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### The Day After Tomorrow

Katherine Rowe

*William & Mary*, karowe@wm.edu

A. Benjamin Spencer

*William & Mary Law School*, spencer@wm.edu

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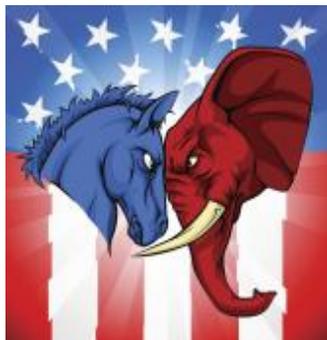
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## The Day After Tomorrow

Katherine A. Rowe and A. Benjamin Spencer discuss how college leaders can help restore civil discourse after the election.

[Katherine Rowe](#) and [A. Benjamin Spencer](#)

November 3, 2020



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As leaders of higher education institutions, we along with many colleagues are giving tremendous thought to appropriate responses to the likely ferment that will come to our campuses and to our country after the U.S. presidential election, regardless of who wins. So many young adults are called to the polls this year, and in a recent survey on our campus, 97 percent of student respondents had registered to vote. This is a vital time to reinforce for a generation of students who we hope will become lifelong participants in democracy how our communities can effectively navigate deep conflict.

People of goodwill on campuses have legitimate and sincerely held views that lead them to favor one of the two major candidates. Some will be pleased with the outcome of the election, while others will be disappointed that the policy preferences they hold will not be those of whoever wins the presidency. For others, intellectual and emotional reactions may be more intense: ranging from a deep sadness to hopelessness.

These are ordinary parts of life in a democratic republic, part of the developmental process that we in higher education bring students to experience. In the case of William & Mary, the institution has navigated such experiences for centuries and through nearly every transition of presidential power in the nation. They offer opportunities for learning that are at the very core of citizenship.

We must also acknowledge that the results of the election will give rise, for some people, to concerns over their personal safety or be perceived as a deep existential threat to our country. These concerns are not far-fetched in an environment where we have seen armed conflict in the streets in different parts of the country, a rise in extremist discourse and even a foiled plot against the governor of Michigan.

The question is, how should we as leaders respond?

As an immediate measure, we should provide spaces for expressions of emotions, perspectives, hopes and fears. Particularly in the age of COVID-19, in which many find themselves isolated behind computer screens, it is important that we foster community and establish outlets for people to exhale and be heard.

But then we need to pivot quickly to facilitating constructive dialogue across ideological divides. There are several prerequisites to doing this successfully.

First, we hopefully have developed and promoted within our institutions meaningful institutional values around mutual respect, community and shared sacrifice. Those common objectives lay the groundwork for a willingness to listen and to build trust. We must repeat the essential work of communicating and encouraging those values annually, with every incoming and outgoing class.

Second, part of our mission must be to instill a common humanity -- to insist on our interdependence as members of our national community. We are truly all in this together, as COVID-19 is teaching us. An "us versus them" mind-set is a risk at any time of conflict and especially during a pandemic. To retreat into our respective redoubts and enclaves is to disclaim responsibility for our individual and institutional roles in community building.

Third, we must take the lead in reversing the trend toward dehumanization of our opponents. Dehumanization always accompanies deep societal polarization, and it blocks engagement and understanding in profound ways. Teaching members of our community that most of those with whom they disagree are sincere and of good faith can go a long way toward reversing this tendency. Yes, there are people of ill will who are not interested in everyone's best interest or in constructive dialogue. The key to rehumanization, however, is to instill an appreciation that groups should not be defined by their worst actors.

Finally, civil discourse depends on the persistent pursuit of facts. In an era of perceived "fake news" and a preference for "alternative facts," we must educate our students about information hygiene. The information overload feels unprecedented. Yet democracies have seen such effects of rapid technology change before. The 17th-century explosion of cheap print provides a lesson. As many people worried at the time, print technologies threatened to distribute error and misinformation widely to an increasingly literate society. Yet our nation's constitutional resistance to censorship evolved alongside innovations (such as the printed errata) designed to correct erroneous information at scale. The intellectual practices to which American higher education is dedicated, such as evidence-based argument, evolved in parallel.

In the wash of misinformation today, it is paramount that those whom we educate practice evidence-based argument and become wise to falsehoods -- alert to missing data, disposed to question sources and to first verify, then trust. Thus prepared, this generation will help design the technological solutions we need to validate trustworthy information in the decades to come.

The two of us lead a university known as the alma mater of the nation and the first law school established in America, respectively. Strengthening democratic institutions through constructive engagement has long been part of William & Mary's mission -- as has improving our democracy through every successive generation of graduating students. Each of us in higher education has to make good on our commitments to students, no matter our institutions' history. If we double down on principles of meaningful civil discourse, evidence-based argument and rehumanization, we will be able to move forward together once this election has passed.

## Bio

*Katherine A. Rowe is president of William & Mary, and A. Benjamin Spencer is dean of William & Mary Law School.*

Read more [Katherine Rowe](#) and [A. Benjamin Spencer](#)