

The Ethical Professor #17
Balancing Fairness and Freedom

The class discussion is going well, you think, as you look out at your students finally getting involved. They're breaking down current events, trying to look at things critically; and though discussion could easily get overheated, you've got them engaged, a little passionate, really thinking. Well, most of them. One of your students, a quiet young man in the back, hasn't said much, but he's shifting in his chair a lot, and he looks oddly trapped. The other students don't notice as they dig into the ethics of urban warfare in Afghanistan and the civilian casualties. The quiet student finally joins the discussion, arguing that the Marines do everything "we" can to avoid hurting civilians, but the war is being fought in the middle of villages a lot of the time. A few students scoff. One young woman blurts, "How many people did you kill?" Discussion stops. You remember, in that moment, the student is a vet, recently returned from combat.

Scenarios like this one play out in real life at SMC, and they serve to remind us to be open-minded and sensitive to the variety of our students' life experiences and political perspectives. This is true not only in how we conduct class discussions, but in the way we grade our students' performance and participation. As faculty, we need to stop and reflect on the following questions from time to time:

- When in the classroom, how can we promote civility and mutual respect so that all students feel free to express their views, even if they differ from our own or from those expressed by other students in the class?
- When grading or giving credit for participation for both in-class and outside class-related activities, how can we avoid even the appearance of rewarding students with grade points for agreeing with our ideologies or supporting causes to which we are devoted?
- When assigning special activities outside the classroom, how can we continue to maintain our fairness, ensuring that the activities—whether they be attending cultural activities or undertaking community service—are broad and without bias?

We want our students to be engaged with the world in all its complexity and controversy. Students are also interested in being active in their communities. Many faculty try to foster these urges, and SMC is committed to the expression of global citizenship. It is essential that we pursue the goal of global citizenship not only with fairness in grading practice, but also by balancing open discussion with compassion and tolerance.