

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

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Rules of Conduct. Even the staunchest advocates of applied ethics courses would admit that their effects on behavior are limited and uncertain. Hence, universities need to consider extending their efforts beyond the classroom. An obvious step in this direction is to have rules that prohibit lying, cheating, stealing, violent behavior, interference with free expression, or other acts that violate fundamental norms. Such rules not only protect the rights of everyone in the community, they also signal the importance of basic moral obligations and strengthen habits of ethical behavior.

But students do not learn to put ethical precepts into practice by rules and punishments alone. This much seems evident from looking at the disobedience that accompanied the stern campus discipline of the nineteenth century. If rules are truly to educate and not merely to coerce, campus officials must bear further principles in mind.

Although universities no longer stand *in loco parentis*, toward their students, their purpose is always to teach and to explain. Hence, those who administer discipline should enact rules only where they have a persuasive justification and should publish the reasons for each requirement whenever the rationale is not clear. This point seems obvious, yet it is frequently overlooked. For example, even though I have regularly presided over faculty meetings that have approved student regulations, only recently did I realize how many rules are stated summarily even when they seem to call for explanation. After all, it is not immediately obvious why "recognized organizations must maintain their local autonomy," or why "no organization shall be allowed to appear on a commercially sponsored radio or television program," or why "no student resident in a university dormitory may operate a business out of his or her room."

Bereft of reasons that connect the rules with underlying ethical principles, such regulations can evoke a legalistic attitude in which only published rules are obeyed and students object to being punished for any conduct that is not expressly prohibited. Worse yet, as more and more prohibitions accumulate, many of them are not enforced at all by campus authorities. Not only does this permit an arbitrary use of power; it undermines the importance of rules and makes them an object of cynicism and derision.

Even when regulations *are* discussed, the explanation can be formalistic and inadequate. This is especially true in the case of prohibitions on the use of alcohol and drugs. Too

often, the official literature fails to explain why using these substances is wrong. Instead, there is a tendency to concentrate on warning students of the legal consequences. Thus, the standard letter to Harvard students on the subject of drugs begins with the sentence: "Attached is a summary of the laws that deal with illicit drugs in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts." A letter to students on drinking begins: "If you serve alcohol to friends under 21, you are opening yourself to arrest, fine, and imprisonment."

Such statements are not irrelevant, of course; students need to be warned. What is lacking is a serious effort to explain why such rules exist by pointing out, for example, that almost all acts of violence on campus are linked to alcohol and that teenage drinking produced an inordinate number of traffic fatalities before Massachusetts enacted its current law. Such explanations will doubtless provoke the retort that drinking wine or sherry at a Master's reception could not possibly result in highway deaths or violent brawls. But this reply itself can be an occasion for more extended discussions of why people should not decide for themselves in what way and in what circumstances to obey legitimate laws. Such discussions may not be easy or brief. Without them, however, a university can leave the impression that laws against alcohol and drugs are merely arbitrary requirements placed on young people by hypocritical and uncaring elders.

A second requirement, which hardly needs explanation, is that regulations must be administered fairly and consistently with penalties sufficient to make the rules credible. Most campuses satisfy this standard most of the time. But some rules, such as prohibitions against drinking alcohol or smoking marijuana, are often not enforced by proctors who object to the law or do not wish to become unpopular by reporting violations. Violations of a political nature such as harassing speakers or occupying buildings, frequently result in only token penalties so long as no violence is done to person or property. Still other rules are rarely invoked against certain privileged persons, a practice that has become more common as universities find themselves in strenuous competition for money, visibility, and prestige. It is rivalry of this sort that accounts for the willingness of some universities to overlook the petty corruptions of big-time athletic coaches or to tolerate famous professors who spend unconscionable amounts of time away from their campus duties.

On other occasions, faculty members or administrators will seek to camouflage embarrassing incidents to avoid adverse publicity. Few institutions are free of such lapses, and Harvard is no exception. Some years ago, for example, local newspapers recounted the extraordinary tale of a resident in one of our teaching hospitals who had sexually assaulted several patients. Rather than discipline the culprit or insist on appropriate psychiatric treatment, those in charge first arranged for him to leave quietly and then sent letters of recommendation to other hospitals, without mentioning the circumstances of his departure. Needless to say, the lesson conveyed by this episode could hardly have been worse.

A final aim in maintaining discipline should be to involve students in the process of devising and administering rules. The more responsibility students can assume, the more likely they are to understand the reasons for regulations and to gain a stake in

implementing them successfully. For example, no system for maintaining the right to speak on campus is likely to work well without building a strong grass-roots consensus based on thorough understanding of the reasons for valuing free expression.

In addition to discussing rules, students can also assist in their administration. In fact, most institutions, including Harvard, include students as members of judicial bodies at least for some types of offenses. An even more extensive form of student participation occurs in schools with honor codes. At Haverford, for example, undergraduates not only vote each year on whether to renew their code but take responsibility for educating freshmen about the system, sit on judicial boards to consider violations, and pledge to report classmates if they observe them cheating.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of honor systems is the stimulus they give to students to think about their own moral responsibility and to discuss the subject among themselves. This is such a notable advantage that one wonders why Harvard has not adopted an honor code of its own. According to an excellent study prepared by a recent president of the Undergraduate Council, Harvard's competitiveness, its size and diversity, its lack of any honor code tradition, and the widespread distaste for accusing one's classmates all combine to curb enthusiasm for such an innovation. That presumably ends the matter, for it would surely be unwise to try to introduce a system of this kind without very broad student support. Indeed, to press students against their will to accept the troubling moral obligation to turn in friends who violate the code might erode rather than strengthen respect for ethical standards. Still, one wishes that there were some equivalent that could do as much to provoke serious thought about issues of moral responsibility.

Acquiring Concern for Others. Moral responsibility cannot develop through rules and penalties alone. It must grow out of a genuine concern for others and a desire to respect their legitimate interests. The best way of acquiring such concern is to experience situations in which one can appreciate the effects of one's actions on others and understand how one's own interests are affected in return. Education does not automatically provide enough of these experiences. Often, students pursue their studies alone in competition with their peers for the grades that will give them entry to the best graduate schools and the choicest careers. Without more, such an environment can drive people apart rather than enhance their sense of responsibility to others.

This danger can be countered by extracurricular activities that bring the participants into collaborative or communal relationships -- especially if someone with experience is available to offer advice and counsel when ethical challenges arise. Living together in the Harvard Houses offers a particularly good opportunity for such experiences. So may athletic teams, drama clubs, orchestras, political groups, and many other activities common to most college campuses.

In graduate and professional schools, on the other hand, such activities are less numerous and the curriculum may not offer many opportunities for properly supervised collaboration. When I was dean of Harvard Law School, the faculty actually refused to allow eight students to collaborate in writing a third-year project because it was

impossible to grade each student's individual contribution. Rather than discourage such initiatives, professional school faculties need to build cooperative work into the educational program and foster adequately supervised group activities of a quasi-professional nature outside the curriculum.

Among these activities, community service programs are especially valuable because they offer such a vivid opportunity to perceive the needs of others while feeling the satisfaction of helping people less fortunate than oneself. Such programs are all the more important today in light of the fifteen-year trend among college students toward valuing self-centered aspirations at the expense of more altruistic goals. To encourage these activities, universities should encourage them publicly, offer seed money to help them get started, and assist in their administration and supervision. Professional schools might even offer further incentives by giving positive weight to applications from students who have devoted substantial time and effort to endeavors of this kind.

In recent years, universities have been doing more to encourage community service. Over one hundred institutions have joined a new organization, Campus Compact, to stimulate the growth of

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such activities. Yet community service still does not receive the support it deserves from American colleges. Only a minority of campuses have sponsored programs of this kind, and only a small fraction of the student body is typically involved. Moreover, the institutions that have programs do not give them the level of support or supervision commonly offered even to minor athletic sports.

Fortunately, Harvard College has a long tradition of community service dating back to the founding of Phillips Brooks House in 1900. In recent years, these activities have received greater encouragement and support; occasionally a professor, such as Robert Coles, has even devised courses that build on community service and help students to reflect more deeply on their experience. In all, close to 60 percent of Harvard undergraduates now engage at some point during their college years in tutoring underprivileged children, staffing shelters for the homeless, working with prison inmates, teaching illiterate adults to read, or trying in some other way to assist the community outside the University. Scores of students spend every summer living in local housing projects where they devote seven days a week to teaching children, taking them to local points of interest, and traveling with them on weekends to Washington, New York, or the New England countryside. The dedication of these undergraduates is remarkable and stands in striking contrast to the surveys of student values and the theories of popular writers who dismiss the current college generation as ambitious, self-centered careerists.

Community service activities also exist in several of Harvard's professional schools. Here, the Law School leads the way not only in encouraging a large proportion of students to participate in programs to give legal services to the poor but in integrating these activities

into regular courses and offering extensive instruction and supervision. In addition, medical students help to staff clinics in ghetto areas, travel abroad to work in underdeveloped countries, and offer health instruction in local high schools. Students at the Education School do practice teaching in inner-city schools, and community service programs are now beginning in the Kennedy School as well.

Notwithstanding these initiatives, few of our professional schools have yet done all that they might to offer opportunities for community services and give them adequate supervision and support. One would hope that they will do so and not regard these programs simply as marginal or extracurricular. For many people, such experiences will do more to build a lasting concern for others than any lessons learned through classroom reading and discussion.

Ethical Standards of the Institution. Universities periodically encounter moral problems in the course of investing their stock, interacting with the surrounding community, implementing affirmative action, and carrying out other tasks. The way in which they address these issues will not be lost upon their students. Nothing is so likely to produce cynicism, especially among those taking courses in practical ethics, as a realization that the very institution that offers such classes shows little concern for living up to its own moral obligations.