

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

THE PROGRAM RECONSIDERED

These, then, are the elements of a comprehensive program of moral education: offering courses in applied ethics at the college and professional school level, discussing rules of conduct with students and administering them fairly, building programs of community service, striving for a high ethical standard in dealing with moral issues facing the university, and, finally, being more alert to the countless signals that institutions send to students so that these messages will support rather than undermine basic norms.

This account should reassure those who fear that any effort to strengthen ethical standards will turn out to be a form of indoctrination. Nothing I have mentioned should compromise the university's obligation to respect the freedom of every student to express any opinion or entertain any view on moral as well as political, social, and aesthetic questions. This is why particular religious doctrines, however important they may be in guiding the ethical beliefs of individual students, can never be adopted by a secular university as the basis for its program of moral education. What the institution can do is to offer arguments and encouragement of various kinds to persuade students to adhere to basic ethical norms. These norms—honesty, nonviolence, promise keeping, respect for property, and other legitimate interests—are all so fundamental and so universal that they have proved essential to virtually every civilized society. As a result, institutional efforts encouraging students to act according to these precepts should not give justifiable offense to any campus group even in the most diverse student body. After all, would any sensible person urge university officials not to speak out in favor of honesty, free speech, or community service, not to strive for a high ethical standard in setting institutional policy, not to adopt reasonable disciplinary rules against cheating, violence, or other violations of widely accepted standards of behavior?

The efforts described, therefore, do not seem doctrinaire or inappropriate for an academic institution. But will they do any good? A university is only one institution among many that affect students' lives. It offers an experience late in youth when ideas and values are more developed and students less open to adult advice than in earlier years. It competes with television, motion pictures, and the tumult of an outside world replete with scandals and lurid exposes. With its commitment to intellectual freedom and diversity, a university even lacks the power to bring a consistent, coordinated influence to bear on those who live and work within its walls. For many students, its efforts to communicate on moral questions will be all but lost amid the distractions of the countless groups and extracurricular activities that fill the typical campus.

Despite these limitations, the years of college and professional school still represent an important stage in the development of most young people. In graduate schools of law, business, medicine, and the like, students form a sense of what kind of a professional they wish to be—what skills and attitudes matter most and how they can adapt their values to the special circumstances and challenges of their calling. In college, freshmen arrive, free from family influence, to think about their lives in new and different ways. As many observers have noted, this experience frequently leads students to discard a simple moral code they have previously acquired in favor of a new set of values. These values are often the

product of considerable thought and introspection and are typically built upon some notion of the reciprocal obligations human beings need to observe toward one another in order to form a viable community. In Carol Gilligan's words, "Moral development in the college years thus centers on the shift from moral ideology to ethical responsibility.

As students search to define their ethical responsibilities, the university can play an important role. Its usefulness comes in part from the capacity to instill a greater respect for facts and a greater ability to reason carefully about complicated problems. Equally valuable is its diverse community populated by students and faculty with many different backgrounds and points of view. Such an environment teaches tolerance, a respect for differing values, a recognition of the complexity of human problems. In so doing, it prepares students well for the real world and helps a perceptive person to acquire a moral understanding far richer and more firmly rooted in the intricacies of modern life than simpler dogmas nurtured in more homogeneous, more carefully controlled environments.

These advantages, however, are not sufficient to insure a sound moral education. Indeed, they carry substantial risks.

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that need to be countered by a serious effort on the part of the university. Precisely because its community is so diverse, set in a society so divided and confused over its values, a university that pays little attention to moral development may find that many of its students grow bewildered, convinced that ethical dilemmas are simply matters of personal opinion beyond external judgment or careful analysis.

Nothing could be more unfortunate or more unnecessary. Although moral issues sometimes lack convincing answers, that is often not the case. Besides, universities should be the last institutions to discourage a belief in the value of reasoned argument and carefully considered evidence in analyzing even the hardest human problem's. And universities should be among the first to reaffirm the importance of basic values, such as honesty, promise keeping, free expression, and nonviolence, for these are not only principles essential to civilized society, they are values on which all learning and discovery ultimately depend. There is nothing odd or inappropriate, therefore, for a university to make these values the foundation for a serious program to help students develop a strong set of moral standards. On the contrary, the failure to do so threatens to convey a message that neither these values nor the effort to live up to them are of much importance or much common concern. This message is not only unworthy of the academy, it is likely in the atmosphere of a university to leave students morally confused and unable to acquire ethical convictions of their own.

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