

Ethics, the University, & Society

"What can universities do and what should they do," asks Harvard's president, "to help students achieve higher ethical standards?"

by Derek Bok

CONCLUSION

Despite the importance of moral development to the individual student and the society, one cannot say that higher education has demonstrated a deep concern for the problem. Some efforts are being made on every campus, and a number of religious institutions and small independent colleges actually devote much time and energy to the task. More often, however, and especially in large universities, the subject is not treated as a serious responsibility worthy of sustained discussion and determined action by the faculty and administration. Let me quickly add that Harvard too has not done all that it should, notwithstanding the programs of community service, the Core offerings in moral reasoning, and the courses in ethics in several of the professional schools.

If this situation is to change, there is no doubt where the initiative must lie. Universities will never do much to encourage a genuine concern for ethical issues or to help their students to acquire a strong and carefully considered set of moral values unless presidents and deans take the lead. Without their endorsement and example, the diffidence and inertia that dog the subject of moral responsibility will continue to keep these issues at the margin of everyday campus life.

An equal responsibility rests with the faculty. The faculty are the core of the university. More than any other group, they set the tone of the institution and establish what is important, what is legitimate, what truly merits the time and attention of the students. Unless professors recognize the importance of moral education, unless they personally participate by treating ethical issues in their classes, counseling students, helping to define and administer rules of behavior on campus, any effort along these lines will lack credibility and force. Indeed, without such involvement, scholarly traditions of value-free inquiry may foster a sense among students and administrators that ethical questions are private matters to be kept out of serious conversation.

It is far from clear how much educational leaders or their faculties will do to change the status quo despite the growing interest in ethics throughout the society. It takes much time and effort to explain the university's policies on controversial ethical questions, to reform the administration of campus rules, to do a better job of preparing counselors, coaches, and other administrators to cope more effectively with ethical issues in their dealings with students. And time has become extremely scarce for deans and presidents, burdened as they are with financial pressures, management problems, faculty demands, and fund-raising responsibilities. Professors, especially in modern research universities, have equally compelling limitations. Not only are they busy with their normal duties, they are trained to transmit knowledge and skills within their chosen discipline, not to help students to become more mature, morally perceptive human beings.

Although these difficulties are real, they cannot save the faculty and administration from an acute dilemma. With their classes, their residential halls, their extracurricular activities and extensive counselling services, colleges and universities have created a world that dominates the lives and thoughts of countless young people during years in which their character and values are being formed. Under these conditions, students must get help from their universities in developing moral standards or

they are unlikely to get much assistance at all. Thus, even if presidents are overburdened and professors happen to prepare themselves in specialized disciplines, universities have an obligation to try to help their students understand how to lead ethical, reflective, fulfilling lives. One can appreciate the difficulty of the task and understand if progress is slow and halting. What is harder to forgive is a refusal to recognize the problem or to acknowledge a responsibility to work at it conscientiously. Advanced knowledge and specialized skills are important in many ways. Yet they are not the only ends of education. As Montaigne observed:

To compose our character is our duty, not to compose books and to win, not battles and provinces, but order and tranquility in our own conduct. Our great and glorious masterpiece is to live appropriately.

CORRECTION: The following section was mistakenly omitted from the beginning of the article "Ethics, the University and Society" In Vajra Bodhi Sea issue #228.

Of course, situations will arise in which faculty members or administrators behave in improper ways. Certainly, Harvard has had its share of cases involving sexual harassment and scientific fraud, along with most other universities. But one can learn from bad examples as well as good ones. Indeed, a morally perfect environment might be a poor preparation for the real world. What is truly destructive, therefore, is not the fact that immoral acts occur but the willingness of an administration to overlook them. This is a matter that does lie within the university's control. Even the tenets of academic freedom do not prevent an administration from holding the faculty to appropriate rules regarding sexual harassment, conflicts of interest, excessive consulting, and other forms of misconduct.

Faculties can also discuss the responsibilities of their office among themselves and develop norms and expectations that exert a powerful effect on individual colleagues. Such discussions are already common with regard to problems such as consulting or conflicts of interest, though even here there is often a reluctance to institute reporting requirements and other methods to assure that agreed-upon norms are observed. Much less frequent are efforts to clarify the professor's responsibilities as a teacher—to return student work promptly with adequate comment, to contribute sufficiently to student advising, to supervise teaching fellows adequately, or to give proper guidance to graduate students writing theses. As a result, while most professors may perform their duties conscientiously, some do not. The willingness to tolerate such behavior can only arouse a suspicion among students that people in positions of power do not necessarily have to be scrupulous in living up to their responsibilities toward others.

The administration could likewise do more by preparing proctors, student advisers, administrative deans, and financial aid officers to respond thoughtfully to issues of honesty, promise keeping, and deception that periodically arise in working with students. Intercollegiate sports offer a particularly apt example, since coaches can have such a powerful effect on their players and because varsity athletics constantly present sharp conflicts between ends and means. Alas, few universities with "big-time" programs have done much to prepare their coaches to address moral problems, or even to convince them that winning is not the most important criterion for judging their performance. Even so, many coaches do manage to set a good ethical example for their teams. But many others have subjected their players to a long list of dubious maneuvers to gain a competitive edge: allowing unauthorized scrimmages to occur, encouraging an excessively violent style of play, keeping star athletes eligible even when they misbehave, committing petty recruiting violations. The persistence of these transgressions and the willingness of campus authorities to overlook them send a damaging message to

students about how important ethical standards are when they conflict with intense ambitions to succeed.

