

THE TEACHING OF ETHICS IN CHRISTIAN HIGHER EDUCATION: AN EXAMINATION OF GENERAL EDUCATION REQUIREMENTS

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The disappearance of ethics instruction from higher education began to receive significant attention in the late 1970s (Callahan & Bok, 1980). Since that time, various scholars have chronicled the marginalization of moral education from college and university curricula (Colby, Ehrlich, Beaumont, & Stephens, 2003; Reuben, 2000, 1996; Hoekema, 1994; Long, 1992; Wilshire, 1990; Bok, 1990, 1982). Most of these authors concluded their works by calling upon higher education's leaders to reintegrate the teaching of ethics into the college curriculum.

Recent studies suggest that Christian colleges and universities have either responded positively to the calls for the reintegration of moral education into the curriculum or always resisted its marginalization. For example, both a study of faculty attitudes toward moral education (Sax, Astin, Korn, & Gilmartin, 1999) and a study of the influence of colleges on character (Kuh, 2002) revealed that Christian colleges showed significantly more support of and garnered greater success with these matters than public or private nonsectarian institutions. In light of these studies, we examined the degree to which Christian colleges' and universities' attention to ethics can be found in the curriculum. Specifically, we sought to determine the extent to which ethics was taught through the general education curriculum at 173 Christian colleges and universities. The first part of this essay places our study within the context of the larger history and literature concerning moral education in higher education. The second part analyzes the results of our study.

Historical and Literature Review

In the nineteenth century, American colleges and universities considered the instruction of their students in both normative ethics and metaethics, or moral education, as we will refer to it, as one of their primary aims (Sloan, 1980). As is well known, this concern was commonly expressed in the curriculum through one of the most important courses in the college curriculum, the senior capstone course in moral philosophy. As Douglas Sloan (1980) wrote, "The entire college experience was meant, above all, to be an experience in character development and the moral life as epitomized, secured, and brought to a focus in the moral philosophy course" (p. 7).

Yet, throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as Julie Reuben (1996) observed in her study, *The Making of the Modern University: Intellectual Transformation and the Marginalization of Morality*, American research universities gradually divorced questions of morality from their general education curricula. As a result, by the mid-twentieth century the moral philosophy course and moral education in general disappeared from the requirements of most research university's curricula. In addition, many liberal arts colleges and universities diminished curricular attempts to provide moral education, though catalogs and public relations guides still make reference to these aims (Colby et al., 2003; Reuben, 1996; Bok, 1982; Sloan, 1980). Hastings Center (1980a, 1980b) reports on the teaching of ethics in higher education concluded a review of the history by noting, "In denominational schools only, courses on ethics often retained their central role, but by the early 1960s, even those schools sharply reflected the general trend toward specialization and professionalism, usually at the expense of traditional emphasis" (1980a, p. 19).

Scholars attributed "the marginalization of morality" to various developments. The three common factors mentioned included the fragmentation of knowledge and the disciplines, the increased elevation of scientific or other forms of knowledge, and the growing importance placed upon a researcher or teacher being objective or value free (Colby et al., 2003; Reuben, 1996; Bok, 1982; Sloan,

1980; Hastings Center, 1980a). Reuben (1996) claimed the last factor proved particularly important:

The separation of fact and value became both a powerful and problematic concept in twentieth-century intellectual life. It has often been invoked as a normative guide for scholars. Its normative status is reinforced by the structure of modern higher education which makes the separation of morality and knowledge seem a “natural” part of intellectual life. (268)

Sloan (1980) succinctly summarized the overall result of these influences: “By the mid-1960s the teaching of ethics was in big trouble” (p. 41). To a large degree, colleges and universities relegated it to the cocurricular sphere.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, however, some evidence of a change emerged. A Hastings Center study (1980a) of ethics courses in the late 1970s included an examination of one-fourth of accredited college and university catalogs. In the 1978–79 catalogs, their research staff found that schools offered an increasing number of professional ethics courses and concluded, “There has been a resurgence of teaching ethics at the college level” (p. 159). Nonetheless, the vast majority of colleges still fell far short of the Hastings Center recommendation that every school require at least one ethics course (Callahan & Bok, 1980).

The teaching of ethics remains a difficult challenge for colleges and universities. Certainly, the interest in curricular studies of ethics courses that the Hastings Center (1980a) hoped their study would produce failed to materialize. Moreover, the factors that helped marginalize morality apparently still work to keep it on the margins. For example, a recent work by Colby et al. (2003) maintained that the segregation of moral and civic education into the cocurricular sphere as well as faculty specialization and autonomy continue to contribute to the marginalization of moral and civic education in colleges and universities. It remains unclear the degree to which ethics has been marginalized from the general education curriculum. Although articles about the role of values in general education pedagogy exist (McKenzie, Williams, Weed & Carroll, 2003), we do

not know of a specific study addressing ethics as a subject in general education.

Interestingly, most studies discussing the marginalization of moral education from the curriculum have given little attention to the teaching of ethics in Christian higher education. For example, Sloan's historical review contained a quote about the decline of ethics courses at denominational schools, but it is unclear what evidence he used to support this claim. In addition, Reuben's historical study did not explore the present attitudes of administration or faculty toward moral education at religious colleges and universities.

Yet survey research of faculty attitudes at universities and colleges has provided some evidence that religious colleges and universities either resisted the marginalization of moral and civic education or have heeded the call to once again make it a priority. For instance, some of the responses to Sax, Astin, Korn, and Gilmartin's recent faculty survey (1999) revealed the attitudes of faculty members at both religious and nonreligious colleges toward matters related to moral education (Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1. National Norms for the 1998–1999 HERI Faculty Survey: Goals for Undergraduates Noted as Very Important or Essential

	Universities		Colleges			
	Public	Private	Public	Nonsectarian	Catholic	Protestant
Develop moral character	46.7	52.6	53.7	66.6	71.1	78.5
Help develop personal values	50.3	52.9	56.4	68.3	71.9	76.8
Instill commitment to community service	28.6	29.5	36.4	41.2	47.3	49.3
Prepare for responsible citizenship	53.0	53.8	60.8	65.5	66.5	70.0

Table 2. Issues Believed to be of High or Highest Priority at Institution

	Universities		Colleges			
	Public	Private	Public	Nonsectarian	Catholic	Protestant
Help students understand values	34.5	59.7	44.6	72.3	80.7	82.3
Involvement in community service	22.9	46.6	30.5	55.6	63.9	62.1

Both tables from Sax, L. J., Astin, A. W., Korn, W. S., & Gilmartin, S. K. (1999). *The American College Teacher: National Norms for the 1998–1999 HERI Faculty Survey*. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA. Adopted with permission of the authors.

With regard to every question, faculty members at religious colleges indicated greater support for moral education when compared to other nonsectarian private colleges as well as public universities. In addition, faculty members at religious colleges perceived that moral and civic education received greater attention at their institutions. Based on this data, one might construct the hypothesis that private, Protestant, liberal arts colleges take matters of moral and civic education more seriously than do other institutions.

Other studies suggest this commitment holds true for a group of evangelical Protestant schools, the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCCU) (Fisher, 1995; Kuh, 2002). Fisher (1995) discovered that CCCCU schools had significantly more courses related to moral education than Christian schools associated with the Presbyterian denomination and secular private liberal arts colleges. He concluded that these colleges “appear to be far more explicitly concerned than either the Presbyterian or the unaffiliated colleges about awakening their students to moral and social issues in the contemporary world” (p. 45). Furthermore, additional evidence indicates that this commitment influences students. George Kuh (2002) found in a study of values development at general liberal arts

colleges and various types of large public universities that, “The institutions with the most distinctive impact on character were the CCCU colleges” (np)

In light of these findings, we undertook a more extensive examination of the ethical emphasis in the general education curriculum of the CCCU colleges and universities and compared it to two other groups of Christian colleges, the Lilly Fellows Network (LFN) and the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools (ASBCS). Since little analysis of teaching ethics in Christian higher education has taken place, we sought to answer the question: Is moral education still a central part of the general education curriculum at Christian colleges and universities and, if so, in what way? In addition, we wanted to know: If ethics teaching is still found in the general education curriculum, what form does it take?

Defining Terms

A study of ethics teaching in the general education curriculum must first clarify what it means by “ethics.” For the most part, we share agreement with definitions used in earlier studies. We concur with the Hastings Center (1980a) general definition of ethics as “the study of good and evil, of right and wrong, of duty and obligation in human conduct and of reasoning and choice about them” (p. 13). An additional traditional, tripartite distinction between normative ethics, metaethics, and descriptive ethics also exists. Again, we find little need to change the definitions the Hastings Center (1980a) supplied:

Descriptive ethics seeks an accurate, objective account of the actual moral behavior or beliefs of particular persons or groups. . . . Metaethics examines the meanings and uses of moral terms such as “good,” or “right,” the analysis of moral discourse and reasoning, and the foundations upon which moral judgments are based. Normative ethics studies actual moral arguments or statements: about what instances or classes of conduct are right or wrong, good for bad, for instance; or about traits of personal character that are worthy of praise or blame; or about the justice or injustice of societies and institutions. (p. 14)

We sought to answer the question of whether or not Christian colleges and universities require courses in metaethics and/or normative ethics in the general education curriculum. By “general education curriculum,” we mean the courses required of every four-year student who attends the college or university.

Method

As mentioned above, we examined the general education courses required by 173 colleges and universities associated with three large partnerships of Christian colleges and universities in the United States. These three partnerships consisted of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, Lilly Fellows Network, and the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools. The largest group included the CCCU institutions (100); followed by the LFN institutions (70) and then the ASBCS schools (43). Three of the Canadian CCCU schools were excluded from the study, as were the ASBCS schools that were not four-year degree schools. Thirty-three of these institutions share affiliations with more than one of these groups.

The CCCU and LFN are broad partnerships of Christian colleges and universities that contain schools from various denominations. The LFN contains schools from both Catholic and Protestant traditions. The Protestant schools included in the LFN are connected to both mainline and evangelical traditions. The CCCU schools are largely evangelical Protestant schools. The ASBCS is a major partnership of Southern Baptist schools that we believed would provide insight into the practices of particular denominational schools as compared to the broader partnerships.

Almost all of the institutions in our pool market themselves as schools that give attention to the moral education of their students. Ninety-eight percent of the schools mention the moral and ethical emphasis of the school in the admission viewbooks sent to prospective students. The Templeton Foundation’s *Colleges that Encourage Character Development* (1999) identified 32 of the 173 schools (18%) on its honor role. It cited an additional 20 schools as having particularly outstanding character education

program such as a senior year seminar or an academic honesty program.

These schools also give significant attention to ethics in the curriculum. When the Hastings Center staff surveyed course catalogs in 1977 and 1978 to ascertain the number of ethics courses offered, they examined one-fourth of the accredited colleges and universities in the United States (623 out of 2,270). Eighty-nine of the colleges (14%) had no ethics course at all. In contrast, we found that only one school among the 173 Christian schools we studied did not list an ethics course in its catalog.

Our study, however, focused upon the teaching of ethics in the general education curriculum. Certainly, we recognize that colleges and universities provide moral education to their students through offering electives in ethics, providing a forum for noncurricular events such as campus clubs, structured activities in the dorms, cocurricular community service projects, and more. Nonetheless, there is little argument that moral education is marginalized from the cocurricular sphere. Scholars such as Reuben (1996), Bok (1990, 1982), and Sloan (1980) maintained that colleges and universities marginalized ethics from the curriculum. Our study sought to ascertain the degree to which the teaching of ethics remains part of the general education requirements at the institutions we studied.

To accomplish this end, we collected current academic catalogs from each one of the 173 institutions during the fall of 2002. We identified the general education courses offered and analyzed these offerings using the institutional-structural model of analysis (Amey, 1992; see also Dressel, 1968). This form of analysis assumes that the requirements in place at a particular college or university are the products of committees such as a general education committee and ratified by a larger body such as a faculty senate. The underlying assumption is that offerings in documents such as academic catalogs require broad institutional approval. Essentially, using the institutional-structural model helps reveal the formal curriculum.

Each of the 173 schools involved in this study reflected the common historical curricular trend described by Rudolph (1977). All required some form of general education along with the

demand that students select a major. We only searched for ethics instruction in the general education requirements. We did not include ethics-related courses targeted to a certain group of students (e.g., honors students) or certain majors (e.g., business students) in our study. In addition, we considered chapel requirements distinct from ethics courses and part of the cocurricular requirements.

How we identified general education courses dealing with ethics shared similarities with earlier studies (Fisher, 1995; Hastings Center, 1980a, 1980b). To begin, as with both of the previous studies, we identified what we called first-level courses in ethics. To identify these courses, we basically followed the Hastings Center Staff's guidelines (1980b) for their early study. They wrote:

We decided to include in the category of ethics courses any course that included in its title the terms "ethics," "values," "moral," "responsibility," or any course whose description indicated a primary focus on ethics. . . . When in doubt, we included borderline cases as ethics courses. (p. 155)

The study previously cited (Fisher, 1995) also used these guidelines.

Next, we identified a second category of courses that contained a normative or metaethical component within the course description (e.g., an introduction to philosophy course that covered ethics as a subsection). In other words, ethics was a *secondary* focus within the course. This approach shares similarities with Fisher's study (1995). He counted courses as "values related courses" if they asked "a significant number of 'should' questions" such as "What are we to do with our lives? Who are we to become? What are we to strive for and care about? . . . What are my responsibilities to my fellow human beings?" (pp. 34–35). Within this category, we also included courses addressing the symbolic or metaethical world central to ethics and ethical reasoning. For example, courses that addressed theological matters such as God's existence, human nature or sin, or matters of salvation were included in this second category, because these matters have direct bearing upon moral reasoning.

Our method also contained some differences with earlier studies. The inclusion of the second tier of courses provided another level of analysis not undertaken by the Hastings Center study (1980a), which focused primarily on the first category ethics courses dealing with normative ethics and not metaethics. We believe this second level of analysis was needed because, as the Hastings Center study admitted, “Indeed, the enterprise of normative ethics will eventually force the student into broader questions of metaethics (and many philosophers will deny that a sharp distinction can be drawn between them)” (p. 14). We would classify ourselves among those “many philosophers.”

We did not, however, consider any requirement for a religion, philosophy, or humanities course to contain a secondary ethics component, if the student could choose a course that did not address ethics or possibly provided teaching about descriptive ethics (e.g., logic, a history of world religions). In this way, our method differed from Fisher (1995), who counted all required religion and philosophy courses (with the exception of logic) as “values-related” courses. We contend that such courses could take the form of history (e.g., church history) or study about a particular field (e.g., philosophy of science, world religions) in ways that do not make the asking of ethical questions or attention to matters of ethical theory or metaethics a significant part of the course. Thus, religion, philosophy, or general humanities courses were only identified as containing a secondary emphasis upon ethics if the course title or description addressed normative ethics or matters of metaethics.

Results and Interpretation

1. What is the Extent of the Focus on Ethics in the General Education Curriculum?

Required Ethics Courses. Overall, we found that 29% (51 out of 173) of the Christian colleges and universities required a specific ethics course of all students where ethics teaching received a

primary emphasis. The CCCU (31%) and LFN (30%) groups had the most schools requiring an ethics course in the general education requirements, but in both cases the total was less than one-third of the schools. Only 12% of the ASBCS schools required ethics courses in the general education requirements. The low number of required ethics courses in the general education curriculum, especially in Baptist schools, we found quite surprising. As mentioned above, 98% of the admissions view books we examined contained some appeal to the moral formation or development the school would provide a student.

Nonetheless, we do not know how these percentages compare to secular private or public colleges and universities without further study. The Hastings Center did not conduct such a study, but they clearly made it part of their recommendations in 1980. They argued, "Every undergraduate should have a systematic exposure to both ethical theory and applied ethics. The minimal standard ought to be that of a one-semester course" (Callahan & Bok, 1980, p. 302). Although they acknowledge that ethics can be integrated into other courses, they maintain, "No other serious subject is taught in the curriculum by what has been called the 'pervasive method,' and ethics ought not to be the outcast" (p. 302). While a significant number of Christian colleges and universities surveyed in our study fulfill these criteria, that number is far from a majority.

Courses with Ethics as a Secondary Emphasis. The reason why the percentage of schools that require an ethics course is low, we hypothesize, is because at most schools, the expectation exists that Christian or philosophical ethics is addressed within the context of every course, especially required Bible courses. Thus, we were not surprised that the percentage of courses making ethics a secondary emphasis in some part of the course was much greater. Ninety-five percent of the Christian colleges and universities we examined required students to take some course in which ethics was addressed (CCCU 100%; LFN 90%; ASBCS 95%). As Table 3 reveals, the vast majority of these courses are Bible or theology courses. In addition, among CCCU schools we also found a significant number of courses that dealt with the development of a Christian worldview.

Table 3. Percentage of Schools that Require One of the Following General Education Courses that Contains an Ethics Component

	Total	CCCU	LFI	ASBCS
Bible	73	99	39	91
Theology	38	50	36	2
Christian Worldview	13	21	7	7
Philosophy	21	22	20	12
Interdisciplinary	13	12	17	2
Other	6	7	6	0

Although these courses were often philosophical or theological in nature, they all addressed matters of metaethics and normative ethics as part of their secondary emphases. Interestingly, the CCCU and LFI schools required a significant number of interdisciplinary courses that included some attention to ethics. Again, the ASBCS schools showed little curricular attention to these matters beyond basic Bible courses.

2. What is the Degree to which this Focus is Articulated as Distinctively Religious or Christian?

Our study also explored whether the required ethics courses used a philosophical approach to ethics or required ethics courses based in a religion, theology, Christian studies, or Biblical studies department. We were interested in the disciplinary approach of the required ethics courses for several reasons. First, one of the weaknesses with original moral philosophy courses, according to Sloan (1980), was that they sought to promote harmony and avoid conflict instead of addressing the major moral issues of the day. It appears that they were often used as ways to foster moral unity in a nation without religious unity. For example, they rarely addressed matters of significant moral disagreement such as the abolition of slavery. The assumption underlying many of these

courses was that Americans could arrive at agreement about the moral order of the universe, although we might not agree about the God of that universe (Sloan, 1980). In many ways, these courses reflected the efforts of what MacIntyre (1984) has called the Enlightenment project. The course designers sought to find a rational ground for morality. The question this study sought to answer is whether these Christian schools seek to base their ethical teaching within the discipline of philosophy, and so possibly continue the Enlightenment project, or if they seek to teach from the Christian tradition, and so possibly sustain a distinctive form of Christian ethical reasoning and knowledge. In other words, we were primarily interested in whether or not ethics was approached within a theological framework. We are using “tradition” in the same sense as that used by MacIntyre (1984) when he writes, “A living tradition . . . is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute that tradition” (p. 222).

Second, some debate also exists regarding how important distinctively Christian ethics is to moral virtue (Stout, 1988; Schwehn, 1993). For example, Mark Schwehn (1993) argued that distinctive Christian practices are needed to maintain virtues that arise out of the Christian tradition, such as humility and charity. Schwehn even maintains that the university as a whole needs such virtues. Thus, we wanted to identify whether or not these schools seek to foster and maintain a distinctively Christian approach to ethics.

Third, a recent study Colby et al. (2003) noted that visions of moral growth at the schools they studied were “not radically different.” From their case studies of different higher education institutions the authors concluded that the schools shared “the same concerns, even though some spell them out more and some less explicitly and even though emphases and specific meanings differ from one campus to the next and the various goals are often organized differently by each school when they are presented and operationalized” (p. 56). We have doubts about this conclusion concerning visions of moral growth, and thus sought to discover the degree to which moral education in the curriculum at these schools was distinctively Christian in its course descriptions. In other words, we

wanted to ascertain the degree to which ethics was approached from within the school's theological tradition.

Overall, we found that according to the course descriptions, roughly two-thirds (69%) of the schools address ethics from within the Christian tradition (Table 3). However, the percentage varies depending upon the coalition of schools. While 94% of the CCCU schools and 80% of the ASBCS institutions took such an approach, only 38% of the required general education courses of the LFN colleges and universities were linked to the Christian tradition. Clearly, the vast majority of the CCCU and ASBCS schools that required ethics courses required ones that focus specifically on Biblical ethics or Christian ethics and not upon philosophical ethics. Interestingly, for 16 of the CCCU schools, the ethics requirement mirrored the traditional requirement in moral philosophy in the 1800s in that they were senior seminars. Such a course was often an interdisciplinary seminar that aimed to help students integrate their Christian faith and liberal learning with a particular moral problem or problems. Although a significant number of the LFN schools take this approach, four of these schools also have membership in the CCCU. Factoring out the CCCU schools, only 19% of required ethics courses in LFN schools without CCCU affiliation teach the courses from the Christian tradition. We believe that some of these differences stem from the fact that a significant number of the LFN schools are Catholic or mainline Protestant denominations that have traditionally held a view that one can find moral truth in the natural law (see Curran & McCormick, 1980).

The distinctively Christian approach to ethics was also apparent in our examination of other courses with ethical content. Eighty-nine percent of the colleges had general education courses that contained teaching about Christian ethics while only 28% of the colleges had general education courses that contained teaching about philosophical ethics. Again, the LFN schools were most likely to require courses that approached ethics from a philosophical angle (31% of the schools), but even in this case, a far greater percentage of the schools (73%), had general education courses whose descriptions contained references to Christian ethics. Thus, at least within the required curriculum, ethics is taught within the context of the Christian tradition. An area of future study might be an exploration

of whether some relationship between the resistance to the marginalization of morality and the teaching of ethics within a specific religious tradition exists.

Limitations

Although we find this structural-institutional analysis illuminating we should also acknowledge a key limitation to our study. By performing a structural-institutional analysis, our study is limited to the formal nature of these general education courses in contrast to their informal nature. The formal nature of a course is the bureaucratic process by which curricular features are developed and then defined. The informal nature refers to the actual implementation of the course by a particular professor with a particular class. The human element inherent in any course experience will inevitably make no two courses alike. Now that our study has identified the formal elements, a further area of study would involve an assessment of the informal components through which these courses inevitably come to life.

Conclusion

The noticeable emphasis upon ethics that studies have found in Christian colleges and universities is evident in a significant number of the general education programs at these universities. Overall, we found that ethics courses are required in 29% of the schools. Nonetheless, even at these institutions where the teachings of ethics is emphasized, the Hastings Center recommendation of requiring at least one general education ethics course of every undergraduate is not met at these institutions. Perhaps, one can argue that since 95% of the schools have at least one general education course with an ethics component, ethics is integrated into the curriculum. Certainly, ethics is not merely a matter addressed in cocurricular activities, outlined in student handbooks, and enforced by an administration. Moreover, we discovered that this attention to ethics primarily originates or emerges from courses within the Christian tradition instead of courses focusing on broader philosophical issues. We find

it difficult to argue that morality, especially distinctively Christian morality, has been marginalized from the general education curriculum at these Christian colleges and universities.

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