



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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Ethics in Higher Education

In many academic institutions these days, the three "R's" are recruitment, retention, and revenue. At Brookdale Community College we have been giving some attention to the fourth "R," responsibility. In May 1989, I was charged with organizing a series of seminars on moral concerns at the college. The process by which the seminars were constructed and the outcomes they generated are worthy of discussion.



The first step consisted of an appeal sent to the entire college community asking for input regarding specific ethical concerns. Individuals were invited to remain anonymous and to formulate their concerns as mini case studies in which the names and nonessential details were changed to disguise the living. To my surprise, only 19 responses were received from a total of 200 appeals. However, the high quality of these responses more than offset the lack of quantity. Several respondents sent lengthy memos; many offered multiple situations for consideration.

The next step was to organize these responses and to rewrite them for stylistic consistency. I arranged the suggestions into five sets: student issues, faculty issues, issues involving learning assistants, union issues, and administrative issues. Each set of issues contained four or five mini case studies for discussion.

Since the first two sets seemed to be of more general interest, we agreed to repeat the discussion of these issues several times. The last three sets were scheduled once each. Nine discussions were planned in three sequences: one sequence for the Monday lunch hour, a second for Tuesday evenings, and a third for Friday afternoons.

Another bulletin was sent to the college community advertising the sessions under the title of "Ethics in Higher Education." Interested personnel were encouraged to register for one sequence of three discussions,

and they could join either as participants or spectators. This time the response improved: 36 faculty, staff, and administrators registered. Of these, 19 volunteered to participate; 17 preferred to simply observe. Because there was a strong preference for the lunch hour, the Tuesday evening sessions were cancelled, and a second sequence was scheduled for another set of Mondays.

Each of the participants was sent a copy of the "script" of case studies for his/her sequence. The basic discussion model was that used on the TV series "Ethics in America," in which I took the role of a principal character and the participants took other roles.

In the first discussion, for example, I played the role of a student, and participants played various faculty members. As Uriah Unready, I struggled with a math course for which I was ill-prepared, and the faculty member was challenged to decide how far he/she would extend his/her moral responsibility to remain patient and available for extra help. Later I became Jack Jocco, who showed no interest in a philosophy course, only to learn toward the end of the term that he desperately needed the credit for an athletic scholarship. Finally, I became Linda Lovelorn and encouraged a relationship with my accounting teacher as I continually sought extra help after my evening class.

Similar kinds of artificial—yet real—situations were used for discussions on administrative, faculty, learning assistant, and union issues. No attempts were made to find the "right" answers, but in many cases the participants came up with a set of tentative guidelines to distinguish morally acceptable from morally unacceptable behavior.

It is important that ethical discussion be based upon issues that are of genuine interest at any given time on campus. It is difficult to get people to submit issues about which discussions could be organized, but offering the college community the opportunity to submit them democratizes the process and removes suspicions of a hidden administrative agenda. Had we received fewer responses, I was prepared to "beat the bushes" for help from my immediate colleagues.



The use of case studies was, in retrospect, also a good choice. Frequently, in the discussion, it became obvious to many participants that the issue being discussed hypothetically had been, or still was, an actual situation on campus. Nevertheless, personalities were removed by focusing on the "case" and leaving the actual situation aside. So, even those who knew the details and had opinions about the latter were on equal footing with those who did not.

My role quickly became a bit complex. In one capacity, I functioned as leader of the discussion, keeping it on track, and moving it along to its conclusion. In a second, I was one of the participants assigned a specific role, usually as a protagonist for the ethically questionable position. In still a third, I was summarizer and chief formulator of principles—a role that fell to me probably because of my training in ethics and experience in classroom case study discussions. However, I found it easy to move back and forth among these three functions, and the other participants never seemed to have trouble with my shifting around.

Participants, as well, found the role-playing effective. It gave them the flexibility to step in and out of their roles, sometimes speaking their own minds and sometimes cushioning their opinions by making them come out of their roles. In this way, participants were able to disagree and yet not invest their true personae in the disagreement. When they left their roles, they could resume their friendships.

After the nine discussions were completed, an evaluation form was sent to all participants and spectators. Approximately one-half responded, and their approval of the method and the content of the series was unanimous.



Did anyone learn anything from the sessions? Were opinions changed and were behaviors modified? The post-seminar evaluations didn't reveal anything so dramatic. But it was clear in many of the discussions that arguments presented in the roles that some participants played were frequently refuted and isolated from the general principles of morality that the group formulated at the end of each discussion period. That these opinions might have represented the actual thinking of the presenters must have given these participants cause to rethink their positions.

The fact that all participants thought that the discussions were worth the time of attendance indicates that some important personal thinking must have been occurring and that participants and spectators were probably relating the issues and principles to specific responsibilities they have in the college community. In other words, the fourth "R" got its day.

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