

UNIVERSITY ETHICS

***How Colleges Can Build and Benefit
from a Culture of Ethics***

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THE ABSENCE OF ETHICS AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

“Education corruption is universal but the type differs from one region to another.”

—Stephen Heyneman¹

The narratives that help illustrate the lack of professional ethics at American universities occur with greater and greater frequency, though most often we fail to note them as such. Our universities are riddled with ethical compromise, but rarely, even when the press exposes something shameful about a university, do we identify the issue as a lack of ethics.²

Consider, for instance, the first three days of 2012. The Sunday front page of the *Boston Globe* carried the story of Harvard University’s cancellation of a professor’s courses because of his apparently inflammatory claims in the classroom. The article described a university debate about academic freedom and a particular professor’s problematic rhetoric, but neither side made any appeal to professional ethics.³ No questions about a professor’s professional ethical responsibilities were raised even though the administration cancelled the professor’s course.

Ethics, an academic discipline that routinely arbitrates competing claims, is rarely invoked as a discipline to address university problems, even though the university itself hosts multitudinous courses on ethics whether in the humanities or the professional schools of law, medicine, social work, or nursing.

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ETHICS

“Making morals means making community.”

—Wayne Meeks¹

The university has, it seems, an awkward relationship with ethics. It teaches ethics for all professions except its own. At the university, its own faculty instructs future lawyers, physicians, nurses, financial managers, social workers, and others in ethics. University professors implicitly and often explicitly teach these emerging professionals that they *need* ethics for their own professions. The professors’ general argument is that ethics is for the good of each of the professions. What they do not teach is that ethics is good for university professionals as well.

In this chapter we focus on ethics, *per se*. First, we see how ethics function in a profession. In this case, we turn to the medical profession to illustrate what we mean both by *ethics* and by an “underlying culture of ethics that promotes ethical conduct.” In the medical profession we find a profession that depends on ethics for its flourishing.

Second, we turn to the profession of ministry. We make this turn because, like the university, the church teaches ethics, and, until very recently, the church has had almost no professional training for its employees or its administrators in the field of church ministry ethics. Our turn to the church is rather important, because not only is it another profession that teaches ethics, it is effectively the *only* other professional institution that dedicates itself to the teaching of ethics. Like the university, however, it has not believed that it needed to practice what it taught.²

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HOW THE LITERATURE ON THE UNIVERSITY IS MOVING SLOWLY BUT SURELY TOWARD UNIVERSITY ETHICS

“The academic profession has traditionally enjoyed a high degree of autonomy, particularly in the classroom and in research. While most academics are only dimly aware of it, the move toward accountability affects their professional lives. This trend will intensify, not only due to fiscal constraints, but also because public institutions have come under greater scrutiny.”

—Philip G. Altbach¹

While this is the first book on university ethics that I know of, there are a variety of works about the university that are related to the question I pose, though they are primarily interested in other matters. My question simply asks whether the university as an institution is willing to develop the context, climate, and structures to promote a culture of ethics for its members’ personal and corporate conduct. Is the university capable of following other institutions like medicine, law, and business in providing the incentives, forums, and guidance so as to tap into the wisdom of its members as they collectively navigate the virtues, values, and norms that they would need to be professionally, ethically responsible, accountable, and transparent in their university work?

I believe that there are four different but related categories of literature that help us today to understand the situation of the contemporary university. Though they are arranged according to their different aims and audiences, we should be able to see that they are moving in a

A FIRST CASE FOR UNIVERSITY ETHICS: THE ADJUNCT FACULTY

“The army of part-time professors teaching at the region’s colleges are merely working stiffs at the bottom of an enormous and lucrative enterprise.”

—Lisa Liberty Becker¹

In this chapter we look at the first group of persons for whom ethical questions about the university need to be asked: the adjunct faculty. It is worth remembering that in books on academic ethics, matters about adjunct faculty are rarely raised. Those books are aimed at the tasks of the academic: her or his classroom and office responsibilities.

Stephen Cahn, the veritable trailblazer of academic ethics, makes little reference to them in his own book, *Saints and Scamps*, where he focuses on teaching, scholarship, and personnel decisions. In even the last section on personnel decisions, he focuses on questions of fairness, honesty, and transparency regarding interviewing, receiving, evaluating, promoting, and tenuring faculty. Adjunct or contingent faculty are really not tenure faculty’s business, or so the culture has us believe.

In Cahn’s edited books, *Morality, Responsibility and the University* and *Moral Problems in Higher Education*, adjunct faculty do not appear either. There are essays on hiring, on affirmative action, and on the experience of faculty, but again the presupposition is tenured or tenure-track faculty. The academic ethics issues are about academic freedom, tenure, research, office responsibilities, committee work, letters of recommendation, and relations and responsibilities with students; adjunct

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THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE OF THE UNIVERSITY WITHOUT ETHICS

“Generally speaking, a million-dollar president could be kidnapped by space aliens and it would be weeks or even months before his or her absence from campus was noticed.”

—Benjamin Ginsberg¹

In this chapter, we look at the world of the contemporary university and discover three foundational insights. First, the faculty (whether adjunct or tenure-line) are especially individualistic in their professional work and are not as prone as other professionals to work in tandem or as partners with other colleagues. Second, the university is not a professionally relational world at all, but rather a series of fiefdoms, with hierarchical classes running across the entire university structure. Third, nature abhors a vacuum: absent a culture of ethics, other cultures inevitably move into a university. The cultures described here could not happen if a culture of ethics were in place. Without ethics and its own vigilance, what do we have?

THE ISOLATING INDIVIDUALISTIC WORLD OF THE FACULTY

In 2008, I was invited to deliver a plenary presentation at the 2009 annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. The title was “Impasse and Theological Ethics” and if anyone knows any-

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CHEATING

“I love honor codes, but honor codes are about a culture, and I’m not sure how you get that going.”

—Trevor Brandt-Sarif, a Harvard University junior from California¹

Since the university exists for the study, understanding, and teaching of truth, cheating and other compromises of intellectual integrity are the most inimical and vicious of university practices. If we want clear evidence that our universities lack ethics, then cheating stories are good indicators. I am looking at cheating not because of its role in either the classroom or in a student’s life; rather, because of our interest in university ethics, I want to look at cheating, the most evident form of a moral lapse, against the backdrop of a university’s culture.

Two insights about cheating today are especially alarming: it is on the increase and involves those who are already ahead of the curve just as much as anyone else.

In a definitive essay on cheating at university campuses, Donald McCabe and Linda Klebe Trevino write that cheating at universities is “frequent and growing.” Their argument comes in three stages: cheating is getting worse and worse, it can be diminished by an honor code, and one needs an underlying culture of integrity to accompany the honor code.

The evidence to make their three-fold claim consists of “a decade of research in which we have surveyed over 14,000 students on 58 different campuses, from small liberal arts colleges to large comprehensive universities.”²

UNDERGRADUATES ACTING BADLY

"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."

—Derek Bok¹

In this chapter we look at undergraduates behaving badly, a phenomenon that is only worsening. If you think that racially themed parties at universities are nastier and more frequent than ever, you are right. If you think hazing is more pervasive, more dangerous, and more brutal than ever, you are not mistaken. If you think fraternities have more dangerous accidents, more parties, and more alcoholic binges than ever, you are unfortunately correct. If you think that sexual violence is up and that rape is a much more common campus event, you are right.

Whether a university has a fraternity or not, undergraduates behaving badly is a progressively worsening reality. As Michael Sperber told us more than ten years ago, in *Beer and Circus: How Big-Time College Sports Is Crippling Undergraduate Education*, when universities bought into football and other sports, they bought into partying, big time.² Come to college, come to party. Fraternities make it easier to party, but if there are no fraternities, heck what are hockey matches for?

GENDER

“People tend to think that the problem has gone away, but alas, it hasn’t.”

—Dr. Nancy Hopkins¹

Women undergraduates are now able to get a hearing in Washington about sexual assault on campuses because they have become collectively aware about the ethical issues around sexual assault. They learned from hearsay, personal testimony, and actual experience that sexual assault was and is an issue on campus. They learned too about the ethical issues of consent, reporting, confidentiality, and their rights. They communicated with one another what the issues were, created networks of solidarity, and sustained a discourse appraising others about the matters of justice that were at stake in responding to a reported sexual assault.

Though the data shows that, for a variety of reasons, few students still report sexual assault (on average only 12 percent of student victims report the assault to law enforcement), many students recognize that the silence on campus regarding reporting is part of the problem. They also know the awful experiences of women who reported at universities that were not prepared or competent to arbitrate the claims in those reports, as the White House Report and the McCaskill report make clear, and as the *New York Times* conveys with great clarity in their account of one woman’s attempt to report, “Reporting Rape, and Wishing She Hadn’t: How One College Handled a Sexual Assault Complaint.”²

DIVERSITY AND RACE

"As undergraduates progress in higher education, they become less interested, on average, in promoting racial understanding."

—Scott Jaschik¹

In 2012, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* published the news that "Women Are Still Underrepresented as Medical-School Deans, Study Finds." The article was brief. "Despite the increased participation of women in academic medicine, they remain significantly underrepresented among the deans of medical schools and take longer to advance through their ranks than their male counterparts."² It referred to the study, "The Impact of Cross-Cultural Interactions on Medical Students' Preparedness to Care for Diverse Patients," which appeared in *Academic Medicine* and found that just 7 percent of medical school deans were women from 1980 through 2006. On average, they only lasted for a three-year tenure, while their male counterparts lasted just over five years.³

That study was part of *Academic Medicine's* entire issue dedicated to diversity and inclusion in medical schools. Among the articles was a commentary about diversity and inclusion by Marc Nivet, the chief diversity officer for the Association of American Medical Colleges, who immediately noted the ethical mandate to attend to diversity and inclusion: "Fairness will always be a fundamental argument at the heart of diversity work. This moral imperative has been well articulated in the academic medicine literature, framing diversity in health care as a means to increase access to care for underserved populations, reduce

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COMMODIFICATION

Have we arrived at a point in higher education where we will see increasing divergence between degrees meant for the masses and those for the elites? How will a Wal-Mart-type degree ("Always low prices") differ from high-end products with status value à la Lord & Taylor ("The Signature of American Style") and those targeted, Macy's-like, to folks in the middle ("Way to Shop!")?

—Mary Cayton¹

Commodification has been in the background of many issues in this volume. The recruitment of international students, for instance, is in part due to a marketing suggestion to bring fresh cash from new consumers into the university. They are lured into a new market. They get commodified to the extent they become simply objects that keep the university afloat with cash.

The turn to more and more adjunct faculty to replace tenured faculty allows administrators a way of reducing expenses for faculty who now receive compensation solely for the specific courses they teach. No health care benefits, no phones, no offices, an easy commodity. Disposable too, with piece work contracts.

Administrators provide more and more of the university's budget for student services and student recruitment than for student teaching, further alienating the faculty but further empowering the student as a consumer with purchasing power. In turn the administrators hire more and more managers for student affairs and for admissions and these

A CONCLUSION: CLASS, ATHLETICS, AND OTHER UNIVERSITY MATTERS

“I have long wondered what the tipping point in intercollegiate athletics would be. Either it would move from the untethered pursuit of money and entertainment toward a model consistent with the soul of higher education, or it would separate from higher education and become professional. The time has arrived for us to move in one direction or the other.”

—Nancy Hogshead-Makar¹

When I began this project four years ago, I began with the argument of the first chapter: Regardless of the difficulties a university found itself in, it rarely referred to ethics to resolve the matter, even though the difficulties were about ethical matters. I also wanted to highlight the oddity of this lacuna, inasmuch as the university is where faculty teach and students learn ethics. The one place that those teaching ethics normally do not engage is precisely the place where they work.

This insight is riddled with ironies because we can hear professors in business, legal, social work, medical, and nursing ethics courses across American universities answering the questions of nervous students who ask, “But what if I face a situation at the place where I work as a professional and I realize that no one around me cares that the situation is unethical?” One wonders whether in answering that question responsibly those at universities teaching professional ethics ever have a reflective moment in which they ask themselves if they practice what they