack or coerce others.

But there is a second, very different argument for civility — this one rooted in anthropology. The Christian and natural law traditions assert that human beings are equal and valuable, not because of what they think but because of who they are. Even when badly mistaken, their dignity requires respect for their freedom and conscience. A society becomes more just and civil as more people are converted to this moral belief in human dignity and reflect that conviction in their lives and laws.

Without a doubt, doubt is useful and needed at the margins of any ideology. The world is too complex to know completely. Many of our judgments are, by nature, provisional. Those who are immune to evidence, who claim infallibility on debatable matters, are known as bores — or maybe columnists.

The holiday just past demonstrates the limits of a political philosophy founded on doubt. Martin Luther King Jr. did not oppose segregation because its supporters were too doctrinaire. He opposed segregation because it was an insult to the nature of human beings. He did not seek to lessen passions by exposing ambiguity. He sought to persuade Americans of a superior moral belief — to convert them to the ideals of their own founding. The intensity of his convictions led him to be a firebrand, a leader, a martyr. Yet he argued for peaceful, civil methods because even oppressors had dignity and value, and thus the hope of redemption.

Moral conviction is not a synonym for arrogance. Both of the paths to civility call for humility. A civility based on doubt demands an appreciation for our own ignorance. A civility grounded in human dignity requires us to bow before a principle greater than ourselves — the belief that others count and matter as much as ourselves.

It is not a coincidence that the first draft of the American ideal begins with a statement of anthropology, asserted without epistemological modesty. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal.” It is this belief — not the absence of belief — that provides the most compelling reason for civility. We are not enemies, but friends.

Michael Gerson is a Washington Post columnist. E-mail him at michaelgerson@washpost.com

MONDAY NEWSMAKER

Working for an educated work force

Terry Green pushes for progress through Pathways to Success and Career Pathways

Terry L. Green became director of workforce excellence at the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership in 2008. He is responsible for Career Pathways Initiative and Pathways to Success, initiatives designed to link business and education.

Previously, he was director of external relations for the University of California, Riverside Palm Desert Graduate Center. He also served as assistant dean and director of Desert Programs for the center.

He was director of developmental education and served in several other capacities at College of the Desert.

Green also served on the John F. Kennedy Memorial Hospital board, the Harvest of Wellness Foundation board and on the City of Coachella Business Incubator Task Force.

He is past president of the College of the Desert Alumni Association and a member of Friends of the Mountains Conservancy advisory board.

He graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Mesa State College in Grand Junction, Colo., earned a bachelor’s degree in history and a master’s degree in education, with emphasis on learning disabilities, from UCR.

Raised in Needles, Green is 60 and lives with his wife in Palm Desert.



MICHAEL SNYDER THE DESERT SUN

Terry Green is director of workforce excellence for the Coachella Valley Economic Partnership.



Green talks about his expectations for the Coachella Valley Economic Blueprint in a video at mydesert.com/opinion

QUESTION: Pathways to Success distributed \$1.4 million in scholarships to 280 Coachella Valley students in 2009, \$1.5 million to 300 students (in 2010) and you project you’ll hand out \$1.54 million this year. Do you expect the program to grow?

ANSWER: Our goal is to increase the number of scholarships available to students in majors related to the industry clusters targeted by CVEP in the Economic Blueprint. We are actively seeking matching partners who are interested in supporting students in health care, arts and media, and advanced technologies including sustainable energy. We will match dollar-for-dollar scholarships that are available in those fields.

We offer large scholarships, up to \$2,500 per year at COD and up to \$5,000 per year at any accredited university, and we hope our funding will stimulate a regional push to increase the amount of scholarship awards that are available to students with financial need.

Pathways to Success and its educational partners are about to launch an all-out regional push to help students complete free application for federal student aid. Even if a student does not receive a scholarship from Pathways, they have opportunities for thousands of dollars in financial assistance by simply completing this application.

Where does the money come from?

Scholarship funding comes from a major grant that CVEP received from the College Access Foundation of California. They have provided \$1 million per year for the past three years. We, in turn, take a good part of that money and make it available to use in matching partner relationships with local scholarship granting organizations who agreed to our criteria.

We have 19 partners who match their money with ours. All of the students who receive a scholarship from Pathways to Success or one of its matching partners have access to student services including college readiness workshops, financial management, counseling and advising and training on how to access the services available to students on their campuses.

Has the recession hurt the program?

The recession hurts everyone, especially our students and families who have financial need which includes the majority of students in the Coachella Valley. College is more expensive than ever, and without access to scholarships and free federal and state financial aid, students will incur massive debt to complete a college degree.

Many of our students are first in family to attend college, and they need some level of additional assistance to navigate the college experience. They have the intelligence and drive but often need help, especially in their first year, to learn the rigors of college and university expectations and lifestyle changes.

The recession has caused all colleges and universities to cut back on student support systems so Pathways to Success and its partners become a much-needed adjunct to those services available on campuses. In addition, the recession has caused a cutback in charitable donations to many of our matching partners which has an impact in their ability to match our funds. We really need the business sector to engage with us in support of students who will become their future work force.

Another important program is Career Pathways, which seeks to link business and education in ways that expose students to the world of work and to career opportunities in targeted industry clusters. Have we already seen students achieve their goals through this program?

The heavy lifting here is done by the K-12 schools, College of the Desert and our university partners. CVEP programs have played a role in creating a structure that allows for ongoing communication and coordination between business and education.

For example, CVEP has initiated three industry councils in health care, arts/media/entertainment and advanced technology that are composed of business leaders and educators. Business and education together plan strategies for the development of unique educational programs and strategies that are linked to an industry cluster.

The job of implementation falls on the shoulders of education and requires the participation of business and CVEP assists by providing best practice models from

across the country. CVEP’s programs seek to open doors to businesses that will allow activities such as field trips, job shadowing, internships and a host of other work-based learning activities.

This is all part of the goal of CVEP partners to create a “pipeline strategy” that reaches from K to University and results in a well trained, well educated work force that is ready for college or career.

What Career Pathways are the most popular with students?

Health care is far and away the most popular pathway in the Coachella Valley. Nearly half of our scholarship recipients are in health care majors. Our K-12 districts have launched five high school career academies in health care along with health care programs in middle school and exploration programs in elementary school. More than 2,500 students are enrolled in health care career academy programs.

(College of the Desert) and (California State University, San Bernardino) have expanded their health care majors and programs, and now UCR is coming online with a full medical school. The more we can expose students at an early age to the wide range of career options in any industry, the more likely they will be motivated to continue on to college and career in those fields.

The business community has been incredibly generous in supporting work-based learning opportunities for students interested in health care. The Desert Healthcare District has provided core funding for strategies ranging from the creation of an industry council to mentoring students in health care majors and work-based learning activities. As well, Eisenhower Medical Center and many other health care facilities provide rich learning experiences for students in this career field. This is the kind of collaboration that is necessary for the development of a comprehensive pipeline strategy for the region, and we are working hard to replicate that infrastructure in arts/media and advanced technologies.

Do you have a suggestion for the Monday Newsmaker feature? E-mail Community Conversations Editor James Folmer at james.folmer@thedesertsun.com or call (760) 778-4625.

MYDESERT POLL

Today’s question

Did Jack LaLanne ever inspire you to exercise or get fit?
To vote, go to mydesert.com/opinion

Sunday’s poll results

109 votes cast as of 7 p.m.

Do you think now is a good time to start a business?

