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Faculty as Moral Models

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Charles Shelton argues persuasively that a Jesuit university ought to promote students' moral development. I will comment here on his recommendation that faculty must be role models. I believe this is central to what moral educators must do, especially faculty at Catholic universities with high standards for scholarship.

I agree with Shelton (as would Kohlberg) that moral education involves listening to students, asking good questions about "what really matters" to them, challenging students' moral views, advocating that students read works that ask the "perennial questions," stimulating imaginations to view issues from different perspectives, encouraging involvement, and stressing responsibilities to and for others.

However, I would venture beyond Shelton in advocating an activist role for a moral educator. In the post-Los Angeles riots age, when one out of four children is living in poverty, our infant mortality rates are alarming, racism and intolerance are rampant, and African American men have a greater probability of going to jail than to college, faculty must engage in moral activism to be a credible voice among young people.

I realize this is not an easily heard message, that moral action in service to others is seen as outside the realm of "scholarly" activities, and that faculty who engage in or even support any activity on behalf of the powerless or marginalized risk being branded as "politically correct."

Nevertheless, if faculty engage in the moral questions of the day, they will gain a better understanding of moral development, be drawn to research questions that address contemporary moral issues, and provide students with models of moral agents.

Kohlberg's moral theory grew out of one of the moral questions of his day: Under what conditions is it morally permissible to break a law? The experience that led Kohlberg to his theory was not, as Shelton claims, "far removed from people's everyday human experience." Rather, it came from his involvement in smuggling Jews out of Europe during World War II. Kohlberg took his ideas beyond the Harvard students with whom he worked, into the public schools in places like The Bronx, prisons, and centers for juvenile delinquents. His work with people outside the university led him to see that the moral atmosphere mediates between individual moral judgment and behavior, and he sought ways to improve that environment.

Kohlberg also claimed (1983) that his theory included his concern for the welfare of others. More research is needed to examine the relationships among ethics of care and justice and moral behavior. As Shelton points out, empirical evidence does not support the claim that the ethic of care is a "female" voice or justice a "male" voice (see Brabeck, 1989). However, whether we call this the ethic of care or concern for the welfare of others, I agree with Shelton (quoting Gregorian) that faculty must be moral agents and translate public declarations of convictions "into actions and deeds." In a similar vein, Ernest Boyer (1990) recently described how university service in the early

1900s carried the conviction that higher education had a moral obligation to improve society. "The goal was not only to serve society, but reshape it."

How might a university foster the development of faculty as moral agents?

We can reassert a commitment to service in our mission statements. Such moral activism need not be an "add-on" or additional activity for faculty struggling with teaching, research, and service to the university. All academic areas of necessity encompass both the world of thought and the world of action and must be seen as the scholarly contribution that they are. This will require that we value both action research and laboratory studies, models that include and empower people as well as "controlled" studies.

We can send positive, affirming messages about human sexuality and parenting by providing campus day-care centers which will affirm our commitment to the value of life. Students should be given straight information about what the biological and social sciences (as well as ethicists) have learned about human sexuality, and this research should be encouraged.

We can send clear messages that we will not tolerate abusive behavior on our campuses or in society. We can publicize and denounce date rapes, incidences of racial intolerance, violence against lesbians and gays, and we can encourage and support research that identifies and changes the conditions that foster such opprobrious behavior.

Finally, we can recognize in promotions and tenure decisions community service as an integral part of the academic load of those faculty engaged in pro bono or volunteer

practice of their profession; such as, counselors and social workers who work with victims of violence or the homeless, educators who work in literacy programs, nurses working with AIDS prevention and treatment, etc.

All faculty do not have to be involved in such political/moral action, of course. However, I suggest that a university which lays claim to providing a moral atmosphere, promoting moral development of its students, achieving the Ignatian view of educating students in "ethical behavior and service to others" and the "faith that does justice" (see Shelton) must encourage its members to act as moral agents, models of these ideals.

References

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A Call for Bold Leadership

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Shelton's article challenges us to examine how bold we want to be as institutions to fulfill the Ignatian vision and help college students become moral decision makers.

Important issues raised in the last third of Shelton's article lose impact

due to the length and negative tone of his opening comments.

That tone, used when discussing the consumeristic culture, and the use of "insidious influence" as a cultural impairment seem to be drawn from a white-male perspective. American Indians empowered by their own culture may not agree with this term. Most student role models perpetuate the "insidious" aspect. Role models need to make a conscious decision whether to perpetuate the consumeristic culture.

Who attends our Jesuit schools in greater numbers, those who can afford it or those who can least afford it? Have Jesuit institutions fallen into the cultural impairment trap? Next fall, one Jesuit high school will counter the impairment by moving from standard tuition to fair-share contribution, thus offering value-oriented education to anyone.

Students come to campus with complex life histories and differing needs. Fulfilling our mission becomes difficult as a result. Shelton quotes philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers: "Perhaps for the first time in human history, the young have from their parents no message about sex." However, our incoming students in general are products of the 1960's sexual revolution. In fact, today's students are more informed about sex and its consequences than students (their parents) 20 to 30 years ago. That young adults act differently today is not a reflection of what little they know about sex.

Faculty alone cannot be responsible for the moral and ethical education of students. An integrated and systematic approach is needed. All university personnel must be committed to raising value-related issues and addressing the ethical implications of decisions in a student's life.

Shelton never mentions the role of student-development professionals. It is difficult to operate when faculty, student-development professionals, and general university staff are divided. Student-development personnel can help define the integrated approach toward the common goal of helping students grow intellectually, morally, socially, and spiritually.

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Student-development professionals help students face Shelton's "insurmountable odds" daily. Thus, integrating student-development expertise with faculty and staff knowledge and commitment will help students develop academically with a moral perspective.

Jesuit institutions must become leaders in developing ways to assess students' developmental growth, thereby implementing a "core experience," not just an academic "core curriculum." This experience would combine the academic core with the developmental, moral, and ethical experiences that support overall student growth.

If Jesuit institutions want to help students develop a vision, fashion a consciousness that embraces compassion, and appreciate the intrinsic value of service to others, it is imperative that Shelton's suggestions and questions be discussed on each campus.