

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

Despite its anarchic, irreverent qualities, the atmosphere of the university helps in important ways to cause administrators and faculty members to adhere to ethical standards. Campus debate can clarify moral choices and improve the quality of official decisions. Prevailing scholarly values emphasizing accuracy and meticulousness reinforce high standards of intellectual honesty. In an environment that relies on personal influence rather than formal power, presidents, deans, and professors all have to behave ethically in order to gain respect. If nothing else, campus authorities act in something akin to a goldfish bowl and hence feel inhibited from uttering convenient untruths or cutting ethical corners to achieve their ends.

At the same time, as I have learned to my sorrow over the past sixteen years, a modern university cannot avoid embarrassing mistakes and moral lapses. Hundreds of people make hundreds of decisions each day. At an institution as bustling and decentralized as Harvard, most of these decisions are made with considerable independence and often under pressure of time. In such circumstances, deplorable incidents are bound to occur. Of course, one could try to reduce their number by imposing more rules and review procedures. But controls of this kind would only increase red tape and stifle the independent judgment essential to an institution that seeks to be creative and personal rather than cumbersome and bureaucratic.

Apart from the inevitable mistakes, problems of communication often make the performance of a university seem worse than is actually the case. In some instances, especially in personnel matters, officials are bound by decency not to disclose all of the facts, even when it is embarrassing to keep silent. Years ago, for example, local newspapers took Harvard to task for refusing to grant a diploma to a student who had secretly finished his work for an MIT degree while taking a full complement of courses at Harvard. To reporters, Harvard was acting in pique because a student had shown that he could complete the University's requirements while simultaneously carrying a full course load at another institution. In reality, the student lost his degree because he had failed to disclose that he was receiving financial aid from the two universities at the same time. Yet the authorities involved properly concluded that they should not reveal the facts. (Today, they would be prohibited by law from doing so.) Similar misunderstandings occur in less spectacular form when the University is accused of failing to appoint someone for political, racial, or gender reasons but will not disclose the judgments from outside experts that actually accounted for the decision.

Even when officials are free to publicize the facts, their motives are often misinterpreted. Presidents and deans must inevitably make unpopular decisions that arouse suspicion and

resentment. Some groups will respond by making accusations against the university in order to attract publicity and generate pressure. Others will conclude that officials who disagree with their position must be acting for immoral or self-serving reasons. In either case, critics can always make their case by finding a petty, self-serving motive behind even the most benign initiative. Thus, Harvard's decision to give more funding and support for student community service has been characterized by some as an effort to gain publicity and curry goodwill in Cambridge. Efforts to develop a national program to bring black South Africans to study at American colleges and universities have sometimes been criticized as a cynical attempt to divert attention from the more costly, controversial issue of divestment.

Further distortions can occur through a desire to tell a good story. Within the past year, a scurrilous book appeared about the Business School containing a startling number of utter fabrications having no basis in fact. Despite strenuous efforts by the University to point out these errors, the opportunity to make money at Harvard's expense was apparently too great to resist. While such flagrant cases are rare, other forms of distortion regularly appear in the media. For example, when Harvard officials decided in 1986 to prevent homeless people from congregating around a grate next to Leverett House, reporters chose to describe what had occurred as a rich, liberal university turning away the poor on the coldest night of the year. This account, though not false, played down what the Dean of Harvard College had emphasized in several interviews — that the homeless in question had threatened students with a knife, peeped through windows of students in their bedrooms, offered marijuana to undergraduates, and behaved in other aggravating ways. Whether one agrees or disagrees with the decision, the action was surely less heartless and more complicated than the media allowed — but also far less likely to interest the general public.

The issue of whether to invest in firms operating in South Africa offers the ultimate example of the difficulties of trying to demonstrate a serious concern for moral standards. The problems of South Africa are far too tragic and inflammatory to escape bitter controversy, whatever a university decides to do. Student activists will claim that officials who oppose total divestment are insensitive to the injustices of apartheid, while conservative critics insist that selling stock is only an empty and expensive gesture to appease irresponsible radicals. In this atmosphere, divestment can easily acquire such emotional, symbolic importance that it is difficult to examine the issues with the objectivity they deserve. In such circumstances, the only hope is to try to convince as many people as possible that the university takes its ethical responsibilities seriously by setting forth the arguments for its position with meticulous care. In the heat of controversy, even this goal can be very hard to achieve.

In sum, however well intentioned the institution, it may be difficult to demonstrate a genuine concern for moral standards, especially to students who do not know campus officials personally and hence cannot judge their motives or understand firsthand the reasons for their actions. The inevitable moral lapses, distortions, and passionate disagreements will all take their toll no matter how hard an administration tries to act in a principled fashion and to explain its actions fully. And yet, the alternative is surely far worse. If campus authorities are reluctant to explain their policies and unwilling to

answer critics, they will seem morally callous and leave themselves vulnerable to those who seek to discredit their actions and charge them with shabby motives. In this event, any effort to emphasize the importance of moral education will soon fall prey to cynicism and distrust.

The Institutional Environment. The examples universities set through their official policies are but a few of the innumerable messages bearing ethical content that pass through the campus community. Coaches periodically grapple with moral issues in full view of their players as they strive to resolve conflicts

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between winning and playing by the rules. Financial aid officers must cope with students who misrepresent their family assets. Proctors have to respond to petty acts of discrimination against black students, women, or homosexuals. In the way they treat individual students and staff, professors signal whether important personalities need have concern for others or whether one can get ahead with little regard for anyone save oneself. By the questions asked, even application forms suggest the importance professional schools attach to matters of character as opposed to matters of intellect.

In seeking to create an ethical environment, universities must try to make these implicit messages affirm rather than undermine basic moral values. Yet those in authority act with much less power than leaders of many other organizations possess. The strong commitment to academic freedom precludes them from trying to influence the views of faculty members even if a professor utters bizarre ethical opinions or openly disparages moral values. As we have seen, moreover, universities have largely abandoned the attempt to pick professors on the basis of their moral character. However sincere their concern for ethical standards, therefore, universities must proceed with little control over the adults who have the greatest influence on the lives of students.

Fortunately, most faculty members do set high standards of probity, conscientiousness, and service to others. Moreover, a university can emphasize character in appointing other adult figures who touch the lives of students in important ways: deans and other administrators, athletic coaches, faculty heads of student residences, and many more.

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