Fifteen Principles for the Design of College Ethical Development Programs
by Gary Pavela

The subject of applied ethics is returning to American colleges and universities. In the late 1980s, Derek Bok (then president at Harvard University) began to stress the importance of student "character development" (see Bok "Ethics, the University and Society," *Harvard Magazine*, May-June, 1988, p. 39). Bok observed that "[m]oral development was a central responsibility of the American college in the last century," and argued that schools and colleges have an ongoing responsibility to affirm basic ethical principles "that have been held to be important by almost every human society of which we have any knowledge" ("Developing 'character' again at American universities," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 27, 1987, p. 21).

Bok was joined by President James O. Freedman at Dartmouth, who wrote in a 1989 *Washington Post Education Review* article that "[M]oral development will once again become an explicit part of liberal education" ("Five Areas of Concern," August, 6, 1989, p. 18).

The views expressed by Bok and Freedman--also seen in the work of Ernest Boyer, among others--are now reflected in an array of tangible developments, like the establishment of the National Center for Academic Integrity; the creation of the Kenan Ethics Program at Duke University, and the blossoming of "ethics and the professions" and "civic responsibility" education programs at schools as diverse as Washington and Lee University, and Arizona State University.

Applied ethics and the sciences

A renewed focus on student ethical development does not require revival of traditional religious perspectives. It is in the sciences where discussion of applied ethics seems most pronounced, harkening back to Darwin's original observation in *The Descent of Man* (Norton Critical Edition, 1979, pp. 200-201) that "the development of moral qualities" in human beings "lies in . . . social instincts" that can be "strengthened by exercise or habit." Edward O. Wilson (University Research Professor and Honorary Curator in Entomology at the Museum of Comparative Zoology at Harvard University) recently wrote in this regard that:

We are learning the fundamental principle that ethics is everything. Human social existence . . . is based on the genetic propensity to form long-term contracts that evolve by culture and moral precepts and law. The rules of contract formation were not given to humanity from above, nor did they emerge randomly from the mechanics of the brain. They evolved over tens or hundreds of millennia because they conferred upon the genes prescribing them survival . . . We are not errant children who occasionally sin by disobeying instructions from outside our species. We are adults who have discovered which covenants are necessary for survival, and we have accepted the necessity of securing them by sacred oath (*Consilience*, Knopf, 1998 pp. 297-298).

Current interest in college ethical development programming remains comparatively unfocused. Careful thought

and planning are required if continued progress is to be made. The following "fifteen principles for the design of college ethical development programs" are written to encourage continued reflection, discussion, and revision.

Fifteen principles for the design of college ethical development programs.

1. **Identify and affirm the basic values and virtues necessary for community life**

   Commentary

   Ethical development programming will fail if it is not grounded in a broad community consensus. At secular institutions, that consensus is most likely to be based on what Sissela Bok (*Basic Values*, University of Missouri Press, 1995) calls "minimalist" ethical standards --perhaps the kind summarized by Ernest L. Boyer in *The Basic School: A Community for Learning* (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1995):

   Honesty. Each person carries out his or her responsibilities carefully and with integrity, never claiming credit for someone else's work and being willing to acknowledge wrongdoing . . .

   Respect. Each person responds sensitively to the ideas and needs of others without dismissing or degrading them . . .

   Responsibility. Each person has a sense of duty to fulfill willingly the tasks he or she has accepted or been assigned . . .

   Compassion. Each person is considerate and caring. There is a recognition that everyone, from time to time, feels hurt, confused, angry, or sad. Instead of ignoring such conditions, people reach out to one another . . .

   Self-discipline. Each person agrees to live within limits . . . At the simplest level, self-control reflects habits of good living . . .

   Perseverance. Each person is diligent, with the inner strength and determination to pursue well-defined goals. . .

   Giving. Each person discovers that one of life's greatest satisfactions comes from giving to others, and recognizes that talents should be shared, through service.

2. **Recognize the fallibility and complexity of human nature**

   Commentary

   Young people are skilled at detecting hypocrisy. They know human beings aren't capable of moral perfection. Affirming and teaching ethical values requires awareness of the reality of human fallibility, and the importance of viewing ethical development as a committed, life-long striving to define and lead a better

life. The complexity of human nature also suggests that good and evil are somehow bound together in the human personality, and that it is the experience--and overcoming--of evil (or unrestrained self-regard) that can create great personalities, like a St. Augustine, or a Malcolm X. Microbiologist Rene Dubos wrote in this regard that:

Every perceptive adult knows he is part beast and part saint, a mixture of folly and reason, love and hate, courage and cowardice. He can be at the same time believer and doubter, idealist and skeptic, altruistic citizen and selfish hedonist. The coexistence of these conflicting traits naturally causes tension but it is nonetheless compatible with sanity. In a mysterious way, the search for identity and the pursuit of self-selected goals harmonize opposites and facilitate the integration of discordant human traits into some kind of working accord.

The God Within (Scribners: 1972), p. 84.

3. **Address the life of the spirit, and the lifelong task of forming a self.**

Commentary

Colleges aren't the only places where applied ethics may be taught. Business is paying at least as much attention to issues of personal character, usually in terms of the "emotional intelligence" needed to work productively with colleagues. The danger in the "business" approach, however, is that ethical development may be constricted, and defined to serving corporate ends.

Educational institutions have a broader mission, reflected in Alfred North Whitehead's observation that "education is the guidance of the individual towards a comprehension of the art of life" (T*he Aims of Education*, Free Press, 1929, p. 39). In the broadest sense, the "art" of life encompasses learning how to understand the self, mold the self, and share the self--perhaps to the point of grasping the illusion of the self, at least as something disconnected from the world, and other living beings.

There is no simple formulation to guide educators in addressing matters that touch on ultimate or "spiritual" concerns. The first step is to recognize the artificial limits that have been imposed on exploring such matters (which are not limited to the realm of religion). Those limits may reflect the fact that colleges are teaching the equivalent of "business ethics" because colleges are becoming more and more like businesses.

4. **Help students consider questions and goals of pressing interest to them, including the pursuit of happiness in relationship with others.**

Commentary

Students are likely to pay attention to topics that interest them. What interests students? It doesn't take extensive survey techniques to know that students (like everyone else) are interested in discovering how happiness can be found; exploring the nature of love and friendship; and wondering what to do with their lives. These are topics philosophers have pondered from the beginning of time. Students will appreciate the

opportunity to reflect upon them too. What educators have to do is ask the right questions at the right time, in a climate of mutual respect and freedom.

5. **Promote ethical development through experience, collaboration, conflict, and guided reflection, rather than formal "instruction" alone.**

   Commentary

   It's a common (and astute) observation that students don't learn ethics by lectures, or out of books--any more than people learn how to ride bicycles by reading instruction manuals. Ethical development is more likely to occur in a climate of action and experience (including the experience of failure), followed by opportunities to think and reflect. What educators have to do is stimulate experience (occasionally setting limits, for safety); suggest ways to think about what has been learned; and encourage students to explore anew.

   Student accomplishment in service learning or other experiential programs should recognized in campus awards ceremonies, and on transcripts. Colleges that give appropriate awards for ethical action are also likely to promote ethical thinking, and a sense of concern for others.

6. **Create and maintain attractive physical environments, designed to promote a sense of community.**

   Commentary

   People are attracted to beauty, and fellowship in partaking of beauty. Nurturing and commemorating beautiful places (often by rituals and ceremonies) also helps build a sense of community. With the sense of community comes the heightened possibility of moral discourse, grounded in mutual responsibility. Particularly in academic settings, discussions about obligations to a particular community can be expanded to include consideration of broader obligations to build and maintain a better world for everyone--including the generations to come.

7. **Foster periods of silence, peace, and reflection**

   Commentary

   "Speed," time, and noise all have important impacts on human behavior. One does not have to observe metropolitan traffic patterns long to understand that the accelerating pace of life contributes to aggression and incivility. Wilhelm von Humboldt's famous "five conditions of a true university" included solitude--and for good reason. It is in moments of peace and solitude that the incessant clammerings of the self fade away, and a sense of eternity (whatever is outside
   of time) appears. For many, a sense of timelessness is associated with feelings of harmony, trust, love, and empathy--perhaps the highest attributes of ethical development.

8. **Recruit students, administrators, and faculty members who are truth-seeking, and intellectually and ethically alive.**

Commentary

Being intellectually and ethically alive means being attentive to interpreting experience with empathy and reason, in an effort to define and live by values that help oneself and others lead a life of love and fulfillment, including the fulfillment of productive work. These are capabilities students can demonstrate in high school, as organizers of community service programs, leaders of honor societies or religious groups, or social or political activists. Targeted recruitment efforts should be made to find such students--by regular contact with teachers and guidance counselors, and careful attention to press reports (including school newspaper stories) about the activities of outstanding candidates. Once students are recruited, an emphasis on ethical development can be reflected in application questions or essays that raise ethical questions (e.g."how do you plan to add to the building of the world?").

For teachers and administrators, being intellectually and ethically alive also suggests the kind of spiritual vitality and commitment described by Page Smith in *Killing the Spirit: Higher Education in America* (Viking, 1990), p. 203:

> [T]he true person has some vision of higher things . . . [that] touch the deepest levels of our consciousness and solace us, inspire us, reconcile us to our humanity. They are the wellsprings of life. The most familiar and most mysterious is love. . . Love is the mortar of our perilously fragile lives . . .it is indistinguishable from grace. None of us [is] worthy of it, and yet all of us must have it to live. It can't be taught. We can have any number of courses on sex education (sex has little to do with love, although love of course may include sex, rather as an afterthought), but who can imagine a university course on love?. . . Teachers who love their students are of course by that very fact teaching their students the nature of love, although the course may in fact be chemistry or computer science . . . And, in a curious way, the professor, although he seldom realizes it, needs them as much as they need him. So long as he refuses to take them to heart, they are simply an inconvenience, a burden, a part of his "teaching load."

9. **Design a curriculum that poses challenging ethical questions, and helps students acquire the knowledge and experience to address them.**

Commentary

History, literature, art, and all the humanities, can promote student ethical development by telling stories rich with human drama. Good teaching can bring the drama alive, and use it to raise timeless moral questions. The sciences have the capacity to make an equally powerful contribution. Scientific inquiry is grounded in identifiable virtues, like honesty, courage, dedication, the willingness to accept criticism, and learn from failure. Students will learn to appreciate those virtues by seeing living examples of how scientists practice them on a daily basis.

The evolution of college curricula is also shifting toward experiential learning and internships. That's a desirable outcome for student ethical development, since experiential learning (particularly in circumstances where clients or customers require care or assistance) can be designed to foster a sense of empathy. Regardless of the setting, experiential learning also provides immediate, personal experience with inevitable human conflicts, and issues of professional ethics. Teachers managing internship experiences have an obligation to ask questions that can bring ethical issues into focus, and help students formulate principled responses.

Many campuses are also weaving leadership training programs into the curriculum. Those programs should emphasize whatexperience (and research) have demonstrated: The foundation of good leadership is integrity, especially the ability to inspire and maintain trust.

10. **Affirm and teach academic integrity as a core institutional value.**

Commentary

Just as monasteries preserved ancient learning during the dark ages, college and university academic integrity policies helped maintain a foundation for moral discourse on college campuses during the last three decades of the twentieth century. It's virtually impossible to find any other component of academic life that permitted reference to concepts like "honor," "trust," or "integrity." Student leaders, faculty members, and administrators need to strengthen the institutional commitment to academic integrity--perhaps by developing new forms of student managed honor codes--and use expanded and creative forms of academic integrity programming to reach a broader segment of the campus community.

11. **Give students structured opportunities to discuss, formulate and administer student conduct policies, and related ethical development programming.**

Commentary

Giving students significant responsibility to formulate and administer student conduct policies helps them acquire immediate insights into the challenges and complexities of any legal system--especially the careful balance that has to be drawn between procedural rights and community interests. The experience students gain in helping to resolve contested cases has the potential to enhance their own ethical development (particularly if issues and conflicts are discussed in the context of broader principles), and the programming they might develop for fellow students. Above all, as Derek Bok has suggested, disciplinary systems should be designed to encourage thoughtful conversation about why particular rules are necessary, and the ethical principles those rules may be based upon.

12. **Distinguish legal requirements from ethical obligations.**

Commentary

Colleges are awash in programs designed to alert students to their legal responsibilities, usually involving substance abuse, sexual harassment, sexual assault, and misuse of computer facilities. There's a growing danger that legal analysis will be substituted for ethical judgment. Generally, the law should be regarded as a floor, not a ceiling. Whenever legal requirements are identified, ethical issues should also be raised, preferably by role-playing, or other devices designed to elicit sympathy and understanding.

13. **Use the popularity and prominence of athletic programs to affirm institutional values, and foster character.**

Commentary

Whether academics like it or not, intercollegiate athletics has assumed a powerful "teaching" role in the lives of many students. It can affirm virtues like courage, tenacity, commitment, self-sacrifice, and teamwork--or qualities like greed, cynicism, hypocrisy, and rudeness. Whether intercollegiate athletics helps or hinders student ethical development depends on forceful leadership by college presidents and athletic directors, including a willingness to hold even the most prominent coaches and players to basic standards of civility and honesty.

14. **Implement "wellness" and substance abuse programs that include an awareness of responsibilities to self and others.**

Commentary

"Wellness" programming, just like programming on legal requirements, can disguise ethical issues, and inhibit ethical development. It is not "blaming the victim" to
suggest that each person has at least some ultimate responsibility for his or her own conduct, including the decision to use alcohol and other drugs. Eric Fromm had an important insight in this regard in his book *The Heart of Man* (Harper and Row, 1964) p. 133:

> The argument for the view that man has no freedom to choose the better against the worse is to some considerable extent based on the fact that one looks usually at the last decision in a chain of events, and not at the first or second ones. Indeed, at the point of final decision the freedom to choose has usually vanished. But it may still have been there at an earlier point when the person was not yet so deeply caught in his own passions. One might generalize by saying that one of the reasons why most people fail in their lives is precisely because they are not aware of the point when they were still free to act according to reason, and because they are aware of the choice only at the point when it is too late for them to make a decision.

Educators could also benefit from studying a broad range of ways to limit substance abuse, and other forms of self-destructive behavior. Research has shown, for example, that Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) can be an effective program for motivated participants (see Morganstern, J., Department of Psychiatry, Mount Sinai

School of Medicine, "Affiliation with Alcoholics Anonymous after Treatment," *Journal of Clinical and Consulting Psychology*, 65: 768-777, 1997). Essential components of the AA program (e.g. making "a searching and fearless moral inventory" and making "direct amends" to people harmed by participants' abusive drinking) highlight the sense of hope that comes with ethical insight and personal accountability.

15. Encourage staff members to develop and use the skills of ethical dialogue.

Commentary

Many college and university staff members have opportunities to discuss serious, sometimes intensely personal matters with students. Those conversations may be remembered for years, especially by students who hunger for mature wisdom and guidance. Staff members don't need formal training in philosophy to ask thoughtful questions designed to promote ethical thinking (Socrates also lacked a doctorate). It's probably sufficient to know that the best questions--and subsequent discussions--will usually encompass variations of two classic formulations: *How is a good life defined?* and *How will the values and habits you are acquiring now help you lead a good life?*