

Ethics and Student Life

The inauguration of North Campus as an all-freshman residential area coincides with a renewed interest in the teaching of ethics to undergraduates, both on this campus and throughout the country. To take advantage of this confluence, we propose a program that will introduce incoming first-year students to ethical principles, through the discussion of issues that will confront them in their daily lives as students. Instruction in this program will take place primarily in the living/learning communities of North Campus. The program, tentatively called “Ethics and Student Life,” is described below.

Goals of the Program

The Ethics and Student Life Program will serve several interrelated goals. One primary goal is to introduce students to ethical principles and frameworks that are likely to play an increasingly prominent role in their undergraduate education, as a range of colleges at Cornell adopt ethics requirements or introduce new course offerings in the field of ethics. To underscore the importance of ethics to decisions that students will make in their lives as learners, residents and ultimately as citizens, the program will focus on issues that students are likely to encounter in their daily lives, particularly as first-years at Cornell. These issues will include, for example, living and learning in the context of racial, ethnic, religious, political or other differences; personal responsibility in sexual behavior or the consumption of alcohol; questions of academic integrity. Addressing these questions will not only provide a tangible ‘applied’ context for the exploration of ethical frameworks; it will also serve a second goal: that of signaling to students the University’s interest in their serious exploration these substantive questions. The question of “learning across differences,” for example, has been a focus of faculty, student and professional staff attention, as the Cornell community has debated issues of campus climate, student choice among residence halls, and a range of other issues. To focus students’ attention on these questions, in the context of a structured ethical inquiry at the beginning of their first year, would underscore their importance and provide students with tools for their successful resolution.

Other goals for the program relate to the settings in which instruction would occur. Although the program could include some larger lectures (see “Format of the Program” below), the core of the program would be discussion groups led by individual faculty members. This would provide first-year students with a valuable early opportunity to get to know a faculty member, in a context where they could engage in extended discussion with that faculty member, and discover shared norms or substantive interests. While this faculty member would not necessarily be the students’ formal academic advisor (although it might be possible, in some cases, to arrange for faculty members to have at least some of their first-year advisees in their discussion groups), the discussion format of the program would permit students to have extended, interactive exposure to a faculty member, positively shaping students’ attitudes toward future faculty interactions and providing an early model of mentoring relationships. Finally, the program would be situated primarily in the residence halls, dining facilities and community center(s) of North Campus. It would therefore be one of several programs (including small courses, writing seminars and special lectures and events) located in that setting, which would help to establish the North Campus as an environment in which formal and informal learning as well as residential living would occur. Bringing academic content, and a spirit of academic engagement, to the residence

halls, and easing the formerly-firm boundaries between formal academic instruction and students' residential lives, has been an important goal of the North and West Campus initiatives that would be assisted by a program of this sort.

Format of the Program

The Ethics and Student Life Program would be taught as a one-credit mini-course. It would begin with an intensive set of several sessions during the Fall Orientation period, and would continue on a once-weekly basis for several weeks thereafter. Students would be assigned to discussion groups of approximately 20 students led by a particular faculty member. This group would remain constant for all small-group discussions, although in some cases, two discussion groups might be combined for a particular conversation.

Course instruction would occur in several different formats. The central component of the course would be regular meetings of the discussion groups. These groups would meet two or three times during Orientation and once weekly for the remainder of the course. Group members would be assigned readings for each session, that reflected ethical teachings, or presented problems or hypotheticals for consideration. Discussions would focus on the ways that various ethical frameworks could be brought to bear on the resolution of the concrete problems presented. These discussions would be held on North Campus, either in conference rooms of the residence halls or of Robert Purcell Community Center, or in small dining rooms in any of the dining facilities. At least some of these discussion sessions would be combined with meals, in order to permit students and faculty to get to know each other, and to pursue their ideas, in a more informal setting.

These small group discussions, however, would be supplemented by instruction in several additional formats. Large lectures might be used in connection with some topics, to introduce students to ethical principles or frameworks, or provide a broader look at certain kinds of issues of problems. These large group sessions would not supplant the small group discussions but would provide an initial base of shared knowledge on the basis of which small group discussions could proceed. Lectures could feature not only distinguished academics, from Cornell and elsewhere, who work on these issues, but also individuals who have participated in more concrete ways in the resolution of particular issues or conflicts. In addition to lectures, students would also attend theatrical presentations or films which would address issues central to the course. David Feldshuh's stage presentation of the journals of Asian-American students this past year provides an example of the kind of program that might be mounted for this purpose. Theatre or film could make more immediate, vivid or emotionally accessible the kinds of issues or dilemmas on which students would be asked to reflect. Such presentations would then be paired with small group discussions, which would give students an opportunity to explore what they had seen in conjunction with others, under the guidance of a faculty instructor. A final component which could be added to the program is community building, assisted by the Cornell Outdoor Education Program. Todd Miner, the director of that program, explains that physical exercises through which group members come to rely on each other can be useful in fostering the sense of trust necessary for difficult discussions; he notes that the Outdoor Education Program has done training in corporate contexts that spotlight ethical choices in the community-building exercises, and that similar exercises might be developed for purposes of this program.

Content of the Program

The specific topic areas around which lectures, other presentations and small groups discussions would be organized are still open to consideration. The following represents a preliminary outline of possibilities regarding the substantive content of the course. It would be necessary first to provide some introduction to ethical principles or frameworks. This might be done by introducing students to major philosophical works that articulate such frameworks (i.e., different forms of utilitarianism; Kantian ethics, etc.), or it might be done by providing a more basic discussion of principles (benefit maximizing, respect for persons, preservation of relationships or communities, etc.) that might provide a basis for decision making. Following this introduction, we imagine several constellations of issues which would provide a focus for discussion; within each numerous problems or hypotheticals might offer more concrete starting points for conversations.

One set of issues concern living and learning in the context of group-based differences. Among the topics that might be discussed under this heading are: hate speech, sexual harassment and university regulation; contrasting lifestyle and cultural differences in the context of rooming or other residence arrangements; group-based decision making in admissions and employment (i.e., “affirmative action”); managing cultural and individual variations in conceptions of privacy and sharing of space; self-separation versus voluntary or mandatory integration in residential, dining and other community-based settings; value of and strategies for achieving greater diversity in course readings and classroom discussions. There are a number of Cornell, and other, documents that might serve as frameworks for the discussion of these issues, including: the Cornell University Statement on Diversity; the “Open Doors, Open Minds, Open Hearts” Policy of the Community Development program; analogous documents from other institutions; (quasi-) legal articulations of principle such as the International Declaration of Human Rights, and more.

Another set of issues concern questions of academic integrity. Topics that might be discussed under this rubric include: citation, attribution and plagiarism; introductory principles of research ethics; paper files or pools (either electronic or compiled in a residential setting); assistance from other in fulfillment of course requirements (from “Take Note” to paid editorial services, to receiving assistance from roommates and intimates); issues of intellectual property; reporting honor code violations or other violations of academic integrity. The statement on “Students’ Rights and Responsibilities” that is currently being developed by the Arts College EPC might be used as a framework for structuring discussions on these topics.

Yet another set of issues might focus on questions of individual responsibility in connection with such matters as sexuality, consumption of alcohol and experimentation with drugs. Topics here might include: sexual coercion or violence (whether alcohol-induced or non-alcohol-induced) in the context of relationships; decision making in relation to “safe” or “protected” sexual activity; managing peer and other social influences on the consumption of alcohol or drugs; reasoning about compliance with legal limits on the consumption of alcohol or the experimentation with drugs (e.g., purchasing alcohol for friends or classmates who are minors, or using marijuana, in contexts where the breach of legal rules is unlikely to be discovered).

In preparation for discussion of any of these substantive topics, students would be asked to read materials that might consist of: ethical discussions or literature bearing on the subject, and, preferably, representing a variety of views; codes, statements or regulatory frameworks intended to guide individualized decision making; problems or hypotheticals presenting specific controversies or choices. Students might also be asked to prepare reaction papers, or to keep journals reflecting their response to course materials and discussions.

Participation in the Program

The Ethics and Student Life Program would be run, for the first several years, as a pilot program, involving 300-400 entering first-year students, and approximately 20 faculty members. The program could be made available, for example, to all students in one or two residence halls, or to a group of students, residing throughout North Campus, who signed up for the course in response to a solicitation in pre-registration materials. Because of the subject matter of the course, efforts should be made to achieve group-based diversity within discussion groups and across the Program as a whole. In addition, because the Program will be designed as a North Campus program, rather than an academic program sponsored by particular colleges, efforts should be made to include within each discussion group, students from a range of undergraduate colleges. The opportunity to discuss these crucial issues with student from outside one's own academic home will provide the kind of rare and valuable experience of inter-college learning that North and West Campuses will be uniquely situated to provide.

Faculty for the program will be drawn from a range of undergraduate colleges. The program should consider, as well, recruiting interested faculty from colleges such as the Law School, or the Johnson Graduate School of Management, who do not regularly teach undergraduates, but would enjoy this kind of quasi-curricular engagement with them. Those faculty members who are freshman (first-year) advisors would be particularly encouraged to participate in the program, and might be given the opportunity to have a few of their first-year advisees included in their discussion group. This is a pool of faculty members who are interested in or well disposed toward freshmen; the experience of leading small group discussions on these topics germane to student life would give them a valuable vantage point on the lives and choices of those students they advise. Similarly faculty fellows and faculty-in-residence for North Campus would be particularly encouraged to participate. These are faculty who have, through their participation in residence life programs, expressed an interest in participating extracurricularly, as well as curricularly, with first-year students. Their experience in this context, where many of the issues on which the Program will focus are subjects of ongoing attention, may also assist them in structuring and leading small group discussions. To provide incentives for faculty participation, and signal the University's valuation of faculty participation in this effort, faculty should receive some form of stipend, summer money, or research supplement to compensate them for their participation in the Program.

The Program on Ethics and Public Life (EPL) could play a role in planning and structuring the Program. Although the magnitude of this role might vary with the preferences of the faculty members who agree to serve as small group leaders, functions that could be performed by EPL faculty include: compiling reading materials for the course; identifying potential large group lecturers (particularly for lectures introducing ethical principles, frameworks or systems);

training faculty members who desire this form of preparation for leading small group discussions. EPL faculty might be assisted in these organizing tasks by members of the North Campus Committee, members of the task forces that have continued the work of last year's Committee on the First-Year Experience, or faculty members who plan to lead discussion groups.

The Ethics & Student Life Pilot Program would run for the first time in the Fall of 2001.