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Helping College Students Make Moral Decisions: Introduction/Real Life

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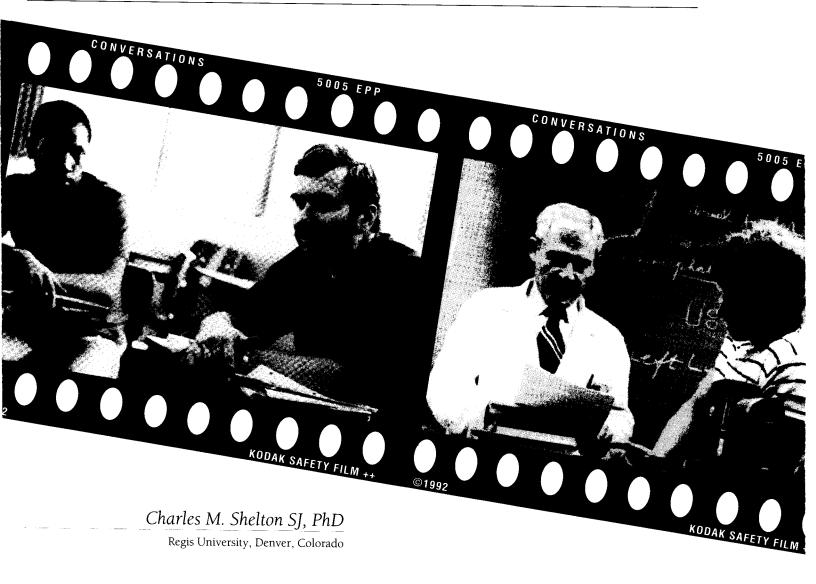
According to a CBS News study, the most significant school problems for students in the 1940s were:

1. *Talking out of turn*
2. *Chewing gum*
3. *Making noise*
4. *Running in halls*
5. *Cutting in line*
6. *Dress-code infractions*
7. *Littering*

In comparison, the major problems facing students in 1980 were:

1. *Drug abuse*
2. *Alcohol abuse*
3. *Pregnancy*
4. *Suicide*
5. *Rape*
6. *Robbery*
7. *Assault*[1]

Youth who face these problems are today's undergraduate and graduate students. No wonder we can easily envision the following scenario:

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I t is a typical day in the life of any Jesuit college or university. On a fall day Nancy Jones, the student-health nurse, walks briskly to the faculty/staff dining room. Earlier this morning she had an appointment with the second student in as many weeks who was pregnant and who had requested an abortion referral. Though a practicing Catholic, Nancy, as a health-care professional, was confused how to advise students, given their increasing sexual activity. She had overheard just the other day a student say the one good thing about the dorm fire alarm going off at 3 a.m. is that it gives a person a chance to figure out "who's going with whom" when the students all leave their dormitory rooms. Over the summer she had attended a workshop on AIDS on campus and wondered how long it would be before the issue of passing out condoms at the health center would surface. Just last week over lunch a faculty member had asserted that it was "morally imperative" to place condom dispensers in student rest rooms.

At lunch she sat with the head of the counseling center, who looked rather worn and tired. After a brief interlude, this clinical psychologist remarked rather pensively on the declining mental health of students. "Many are kids from divorced homes or really painful family situations. So many of them are hurting, it's amazing they can study," he said. This psychologist excused himself for an upcoming meeting between the counseling and campus-ministry staffs. Several students had requested an in-service on date rape, which was receiving more and more publicity on campus, and he had offered the counseling staff as a resource. In-services had become more popular; last month, spurred on by recurring alcohol incidents in

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the dorm, the counseling center had done a series of workshops on alcohol abuse.

Across campus Professor Hendricks was in her office seeing another student who was going to school full-time while working more than twenty-five hours a week. She had sympathy for the student's excuse regarding his late paper, but was firm with him on the need to be punctual with assignments. After he left, she wistfully wondered about the good old days when students could just be students. Yet she understood the student's plight. Moreover, several students had recently talked to her of their fears that in the present state of the economy they might not be able to find a job. Some seemed genuinely scared. She wondered whether she had given this student enough time; she felt rushed. She reflected on how Jesuit education was supposed to stress care for students, yet she had this deadline for her publisher and felt irritated trying to balance her scholarly commitments with her desire to be attentive to student needs.

In the administration building next door, Father Hodges, the university president, had his own concerns. Several alumni had written angry letters regarding the university's decision to recognize a student gay/lesbian group on campus. Then there was the matter of the newly

endowed chair of business administration. Members of the School of Business were split on whom they would recommend for the chair. Several members wanted a nationally recognized scholar who was a national consultant for defense industries, whereas other members vocally demanded that the recipient reflect a "faith that does justice" persuasion. Down the hall the academic vice-president was meeting with the chair of the theology department. The recent department revamping of courses had been stymied due to an ideological dispute within the department. A clear conservative/liberal split had developed regarding ethics and doctrine courses; consensus seemed impossible. Neither the vice-president nor the department head knew quite what to do.

Admittedly, not every Jesuit institution faces such issues every day. Nonetheless, I doubt if any of us can deny that in any given year every Jesuit college or university faces some of the above situations and issues, as well as numerous related ones.

In this article I would like to reflect on student moral growth in the context of Jesuit education.[2] We will begin by offering three theses for discussion and conclude with some practical suggestions for faculty and staff to further young-adult moral development.

FIRST THESIS

Higher education appears to have rediscovered the moral thrust of education, but the reality is that this pursuit might have only minimal significance.

Of late, much public attention has been focused on the issue of morality. Indeed, instruction in "ethics" has become the rage on many campuses.[3] According to a recent survey, America's institutions of higher learning offer 11,000 courses in areas of applied ethics over a wide variety of disciplines.[4] This renewed interest in ethics is not surprising. Education is not value-free. A nation, in addition to knowledge and skills, must pass on to successive generations its vision and purpose. "In the United States schooling has always been connected with moral purposes. Moral education has been considered central to the formation of a democratic society. Democracy is so defined that it demands persons of good character and virtue."[5] Former Harvard president Derek Bok noted that in the earlier part of this century a moral individualism developed, having little sympathy for communal understanding and shared vision.

During most of the twentieth century, first artists and intellectuals, then broader segments of the society, challenged every convention, every prohibition, every regulation that cramped the human spirit or blocked its appetite and ambitions. Today, a reaction has set in, born of a recognition that the public needs common standards to hold a diverse society together, to prevent ecological disaster, to maintain confidence in government, to conserve scarce resources, to escape disease, to avoid the inhumane applications of technology.[6]

Such a notion of "common standards" implies, at a minimum, a consensus on some values, some minimal limits on conduct, and a shared moral vision. Educators are increasingly willing to speak out on the role of higher education in articulating this communal vision and to challenge students to accept responsibility for the country's moral health. At his inaugural, Brown University's