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Betty L. Siegel

Kennesaw State University, bsiegel@kennesaw.edu

S. Craig Watson

Kennesaw State University, cwatson@kennesaw.edu

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Terms of the Contract: The Role of Ethics in Higher Education

Betty L. Siegel (with S. Craig Watson)

The subject of ethics is never far from the surface in most university classrooms. Imagine, for example, a literature professor teaching the close of Saul Bellow's novel *Mr. Sammler's Planet*. In the novel's powerful final scene, the main character sits at the deathbed of a lifelong friend and quietly speaks a prayer, asking God to watch over the soul of his friend, someone who met at all costs the "terms of his contract, the terms which, in his inmost heart, each man knows. As I know mine. As all know. For that is the truth of it—that we all know, God, that we know, that we know, we know." What inspiration might the professor and students find in talking over this scene and examining the personal implications of the phrase *terms of his contract*?

Now imagine a professor of management discussing casebook examples of leadership in action. She quotes the speech of one corporate leader as he welcomes his new employees to the company's orientation: "You could stay home, raise the kids, go to college, write the Great American Novel, or slit your wrists and end it all... My job is to make sure that I'm providing you with a combination of economic, psychic, and emotional benefits that makes working for [us] better than anything else you can do" (quoted in

Hymowitz 8). What ethical questions might be raised by this manager's assumption that working for his company should take precedence over family, education, art, — over *life itself*?

Wouldn't the discussions in each of these classes revolve around similar moral dilemmas—how to balance competing responsibilities and relationships, how to reassess our priorities, how to meet the "terms of [our] contract" personally and/or professionally? That such concerns would emerge naturally as part of the discussion in two otherwise widely differing courses should not be surprising. Indeed, unless a professor makes a point of excluding ethical questions from class discussion, he or she can hardly avoid the more universal of those questions. As an experiment, browse through any college course catalogue and see how many courses you can name that wouldn't lend themselves to at least a cursory discussion of values. I dare say the list will be short. Even the choice to emphasize one aspect of a discipline over another is a choice that often has ethical dimensions.

The subject of ethics, then, will always have a place in the college classroom, whether as an abstract concept in an English course or as a set of practical guidelines, say, for future business or medical professionals. How does a university take these instances of ethical education, though, and connect them to an institutional mandate for placing ethics at the center of its educational mission? This is the question that underlies the work of Lee Shulman,

Betty L. Siegel, Ph.D., is President of Kennesaw State University.

S. Craig Watson, Ph.D., is an Instructor and Administrative Coordinator to the President at Kennesaw State University.

president of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. In promoting a new approach to institutional research, Shulman suggests that we move away from present models of assessment and accountability, where student success is measured in relation to such categories as credit hours or retention and graduation rates. This is a soulless kind of accounting, offering nothing more than statistics for an administrative bureaucracy.

Instead, Shulman insists, “the questions we should be concerning ourselves with are questions about quality—and particularly about the quality of what our students come to understand, believe, and do on our watch.” In an essay written with his Carnegie colleague Pat Hutchings, Shulman posits the following questions as central to a more meaningful kind of institutional research: “What are our students really learning? What do they understand deeply? What kinds of human beings are they becoming—intellectually, morally, in terms of civic responsibility? How does our teaching affect that learning, and how might it do so more effectively?” These questions presuppose administrators and faculty who share basic assumptions about the purposes of higher education—that it has more to do with educating dedicated, engaged citizen-leaders than with training students in technology; that it places moral reasoning high among the critical thinking skills; and that it encourages students to give serious consideration to their obligations to the larger polity or community.

Such a concept of higher education must be driven from the top down, especially if a university is to be successful in extending the teaching of ethics beyond the traditional classroom to become part and parcel of the college experience as a whole. This is why Thomas Ehrlich, in his introduction to *Civic Responsibility and Higher Education*, puts “top-down” thinking, or “intentionality,” first on his list of suggestions for universities seeking to

promote a broader treatment of ethics on their campuses:

A high degree of institutional intentionality in fostering moral and civic responsibility is the hallmark of those colleges and universities that lead in this arena. The campuses not only have mission statements that include this goal, but the statements are well known and understood by most students, faculty members, and staff. The administrative leadership speaks and acts in ways that promote this goal, as does faculty leadership. (xl)

Ehrlich assumes that moral and civic responsibility will be a natural part of an educator’s thinking about his or her career. After all, service is built into any university’s general mission—service toward students, on one level, and service on behalf of the future, on another, more abstract level. Importantly, though, he wants campus leaders to become inspiring examples for students and colleagues by speaking *and* acting in accordance with specific institutional goals concerning ethical commitment and community involvement. We might define these new leadership roles as having much in common with what management expert Robert Greenleaf calls “servant leadership”:

The servant-leader is servant first. It begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve. Then conscious choice brings one to aspire to lead. The best test is: do those served grow as persons; do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely to become servants?

Notice how Greenleaf's words echo Lee Shulman's questions about how effectively we are teaching our students. *Those served* in the Greenleaf quotation could be read as *students*, while the *servant-leader* could be read as *teacher* or *administrator*.

Greenleaf clearly believes that leadership is closely aligned with teaching and mentoring, as one of the major requirements of leaders must be that they move others toward service. His is a model that could serve us well in higher education. In his thinking, it is not enough that leaders concern themselves merely with organization and management—read *assessment and accountability*—rather, they must inspire and instruct by example. Servant leadership, like the field of higher education, is thus based upon an ethical relationship between those who serve—*faculty and administrators*—and those who are invited, or led, into a life of service—*students*.

This relationship must be at the heart of any campus-wide commitment to moral and civic engagement, and it must be reinforced through programs and policies touching on all aspects of campus life. These programs and policies must be motivated by the same “institutionally intentional” question: How do we make the college or university experience one that is truly significant for our students? By *truly significant* I mean an experience much like the one described in *Leadership Reconsidered: Engaging Higher Education in Social Change*, a recent report by the Kellogg Foundation, where the authors insist that colleges and universities must “empower students to become agents of positive social change in the larger society.” Success may be the immediate goal of the academic regimen—raising one's grade point average, preparing for the GRE, loading the resume with memberships in student organizations—but true *significance* must be the goal of the educational experience as a whole—learning one's obligations to

community, realizing one's potential for leadership, defining an ethically-motivated life.

This is a high standard for education, to be sure, but it becomes possible if there is broad participation across campus in achieving institutional goals. Once concepts like ethics, civic engagement, and moral leadership become a central part of a university's educational mission—a mission that is “well-known and understood,” as Ehrlich says—then discussions of ethics in the English or business classroom take on added meaning. Such discussions are no longer isolated cases but instead contribute to a larger, community-wide effort. In this way, what students learn in lecture halls and around seminar tables will ideally be connected to how they live their lives outside of those settings.

One program that asks students to think well beyond the classroom is that of the First-Year Experience. Originally developed at the University of South Carolina in 1972, the First-Year Experience program has become an essential part of colleges and universities throughout the country. It is also a program for many colleges and universities that reflects larger institutional goals concerning, to paraphrase Lee Shulman, what kind of human beings their students are becoming. The core of the program in most cases is a seminar introducing students to the skills they will need to succeed in higher education. Subjects covered range from the practical—study skills, time management, campus resources, career decisions, student life—to more thought-provoking, philosophical discussions about the place of the college experience within an engaged and successful life and career. From the beginning, then, students are encouraged to look beyond their immediate goals toward the more significant ethical questions raised by their futures.

One of the questions students in many of these programs are encouraged to ask has to do with their place in the larger community. For this

reason, service learning is often an integral part of the curriculum in the first-year experience program. Indeed, the program seems ready-made to absorb an emphasis on ethical education and service learning. First of all, the first-year seminar had been concerned from the beginning with the *whole* student, not just the one taking tests and performing research in the library. To ask students to consider their place in the larger community is merely the next logical step in preparing them for the invigorating challenges of their futures.

Second, the first-year program provides a model of community building, prompting students to think about college life as a shared experience and to work together toward common objectives. Again, there is a natural progression here from understanding your role in the campus community to comprehending your responsibilities as a citizen. Third, as I have said, the first-year program as a whole combines the best of practical-minded studies—test-taking skills, career planning—with more philosophical reflection—how to form lasting relationships, how to interpret the impact of your education on your life generally. Service projects also combine these two learning styles, as building a house with Habitat for Humanity, for instance, raises questions about class distinctions, economic policies, ethical commitments, and a whole range of other thought-provoking issues.

At Kennesaw State University, we have been working for four years now to include a service-learning project in every section of our first-year experience seminar. The key focus of our effort has been to make service learning integral to the classes as a whole; that is, we do not want these projects to be interpreted by the students as simply more work, or yet another hurdle to be cleared to pass the class. Instead, by explicitly linking academic success with civic involvement, we wish to inspire our students with the understanding that their studies have a direct bearing on the most pressing issues facing their

communities. Because civic engagement has become such a central part of our university's mission, our students are made aware as early as orientation of a general expectation on our campus that service will be required of them.

In addition to this foundational experience during the freshman year, our students are likely to participate in service projects in a wide variety of other classes. Two years ago, we formed an Alliance of Community Engagement, a group comprised of representatives from each major academic division on our campus and charged with the task of making service learning a more integral part of our general education program. Our commitment to service has by now become a kind of community ethos, driven by collaboration among administrators, faculty, students, and staff.

During the 2000-2001 academic year, I asked representatives from each division on our campus to meet with my cabinet to outline the depth and breadth of their civic involvement. I discovered happily that my colleagues had created some incisive metaphors for their engaged work. One group said that its top priority was "to mesh gears," to bring its forces in teaching, scholarship, and service into alignment. Another said that its approach to community engagement—both on and off campus—could be likened to "putting together the pieces of a large puzzle." One of our academic deans presented me with an African sculpture of three interlocking figures in perfect balance. The symbolism—that collaboration produces order and harmony—was enlightening, and the sculpture now has a permanent place in my office.

I share these metaphors because they suggest how a change in thinking can impact an entire campus community. Together with our students, we have had the privilege of reflecting more deeply on our individual and collective responsibilities, and we have developed a much more vivid sense of our potential impact on the

communities we serve. Most importantly, we are teaching our students—as we ourselves are learning—the inspiring benefits of moving out toward others in a posture of empathy, respect, and service. Dr. Ernest Boyer, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, writes of the far-reaching significance of this lesson: “If students do not see beyond themselves and better understand their place in our complex world, their capacity to live responsibly will be dangerously diminished.” To live responsibly, he implies, is to look outside the self. This means looking beyond everything that is immediate and familiar and comfortable. It means challenging ourselves, perhaps the most important requirement of true lifelong learning.

To challenge ourselves in this way is, above all, to make an ethical commitment. In *Rights, Relationships & Responsibilities* (2003), William Lindsey makes a direct connection between Loyola Marymount University’s College of Business Administration’s rich tradition of values-based education and current programs highlighting “social-impact management.” Indeed, he notes, “the College’s vision, mission, and objectives are carefully aligned to support and carry-out the University’s purpose.” Accordingly, the teaching of “social-impact management” allows Loyola Marymount professors to place discussions of business management and leadership in the larger context of moral and civic responsibility. It is, as his title makes clear, “Business Education with a Purpose,” one that is reinforced by a high degree of what Ehrlich calls “institutional intentionality.” Ethics is connected with morally grounded decision making in one’s life and career; thus, implying that ethical leadership necessarily involves service to the greater good. Combing these notions, we might say that the role of ethics in higher education is ultimately to help students develop an ethical system that will extend to their treatment of colleagues, family and friends, and further to the larger community.

One can find this basic ethical principle at the heart of many of the world’s great moral systems. In discussing what it takes to lead a heroic life of the spirit, the late Reverend Frank Harrington discusses the “fundamental ingredient” of virtue:

[Virtue] is the critical dimension that undergirds behavior. Real heroes are acting from a standpoint of virtue: honesty, honor, love, compassion, loyalty, responsibility, duty, sacrifice. These are the things that undergird heroic action—not self-aggrandizement, not ego satisfaction, not greed, anger, or intolerance. The greatest virtue of them all is to love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Notice how so much of what we teach in our colleges and universities is contained in this statement. In teaching our students to consider their obligations to community, we are really describing for them this movement from self-interest to selflessness and from exclusion to inclusion. Similarly, when we teach our students to honor diversity, we are asking them to respond with empathy to other people and to ask before making judgments how others might see things differently. Finally, in assigning group service-learning projects, we want our students to discover that partnerships and collaboration are far more likely to produce long-term positive results than open battles between competitors.

In another tradition, Confucian philosophy centers on a variation of the Golden Rule: “Do not impose on others what you yourself do not desire.” In doing one’s best for others, Confucius implies, one should always proceed with empathy and respect, asking yourself what you would prefer were you in the other person’s position. Living according to this principle, one gradually begins to make such

decisions and judgments almost naturally, without excessive worry or sorrow. Thus, when Confucius says that at the age of seventy “I followed my heart’s desire without stepping over the line,” he clearly means that after a lifetime of following his own moral system, he is able to respond to situations with ease and grace. Importantly, the Confucian system makes no distinction between our behavior toward those closest to us and toward the community as whole, insofar as its version of the Golden Rule is concerned.

There are also these famous words from Rabbi Hillel: “If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am only for myself, what am I? And if not now, when?” Notice how these questions encapsulate an entire ethical philosophy: first there is the imperative need to turn within for the strength and sustenance of the inner life; second comes the acceptance of one’s responsibilities toward others; and third comes the insistence that those responsibilities must be attended to here and now, in our everyday actions. It is an incisive reminder, in three brief questions, that we are indeed duty-bound to uphold the human contract.

That is the lesson the English professor offers his class in discussing Saul Bellow’s novel, and it is the lesson the professor of management teaches in discussing leadership styles. In short, it is the lesson all of us in higher education should be teaching to our students and to each other, in our lecture halls and conference rooms, within the borders of our campuses and beyond.

NOTE

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