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Haenicke, Diether, "In college, a half-century ago, students, professors kept it formal" (2008). *WMU President Diether Haenicke*. 49.

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In college, a half-century ago, students, professors kept it formal

*By Diether Haenicke
November 12, 2008*

When I went off to college a little more than 50 years ago, we lived in another world as far as manners and social conventions were concerned. This is no exaggeration. Things were indeed fundamentally different.

I studied at four German universities, all of them distinctly formal in their social relationships. Professors were very distant from their students, and I don't think that anyone ever knew me by name before I reached my third or fourth semester. Up to that point, I was addressed as "the gentleman with the sports jacket on the left there" or as "the colleague sitting next to the always silent co-ed." Certainly none of my professors, not even during my doctoral phase, ever called me by my first name. It was always "Mr. Haenicke" and "Herr Professor" in social interaction with my teachers.

Matters were similarly formal among students. Hard to believe now, but students actually also called each other "Herr" or "Fraulein," and an exact social protocol existed for transitioning from the formal "Sie" to "Du," the informal, familiar form of address. Meeting a girl in college and addressing her with her first name and the familiar "Du" would have been as boorish as can be. As I remember it, only those of us who had attended the same high school continued to use our first names also in college.

I had joined a fraternity, and we called each other by our family names -- "Haenicke" or "Bundesbruder Haenicke." Even among men there was no rush to what I call instant familiarity. In the absence of dormitories in my student days, one usually rented a room from locals, often widows, who needed the additional income. One year, having hesitated too long, I could not find quarters in Marburg and was directed to a vacancy where I had to share a room with another student. That was highly unusual.

The landlady, Mrs. Sybel, the widow of a famous German historian, showed me the spacious room in her large villa and introduced me to the other renter, a law student. Herr Oellrich was willing to give our duo-rental a try. After Mrs. Sybel had laid down the most critical of her house rules -- no lady visitors after 10 p.m. -- my new roommate and I settled in.

For a whole semester we addressed each other as "Herr Haenicke" and "Herr Oellrich" and did not consider this formality odd. I often think that the closer one lives to another, the more formality is needed to guarantee considerateness and tact. Herr Oellrich had suggested that if one of us returned home and found a certain geranium plant placed on the window sill, this was to be understood that the other party wanted to be undisturbed, possibly because of a lady visitor prior to 10 p.m. It worked well. The roommate on the outside had the right to go for a beer, a meal or to the movies at the expense of the party who enjoyed the temporary privacy.

A half a year later, we had become close and felt it was time to use the familiar "Du." For that purpose, a bottle of wine was uncorked, and with solemnly lifted glasses we offered each other the use of our first names. From then on it was "Diether" and "Claus" between us. The new form of address was almost an act of intimacy that both of us cherished. We remained the closest of friends for more than 40 years until Claus' untimely death.

Of course, today I smile at those memories and the old-fashioned habits. But I am glad, nevertheless, that I once experienced these meaningful formalities and understood their value. We used to reserve, in our minds and in our social habits, an intimate, heartfelt, warm and very special sphere for those we considered close and true friends, not mere good acquaintances, good neighbors, or good colleagues.

Today, in America, I very much enjoy the use of first names for friends and acquaintances, although I still cringe occasionally when students call their professors by their first names and professors encourage this. I may well be wrong with my old-fashioned sensitivities about instant familiarity. It is most likely an old world hang-up, but one for which I am reluctant to apologize.

This column was published in the Kalamazoo Gazette mlive.com/kalamazoo