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## Teaching Research Ethics: An Institutional Change Model

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# **Teaching Research Ethics: An Institutional Change Model**

**Michael Pritchard, Ph.D.**

**Willard A. Brown Professor of Philosophy  
Director, Center for the Study of Ethics in Society  
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Western Michigan University**

## Biographical Sketch

Michael S. Pritchard

Michael Pritchard is the Willard A. Brown Professor of Philosophy at Western Michigan University, Director of WMU's Center for the Study of Ethics in Society, and an Associate Dean in the Graduate College. Author of many articles on ethics in engineering, he is co-author (with C.E. Harris and Michael Rabins) of *Engineering Ethics: Concepts and Cases*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Wadsworth, 2000). Among his other publications are *Reasonable Children* (Kansas, 1996) and *On Becoming Responsible* (Kansas, 1991). Currently he is working on a book tentatively titled, *Professional Responsibility*.

## **Teaching Research Ethics: An Institutional Change Model at WMU**

“Teaching Research Ethics: An Institutional Change Model” is a two year project at WMU that aims at promoting an institutional environment in which ethics is widely discussed and explicitly embraced as an integral part of good research. Funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (Grant # SES-0115480), one of the project’s major objectives is to develop an instructional program in research ethics for faculty, staff, and graduate researchers throughout the university.

It is intended that our instructional program will serve as a model especially for institutions like WMU that are developing a strong research agenda, but without the experience of the major research universities. Our university has been marked by dramatic changes in its level and kinds of research activities, particularly in regard to seeking external support from, not only federal sources, but also private industry and the community. As our university continues to move in this direction, it faces challenges and opportunities that require paying careful attention to issues in research ethics. Some of these involve relationships with external agencies (e.g., over ownership of information and conflicts of interest); but many involve faculty/student relationships, as research plays a much more prominent role.

WMU has, of course, established procedures for assuring compliance with appropriate governmental policies and regulations. However, this is not sufficient for accomplishing the sorts of institutional changes our research ethics project envisages. Our strategy is to develop, implement, disseminate and evaluate a comprehensive set of instructional modules on research ethics that can serve as a vehicle for serious examination and discussion of research ethics issues facing institutions of higher education. The instructional module program will be designed to:

- familiarize researchers with basic ethical issues in research;
- help researchers develop and refine methods of analyzing and

dealing effectively with those issues;

- provide an interdisciplinary forum for constructive dialogue about research ethics issues facing universities like WMU; and
- enable participants to play a leadership role in promoting research ethics within their disciplines.

A key part of this project is the leadership of a cadre of *Research Ethics Fellows*, composed of faculty and graduate students. Ten faculty and ten graduate students were selected as Research Ethics Fellows for the first year of this project. (They, along with the members of the project's Planning Committee, are listed below.) Twenty more fellows will be selected for the second year. First year fellows participated in a series of seminars devoted to topics such as: basic principles of research ethics; research involving human subjects; research integrity; misconduct in research; conflicts of interest; and the social responsibilities of researchers. They also participated in study groups on special topics and made presentations in their disciplinary areas. During the second semester of the 2001-2 academic year, three workshops were presented to the entire university community: An Introduction to Research Ethics; Human Subjects Research; and Research Ethics. These university-wide workshops will be repeated during the 2002-3 academic year, along with several new workshops on such topics as conflicts of interest, intellectual property, mentoring, and the social responsibilities of researchers.

Dr. Brian Schrag, Executive Secretary of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE), helped us launch our program by making a keynote presentation on research ethics at the first gathering of the Research Ethics Fellows. Dr. Schrag directed a seven year NSF funded program, "Graduate Research Ethics Education" (GREE). Modeled after Indiana University's highly successful "Teaching Research Ethics" (TRE) summer program for faculty, the GREE program brought 15-18 graduate students each summer to Indiana University for a week-long summer workshop on research ethics. As a member of the teaching faculty in that program, I was present to appreciate with Dr. Schrag what took place in those workshops.

His presentation, "Changing the Culture of Science: Teaching Research Ethics to Graduate Students and Post-doctoral Fellows," provides an excellent overview of what the recent upsurge of interest in research ethics is all about, as well as a detailed account of the GREE program. We are grateful to Dr. Schrag for helping us get our project off to an excellent start and for allowing us publish his presentation.

The first year is concluding with a two day conference, May 10-11, during which the Project Planners and Research Ethics Fellows will convene with next year's Research Ethics Fellows to evaluate the first year of the program, and plan for the second year. Presentations will also be made by Nicholas Steneck (University of Michigan and the Office of Research Integrity), Rebeca Rufty and Nell Kriesberg (North Carolina State University), and Julia Reyes (Michigan State University), all of whom have considerable experience in developing educational programs in research ethics.

A distinctive feature of our project is its concern to develop and nurture a broad community of researchers, within a single university, who are seriously interested in research ethics. What we have in mind is a strongly interdisciplinary community, including engineers, biologists, chemists, communication specialists, psychologists, sociologists, education specialists, philosophers, and so on, discussing together issues in research ethics and sharing the view that ethics is an integral part of responsible research. This community is broadly inclusive in another important way; it includes student researchers as well as faculty and staff researchers.

Seeking equal representation of faculty and graduate students in our Research Ethics Fellows program is a significant departure from the more usual research ethics programs, which tend to separate faculty and students. As mentioned, the TRE program is for faculty, the GREE program for graduate students. However, much university research is undertaken with faculty and graduate students working together, and faculty serve as advisors and mentors for their students. Furthermore, working out these relationships well can itself pose ethical challenges.

The interdisciplinary approach to our project is fundamental for several reasons. First, research ethics is itself an interdisciplinary subject, informed not only by the specific areas within which research is undertaken, but also by, for example, philosophy, sociology, psychology, management, public administration, and communication.

Second, although there may be important differences in the details of research ethics issues from area to area, there are many issues that cut across virtually all of these areas (e.g., conflicts of interest; misconduct in designing, conducting, and reporting research; confidentiality; concern for the rights and welfare of human subjects). Interdisciplinary analysis of the generic features of these issues can contribute to a deeper and clearer understanding of their application in specific domains of research.

Third, many research endeavors are themselves interdisciplinary to a significant degree (projects combining the efforts of, for example, researchers in biomedical science and engineering, or nursing and social work). Recent examples of such research on our own campus include:

- researchers in Psychology collaborating with local physicians in developing relaxation strategies for adolescents with asthma;
- researchers in Blind Rehabilitation and Electrical Engineering building and testing a device that teaches blind children to walk without veering--with similar efforts made in developing a talking compass and a talking bus;
- researchers in Blind Rehabilitation and Electrical Engineering at WMU working with teams of engineers, orientation and mobility instructors, highway safety researchers, and psychologists at four other institutions to find solutions to mobility challenges of those who are visually impaired;
- researchers in WMU's Institute of Mechanical Engineering working with a local manufacturer to develop a surface that reduces the incidence of bedsores in patients confined to bed or wheelchairs--work that is also being extended to seating for

offices, automobiles, and trucks;

- researchers in Industrial Engineering and Psychology investigating ways to eliminate barriers to teamwork and effective communication in critical groups, such as surgical teams and aircraft cockpit crews.

As this list suggests, many research projects at our university are very applied, especially in ways that lend themselves to interdisciplinary endeavors having an immediate and direct impact on human health and welfare. Such interdisciplinary research creates a need for mutual understanding of research ethics concerns and may even require negotiating differences that surface in particular research projects (for example, different authorship practices, or different criteria for what counts as data or how it is properly interpreted and reported).

An interdisciplinary undertaking, our project contributes to developing a broad institutional commitment to research ethics rather than only a somewhat isolated effort (whether this is in an ethics course in a philosophy department or a session on research ethics in a senior design course in an engineering department).

Our project addresses a problem left unresolved by the TRE and GREE programs. After attending these programs, participants return to their home institutions--*alone*. They no longer have the advantage of the organized support of their institute faculty and fellow participants; and they may find that they have relatively little support from colleagues at their home institutions. WMU is unusual in that a total of nine faculty members have participated in the TRE program since its inception more than ten years ago. One graduate student has participated the GREE program. However, attending institutes elsewhere does not necessarily bring participants together at their home institutions. By developing a relatively stable, interdisciplinary group *within our institution*, we aim to provide the kind of support that will enable research ethics to become thoroughly integrated into the research environment of the entire university.

Research ethics is in its infancy as an area of teaching. It can be expected to undergo significant changes as more is learned about what works and what does not work in teaching research ethics, and as new challenges arise from new research endeavors themselves. Nothing is static, especially for institutions like ours that are entering waters that are, for them, relatively uncharted, as they strive to become more research oriented, particularly in ways that link research with industry and the community.

### **WMU Program on Teaching Research Ethics, 2001-2**

#### **Planning Committee**

Sylvia Culp	Philosophy
Wayne Fuqua	Psychology (Chair)
David Hartmann	Sociology, Kercher Center (Director)
Victoria Janson	Research Compliance Coordinator
Deborah Wilson	Sociology (Graduate Assistant)
Michael Pritchard	Graduate College (Assoc. Dean); Philosophy
Thomas VanValey	Sociology (Chair)

(cont.)

## Research Ethics Fellows, 2001-2

Daryl Arkwright	Biological Sciences (Grad Student)
Kathryn Bell	Clinical Psychology (Grad Student)
Racquel Cuoto	Occup. Therapy (Grad Student)
Doris Dirks	History (Grad Student); Chair, GSAC
Harold Glasser	Environmental Studies (Faculty)
Sonia Guerreiro	Science Education (Grad Student)
Gregg Guetschow	Public Administration (Grad Student)
Peter Kobrak	Public Administration (Faculty)
Mary Lagerwey	Nursing (Faculty); Chair, HSIRB
Sherrie Maher	Psychology (Grad Student); Grad Asst, HSIRB
Ken Marker	Paper Science & Engr. (Grad Student)
Peter Parker	Paper Science & Engr. (Faculty)
Erik Pederson	Mechanical Engineering (Grad Student)
Cindee Peterson	Occup. Therapy (Faculty), Vice-Chair, HSIRB
Subhash Sonnad	Sociology (Faculty)
Richard Spates	Clinical Psychology (Faculty)
Susan Stapleton	Chemistry (Faculty)
Ralph Tanner	Electrical & Computing Engr. (Faculty)
Kiesha Warren	Sociology (Grad Student)
William Wiener	Graduate College, Sr. Associate Dean

