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The Place of Ethics Centers in Higher Education

Douglas Ferraro

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I am humbled to be on this retrospective program with so many of the founders of the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society and among people who make the teaching and research of ethical issues such a central aspect of their professional careers as educators.

Indeed, I am suffering a bit, quite a bit, from the Imposter Syndrome--the sense that I, having no expertise in ethics centers, am an imposter among this panel of experts--all the more so if I dare to address the lofty topic of "The Place of Ethics Centers in Higher Education." After all, I have no formal training in ethics nor have I ever been a participant in an ethics center in higher education.

But there are two or three reasons why I do not, having confirmed my lowly status, now simply take my seat (which I will do relatively quickly ever mindful that I am the only speaker

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that separates us from a reception for the Ethics Center). The first reason I suppose is that deans, particularly deans of Arts and Sciences who must move amongst 20 disciplines in which they are not trained, are somewhat practiced at handling the anxiety that the Imposter Syndrome engenders so that I have formed some tolerance for being an imposter in this sense.

Since I now place myself firmly into my decanal role let me exercise the privilege of speaking on behalf of the College of Arts and Sciences to acknowledge and thank the founders of the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society, to acknowledge the many contributions that we have heard about today and to praise in particular the associate directors, Shirley Bach and Jim Jaksa. Needless to say, Jim's announced retirement will create an unfillable void in the College's expertise in Communications Ethics.

While in this mode, I need to dwell some on the seminal and continuing contributions of the Center's director, Michael Pritchard. It seems always in an organization that there are those who sow the seeds for the organization, those who nurture the development and growth of the seeds, and those who productively harvest the mature

growth. Michael Pritchard has done it all. From seed to harvest he has farmed the Ethics Center and it is largely because of him that we are having this 10th birthday party for the Center today. I take a great measure of pride in having Mike as a College colleague and am thrilled that the University has seen fit to acknowledge his research in ethics by giving him the University's highest award as this year's University's Research Scholar.

A second reason that I share my thoughts with you today is that, as one who previously engaged in an active professional practice of forensic 'clinical psychology and psychopharmacology, I have lived intimately with professional ethical issues in applied settings, often, in my case, involving decisions of life and death. From these experiences I have developed a keen interest in knowing how people learn to make responsible decisions about what is right, good or moral.

As a sidebar here, it is my guess that the American Psychological Association's Code of Ethics for the Practice of Psychology is among the most detailed and comprehensive of any professional code of ethics. Despite this, my sense

is that the code evolves in a reactive sense rather than in a proactive sense. For example, when it was determined that the primary reason underlying malpractice suits against psychologists by patients was sexual relations among therapists and clients, the APA Code of Ethics was revised to prescribe acceptable behavior in this context but did nothing to help psychologists think through, to reflect about, the ethical issues involved. (For the curious among you, a therapist is considered to be behaving ethically if the therapist has sex with a previous client six or more years after the termination of therapy with that client.)

My point here, I suppose, is that as I observe the behavior of professionals they do not seem to deduce solutions to new ethical dilemmas simply by having behaved in accordance with a codified prescription for ethical behavior. People seem to need to learn how to think ethically just as they seem to need to learn to think critically.

This latter thought provides a segue to my next rumination and that has to do with my conviction that a responsible institution of high learning will provide the opportunity for its membership, students, staff and faculty alike, to learn the processes of thinking critically about

ethical issues. There is no need to assert this to this audience, of course, since you all operate daily on this premise. But it probably does us well to remember occasionally that there is a cogent argument that the study of morality is not proper in a public state institution such as ours if for no other reason that those that would teach may instead preach about the appropriateness of a particular ethical position.

And while those of you who teach ethics as a cognitive process or an awareness or perspective may understandably take umbrage at the notion that you might propagandize instead, I remind you that there does not seem to be a well articulated code of professional ethics in higher education to guide our behavior as teachers. Put otherwise, one is not imbued necessarily with the subject that one teaches; one is not ethical because he teaches ethics.

Our President, Diether Haenicke, in a previous talk to the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society, lamented the absence of a set of ethical guidelines in higher education, noting that few other professions were devoid of such a code. This absence, speaking again as a dean, seems particularly noticeable to administrators who are

tasked with making disciplinary judgements about colleagues. The absence of an ethical code leaves one to default ethical and professional judgements to rule of law which is often framed in nonacademic contexts. Take as but one example, more real than hypothetical, the instance where a male professor has sex with a female graduate student working under his direct supervision. Can this behavior be considered professionally ethical in higher education? Under the law that governs sexual harassment in the workplace, this behavior can be considered lawful if the sex was consensual. But how do we in higher education arbitrate the question of whether in a student-faculty power differential relationship it is possible ever to have an uncoerced consensus or an informed consent in this situation? Drawing a parallel to the psychology code of ethics, should we in higher education not codify ethical behavior and say, perhaps, that having sex with an ex-student is only ethical if it occurs six years or more after the student graduates?

But what now of the place of ethics centers in higher education? I do not know precisely how many institutions of higher learning have an ethics center. The Association for Practical and

Professional Ethics has over 70 institutional members as of this year, one of which is our own Ethics Center thanks to Mike Pritchard being a charter member of the Association. A review of these centers for practical and professional ethics yields more similarities than differences among them. The principal difference is the breadth of the professions that are of concern. Some are restricted to health professions or to business professions and so on, but most have the magnitude of interdisciplinary breadth that ours does. The principal similarity is that each center serves as a resource for information to the broader academic community about applied ethical issues.

As I see it, there are three factors in higher education that demand the presence of an ethics center; that make an ethics center essential rather than a pleasant nicety. These factors are the extant Liberal Education Reform Movement; the seeming past failure of interdisciplinary studies; and the immediate attack on the humanities. Having earlier disavowed my expertise to address these issues let me be brief in explicating each of these.

1. Liberal Education Movement. Over the past 5 years almost every institution of higher education has moved to reform liberal education--

the College of Arts and Sciences at WMU being no exception. The principal drivers for this were that our curricula did not seem adequately to reflect cultural pluralism, diversity and internationalization as a content matter and did not adequately engender "habits of mind" in our students. The specific latter criticism was that our curricula were not preparing students to think critically or ethically in complex situations. Employers called for cognitive processors not content knowers. The fit to centers of practical and applied ethics with their support for preparing ethical thinkers in professional settings was perfect with the liberal education reform emphasis on thinking, writing and ethics across the curriculum. The place of ethics centers in higher education was elevated as a result.

2. Failure of Interdisciplinary Studies: An earlier higher education reform force, you may recall, was the movement toward interdisciplinary studies. Despite the face validity of the arguments for interdisciplinary pursuits, most of which we would all embrace, as a practical matter interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary studies have not survived in higher education. Indeed, disciplinary restricted studies seem to be even

more secure these days than ever before. It is easy to speculate about the reasons for this failure. What seems more pertinent for today is to note where some successes are. Basically, the few successes there have been occur where there has been an overwhelmingly strong, unifying conceptual scheme with real life application to glue the disciplines together. Thus, while interdisciplinary approaches to artificial intelligence have faltered, environmental studies have flourished. And while sociobiology has ebbed, ethics centers have sustained. Again, as a bastion of interdisciplinary success, the place of ethics center in higher education is secure. (Aside-think how unusual the stability of our center has been across all of our colleges-something that is not elsewhere truly duplicated on our campus.)

3. Attack on the Humanities: Once upon a time to be learned meant to be knowledgeable about philosophy, religion, music, mathematics, language, letters, and literatures. The polymath was gifted in what we now refer to as the humanities. These days the humanities are under direct frontal assault. Being perhaps postmodern, deconstructive, or politically correct (read feminist, ethnocentric) in nature, the humanities

have been eschewed as not useful, not applicable, not worthy of support. Our U.S. Congress, struggle as it will with ethical issues in its own glass house, has stripped the lifeblood from the NEH and NEA to the extent that the infrastructure and context for the humanities has been dismantled. In this context, ethics centers stand tall in higher education as a beacon for the humanities. They demonstrate that the humanities have an applied importance in professional settings that functionally rivals that of science and technology. Again, the place for ethics centers in higher education is front and center.

Close

I need to bring this to a close. I have already said more than I know to say. But I would feel remiss if I did not pose the question of what next for ethics centers, indeed what next for the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society? When we reconvene in 10 years for the Center's 20th birthday party will forces at play on higher education still determine a central place for ethics centers? Will it be enough that ethics centers support discussion and scholarship about professional ethics or will they need to be more affirmative in generating ethical codes of conduct?

Could we challenge our Ethics Center, for example, to draft a detailed code of ethics for professors and administrators at WMU?

These are interesting questions to ponder but not dwell upon today. Instead today we should say happy 10th birthday to the Center for the Study of Ethics in Society and let the celebration begin.