

## The Pursuit of Wisdom: A Modest, but Essential, Prescription for the Future

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**Abstract** Although higher education leaders are occupied with important issues such as accessibility, globalization, funding, and innovation, another issue – moral education – must be addressed if we are to equip students to navigate the future. One need not adhere to a particular religious orthodoxy or propound any sectarian dogma to engage students in the examination of values. The rare context and crucible of heterogeneous and heterodox postsecondary institutions provide an environment in which students, guided by their professors, can learn to wrestle with thorny questions, to maintain their intellectual and moral autonomy, and to take responsibility for their actions.

**Key words** ethics · moral education · student-centric

As I have considered the outlook for American higher education over the next decade or so, I have been mindful that this outlook is, like our nation itself, far from homogeneous. Radical differences exist among postsecondary institutions. Although united to some extent in their broad educational purpose, research universities, liberal arts colleges, master's level state universities, for-profit degree-granting institutions, religiously-affiliated colleges, specialized colleges, and community colleges all employ different means and pursue different ends. Each has a valuable mission, and each

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confronts unique challenges and opportunities in the ongoing evolution of American higher education.

My own experience has been solely with major research universities, and it is from this perspective – particularly from the vantage point of private research universities – that I offer some thoughts about the prospects ahead. Although issues such as accessibility and affordability, public and private support, interdisciplinarity, globalization, and innovation are rightly occupying the attention of many leaders in higher education, I have lately been pondering something thornier, more mysterious, and even perhaps more elusive – moral education.

## Moral Education

I do not mean to sound like Aristotle, Cicero, or Henry Adams *redivivus*; and I am not unmindful that significant debate takes place among academicians about this topic, with one side justifiably leery lest moral education be a mask for religious dogma or the politicization of the classroom and the other side unwilling to shirk responsibility for influencing young people's developing values and responsibilities. Nor do I assert any scholarly *bona fides* in this area. I gladly, instead, defer to other members of the professoriate and leadership ranks who have thoroughly explored and insightfully written about moral education and ethical development. I wish to approach this issue as a reflection, based on nearly 30 years as a university president and as a university teacher for some 50 years. Hence this is a personal observation and at best only a modest prescription for the future.

All of us at elite research universities like to boast about our illustrious alumni and their accomplishments. Indeed, one metric used in the annual *Academic Ranking of World Universities* (Liu & Cheng, 2005) conducted by Shanghai Jiao Tong University is the number of graduates a particular institution produced who then went on to become Nobel Laureates. These are the alumni who get their own covers and headlines in our alumni magazines.

What we do not want anyone to count, by contrast, is the number of our alumni under indictment or in prison. Liars, cheaters, evaders, invaders, raiders, wreckers, malfeasors of every stripe—their (typically) white collars sullied and tattered—embarrass us. The captains of business and state who have lately been implicated in everything from Wall Street shenanigans and balance-sheet deceptions to warehouse liaisons were graduated from “good schools.” Their professors cringe and wonder, “Did they forget their Plato, their Marcus Aurelius, their Thoreau?” Or did we neglect to tell our students that Iago or Jay Gatsby or Boss Tweed were not good role models? What good was all that literary, historical, and philosophical feasting, those shining examples of virtuous teachers and mentors on campus?

### Where Did We Go Wrong?

The answer, I believe, is simple. We abandoned moral education. To a great extent, we gave it up for good reason. Moral education fell into greater and greater disrepute as higher education became uncoupled from the religious organizations that founded so many of our institutions. The increasing secularization and diversification of our colleges and universities necessitated open-minded heterodoxy. Free inquiry, after all, was the gold standard. Education, not indoctrination. Independence, not conformity.

Charles W. Eliot declared the following in his inaugural address as president of Harvard in 1869.

The very word education is a standing protest against dogmatic teaching. The notion that education consists in the authoritative inculcation of what a teacher deems true may be logical and appropriate in a convent, or a seminary for priests, but it is intolerable in universities and public schools, from primary to professional (1869, pp.35-36).

My own institution, the University of Southern California (USC), was founded in 1880 as a Methodist university. Although faith could not be coerced, behavior could be controlled. Students were obligated to attend daily chapel and church services on Sundays. According to early catalogs, students were

not allowed to use profane or obscene language; to carry concealed weapons; to visit drinking saloons, or places of gambling of any kind; to use spirituous liquors of any kind as a beverage; to use tobacco in any manner in or about the college buildings or campus; to play cards, or permit others to play in their rooms; to mark or deface the buildings or furniture, or to engage in any immoral conduct.

The University's president even felt compelled to issue a decree against students' shooting jackrabbits from the town trolley. Infractions of these rules could lead to dismissal.

USC, like so many of its sister institutions, eventually separated—amicably—from the Methodist Episcopal Conference. By that time (1928), USC enrolled 15,000 students representing 34 denominations and religions. This diversity, which has continued apace for eight decades (we now enroll 33,500 students, most of whom describe themselves as “spiritual but not religious,” and sponsor 70 student religious organizations), demands an educational milieu that shuns orthodoxy and embraces tolerance of difference.

Regrettably, a principal obstacle to reintroducing the concept of moral education is that too often people are still preoccupied with a particular religious orthodoxy—be it Hindu, Protestant, Catholic, Mormon, Muslim, Jewish, etc.—when they attempt to prepare themselves to make moral choices. Despite the existence of a sound basis for making moral choices focused on generally accepted humane, nonsectarian values, faculty members and administrators are reluctant to engage in discourse on ethics. “Character,” “morals,” and “principles” are often viewed suspiciously by many faculty members as code words for enforced conformity and the straitjacket of conservative ideology.

However, in the 18th and 19th centuries, when religious discourse became discredited among the educated elite and was displaced by the language of science and the primacy of the rational, “many babies,” as author and literature scholar Curtis White (2007) noted, “went out with the bath water of Christian dogma and superstition. One of those was morality. Even now, science can't say why we ought not to harm the environment except to say that we shouldn't be self-destructive” (p. 22). Given the increasing complexity and diversity of society, the capabilities for good or ill that science and technology place in our hands, and the barely suppressed miasma of hatred and bigotry, which tenaciously clings to old targets and inevitably finds new ones – we will be inadequately educating our students if we focus solely on the acquisition of knowledge and the discovery of new knowledge.

## The University as Crucible

There are those who believe that the morality of young people has been already set by the time they arrive on our campuses. “If the family, the community, the church, and the like, haven’t made you a relatively decent member of society” by the age of 18, asserted Richard Rorty (2000), if they “haven’t given you a conscience that stops you from cheating the customers, administering date rape drugs, or doing a lot of things we hope our 18 year olds won’t do, the university won’t either” (p.109). I might add that, indeed, given students’ newfound freedom in the postsecondary world, away from daily parental oversight, and still subject to the powerful and pervasive sway of the herd mentality among peers, the university may be deemed an unwitting abettor of the corruption of the common decency (that is, trustworthiness, responsibility, capacity for altruism, etc.) with which the students arrived on campus.

My experience, however, has been that students do not come to us fully formed. They are works in progress. For the most part, they have not begun to wrestle with truly complex moral choices. It is a long, perhaps lifelong, distance from a student’s weighing whether she or he should claim the computer crashed or simply admit not getting the term paper written to the even more challenging instance of a doctor trying to decide whether to follow the law and tell the parents about their teenage daughter’s abortion. Cultivating the kind of critical analysis involved in the latter dilemma is what colleges and universities are all about, or purport to be all about. Nuance, seeing different sides of an issue, considering context, history, circumstances – these methods of evaluation and discernment are, or at least should be, the bread and butter of a university and college education today. An 18-year-old, or even a 25-year-old, has had little time to think deeply about ethical conundrums or to frame deliberately and thoughtfully their personal values. Like most human beings, they are binary thinkers, given to seeing things as black or white, right or wrong, yes or no; gray areas make them squirm. I have witnessed this year in and year out among undergraduates (juniors and seniors) in the class I teach with Professor Warren Bennis at USC on leadership. Holding two opposing thoughts in the mind at the same time utterly disconcerts them. However, causing this kind of disequilibrium is precisely one of the principal jobs of their professors.

Once in a while I am asked to offer an exhortation to engineering students. As one of the old sages who, to their great astonishment, once upon a time used a slide rule, I typically (1) commend them on having chosen the field of engineering, (2) tell them that engineers have fun because they are in the business of solving people’s problems and expanding people’s potential, (3) assure them that engineering cultivates skillful judgment based as much on intuition as on precise analysis, and (4) shock them by asserting that engineering is always tied up with moral values. Most of these students simply had not thought about that angle; or, if they had thought about it, they concluded that engineering, and science for that matter, were morally neutral. Nonsense, I tell them. If you are caught up doing things for or with people, you are caught up with moral values. I remind them that sometimes the outcomes of our work as engineers are repugnant. A lot of time and effort have been spent figuring out how to use new technologies to kill people more efficiently. Technology is dangerous and often does more harm than good. However, much of what engineers do is uplifting – finding better ways to clothe and feed people or designing devices to improve human health.

The upshot, I tell these young engineering students, is that it is important for engineers to have some sense of what their moral values are – and to then apply them. They cannot turn over their moral decisions to anyone else – not to authority figures, not to social

institutions, not to popular opinion. A part of their education should be spent discovering their moral compass. As Richard Rorty (2000) said, “It’s one thing to find out how you make the rockets go up, and another thing to decide where they ought to come down” (p.113).

Two decades ago, well before the current hailstorm of headlines announcing the moral turpitude of some of our finest college graduates, Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, asserted the importance of what he called the rebirth of moral education in our academic institutions. “Universities should be among the first to reaffirm the importance of basic norms such as honesty, promise-keeping, free expression, and helping others,” he wrote,

for these are not only principles essential to civilized society; they are values on which all learning and discovery ultimately depend. There is nothing odd or inappropriate, therefore, for a university to use them as the foundation for a determined program to help students develop a strong set of moral standards. On the contrary, the failure to do so threatens to convey a message that neither these values nor the effort to live up to them are of great importance or common concern. This message is not only unworthy of the academy; it is likely in the atmosphere of a university to leave students morally confused and unable to acquire strong ethical convictions of their own. (1990, p. 100)

One can argue that the values Bok enumerates – honesty, helping others, etc. – are not sufficiently concrete; but since ancient times and on every continent, when sages put quill to parchment, specific virtues and ideals have been set forth as the goal of every human being and worthwhile human institution. These values include truth, goodness and beauty, courage, wisdom, prudence, justice, and compassion.

Our academic institutions are conduits for these ideals, offering them up for exploration through the courses we offer, the syllabi we create, and the extracurricular programs we establish. Yet, more important to recognize is that our colleges and universities are the crucibles in which these ideals are tested and formed. There is no other social organization that offers both the broad diversity of ideas, backgrounds, and opinions that we do; and this is done within a deliberate and valued climate of civil discourse. Most students began to establish their values in the homogeneous incubators of family, friends, churches, and neighborhoods. When they witness the wonderful cacophony of today’s postsecondary institutions and see firsthand that people of goodwill can disagree, even passionately disagree, without malice, rancor, and scorn, they are learning important lessons, even if sometimes covertly, about the humane values that must guide any civilized society. I would never presume to claim that universities are molding students, but we do create the setting in which students can enhance the molding of their own ethical development.

When encouraged by some of our trustees 17 years ago to come up with a role and mission statement for USC, I worked hard, in concert with colleagues on our faculty and staff and with our board, to distill the vast and unwieldy purpose of such a multidimensional community. Of the 453 words we all eventually agreed upon, the following, to my mind, were the most important: “We strive constantly for excellence in teaching knowledge and skills to our students, while at the same time helping them to acquire wisdom and insight, love of truth and beauty, moral discernment, understanding of self, and respect and appreciation for others.” Lofty values indeed, echoing those propounded by philosophers (literally, lovers of wisdom) down through the ages. Adding “moral discernment” was a move that few if any presidents of a secular research university

would dare do, but I felt it had to be included. Perhaps the impetus was partly my own realization as an engineer that no one in my field could operate in a moral vacuum, and I suspected the same held true for every discipline.

At the time, moreover, I was also immersing myself in the study of leadership and had determined that the best leaders in history were consciously aware of their own moral beliefs and what the basis was for those beliefs. In the spirit of Robert Bolt's play *A Man for All Seasons*, they knew where their adamant core was located. They could therefore discern which values they could compromise and which they would literally die for. They knew how much ground they could yield and still be true to their moral core, how far they could be pushed before they needed to walk away from their duties. (I harken back to Sir Thomas More as an exemplar, whose suppleness, and life, ended when Henry VIII asked him to swear to something he knew was not true.)

The values articulated in USC's mission statement of 1992, then, supplanted the behavioral proscriptions of USC's early years (although certainly we and every other academic institution still prohibit an assortment of behaviors – e.g., plagiarism and harassment – that are inimical to the academic enterprise). The mission statement thereby reflects our evolution into a nonsectarian organization which nevertheless believes that all human beings owe ethical obligations to their communities and have been served a summons to seek the higher personal purpose that knowledge alone is insufficient to impart.

When he founded the University of Virginia, Thomas Jefferson's hope, shared by his Enlightenment confrères, was that education would, among other benefits, transform what in a man's nature is vicious and perverse into qualities of virtue and social worth. Jefferson believed that along with improving a person's intellectual faculties, education would also improve a person's moral sensibility. This noble ideal is one we can all embrace – the humanizing, the civilizing affect of education. Yet knowledge is not enough. We only need recall that the worst brutality of the 20th century arose in the heart of European civilization among people who valued philosophy, literature, and the arts. When barbarism asserted itself, the ideas of the humanities, the arts, philosophy, and even theology proved incapable of defense. Even worse, people steeped in these ideas sometimes colluded with the tyrants and oppressors.

Here we must return to the critical importance of moral autonomy – the quality Sir Thomas More ultimately displayed and the one that led to his beheading. Call it the courage of one's convictions because courage is what is required. A multitude of famous experiments by psychologists and social psychologists have illustrated how ordinary, decent people can be enthralled by a powerful group or authority figure. These subjects' sense of proper, humane behavior flies out the window. This tendency of individuals to shed their own values and adopt an organization's morals and rules has been the topic of several studies (Robert Jackall's *Moral Mazes* comes to mind) and provides all the more reason for those of us entrusted with educating students to keep hammering at the vital importance of intellectual independence and awareness of one's core values.

Such an awareness of one's moral values can readily be developed in the crucible of public debate conducted with civility and respect, which is what academic institutions can provide. I have seen many political causes, opinions, and struggles examined and debated on campus, with passionate proponents on one side and equally passionate opponents on the other. In the middle are those observers who, I always hope, are considering the merits of the arguments and thinking critically as they analyze the issue at hand. All shades of political thought are expressed on our campuses daily. I believe

USC represents a lively open forum in which each person is encouraged to sort fact from opinion, employ healthy skepticism, and seek more than one point of view on controversial matters.

From time to time, I am asked to take a public position on one side or the other of a particular political issue and to use the office of president to sway public opinion on that issue. Those who ask me to embrace the role of advocate hope that I will thereby put the entire weight of the University of Southern California behind their cause and lend it persuasive power and gravitas. However, I do not see my role as an advocate of any position unless a particular political issue directly affects the well-being of USC (e.g., the state referendum on the California Initiative on Stem Cell Research, which I did support publicly). Even then, I usually seek the concurrence of the Executive Committee of USC's Board of Trustees prior to my taking a public position on any such issue.

I perceive my primary role in this arena as the guarantor of freedom of inquiry, freedom to take unpopular positions, and freedom to express those positions publicly. My personal involvement in political causes and debates may well tend to diminish and restrict academic freedom on campus, rather than encourage and enlarge it. I believe that, as the President of USC, I am in the service of no political cause other than the building up of this university; and its greatness rests squarely upon free and unfettered inquiry and discussion conducted in an atmosphere of civility and mutual respect.

As our young engineering students, the members of my leadership class, and all the other undergraduate, professional, and graduate students clamber up the academic mountain, I believe it is incumbent upon me to add this truth to their backpacks: The severe backsliding into brutality that occurred in the 20th century was to a great extent attributable to our inability to produce people, and especially leaders, who could persuasively articulate a humane moral philosophy in an age dominated by technological change. We must have with us at all times our own moral compass, we must know what our core values are, and we must hold ourselves accountable for our actions.

### **Knowing the Difference Between Legal and Ethical Behavior**

Throughout the years, as I have championed the kind of free inquiry that demands critical analysis and nuanced thinking, I have noticed that many people miss the distinction – sometimes a subtle one – between legal behavior on the one hand and ethical behavior on the other. This happens even within the faculty. Once, for instance, I heard this remark attributed to a well-known faculty member: “Ethics are irrelevant, even meaningless in the modern world. If it's legal, you should feel free to do it, irrespective of any so-called ‘ethical’ concerns.” I was dumbfounded when I heard that remark. Surely this faculty member knew that in reality there are important differences between legal and ethical behavior. For example, it is legal to urge young adults to take up smoking, to make promises in a political campaign that you have no intention of keeping, or to take advantage of the weak and vulnerable in your business dealings. However, these are not, in my judgment, ethical behaviors.

Conversely, every dissident has likely done something illegal that at the same time he or she felt was highly ethical. Examples abound of people who heeded their conscience rather than the law such as the Hebrew midwives refusing to obey Pharaoh's orders to strangle all newborn Hebrew males, the anonymous Puritan pamphleteer in Elizabethan England

calling for religious freedom, men making mischief with tea imports in Boston Harbor, and Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on the bus. Likewise, in my judgment it is perfectly ethical to break into a cabin in the woods in the middle of a snowstorm in order to save your own or others' lives or to use excessive force in defending yourself against a violent attack by hoodlums, even though none of the foregoing actions is legal. The point is that the law provides very little guidance as to what is or is not ethical behavior. One popular definition of moral or ethical behavior is that it is what you are willing to do on others' behalf when no one is there to check up on you or force you to do it.

Every college or university has rules of conduct pertaining to students, faculty, and staff that are intended to support the academic mission – from protection of human subjects in medical research to honor codes and respect for property. More than rules of conduct, however, our efforts on behalf of moral education are reaching for higher ground, reaching in fact for the highest guiding principles, which are extra-legal, transcending the proscriptions of the law and the specificity of mere rules.

In order to articulate some of these higher guiding principles, USC adopted a Code of Ethics a few years ago. As my colleagues and I were drafting the code, we concluded that ethical behavior at USC had to be predicated on two main pillars: a commitment to discharging our obligations to others in a fair and honest manner and a commitment to respecting the rights and dignity of all persons. Both of these pillars are other-directed. The entire document's *Leitmotif* is that the essence of ethical behavior consists in how you treat others, especially in the absence of coercion.

The code has been received favorably and taken seriously by many members of the Trojan Family, and I sometimes get mail from people taking USC to task for what they perceive as violations of this code. These letters generally fall into one of two categories: (1) the letter writer perceives an ethical transgression where in fact none exists or (2) challenges us to reconcile our actions with our stated ethical principles. Correspondents who claim an ethical breach when there was none are typically manifesting misperceptions related to the writer's personal biases and imperfect understanding of the ethical principles the code propounds. An example of this is a letter taking the administration to task when a USC professor voices his or her personal opinions in the newspaper or on television. I point out to them that exercising free speech is not an ethical breach. Instances that fall in the second category, in which the writer believes that a particular action or lack of action by USC is a breach of ethics (these could, for example, involve a grade dispute or employee conduct), are often legitimate complaints; and they are painful for administrators and deans to resolve. These kinds of expressions of concern serve to keep us vigilant, constantly scrutinizing, assessing, and adjusting all of our actions and decisions and measuring them by the highest ethical standards. They also require our willingness to admit our ethical lapses when they occur, which is very difficult to do. Yet it is a true test of putting our words into action – manifesting in our behavior and responses the values we cherish at USC; and it reminds us that alumni, donors, and friends have a personal stake in the continuing integrity of the university into succeeding generations.

Each member of the faculty and administration at USC plays a role in building USC's stature as an ethical institution. In striving to be faithful to the values expounded in the ethics code – fairness, honesty, and respect for others – we acknowledge that these are not just words on paper, but are in fact the very foundation on which the university is built.

## Implications for the Faculty in the Near Future

In both New York and California, I have been appointed by governors to serve on committees charged with projecting the future of the economy and technology. The respective committees differed in the projections we offered, but we were alike in this one aspect: We were wrong on every point. Predicting the future is risky business. Those of us in academe – a sector that endures and outlasts most other organizations and institutions – often chastise industry in the U.S. for looking forward only one quarter at a time; but, given the shifting horizon, it may make sense to look not at distant stars but at the terrain just in front of us.

So now that I have just dismissed prognostication, let me heedlessly jump in and prognosticate. In the United States we appear to be moving ever so slowly toward an academic environment in which students take primacy of place. Up until now, faculty members were at the center. Universities existed for the faculty; and for a century or so professors were under no obligation to pay much, if any, attention to the needs and preferences of students. The heretical notion that students are more important than the faculty has driven the success of proprietary schools such as the University of Phoenix. Despite the pleasure that many of us in the not-for-profit academies have taken in disdaining proprietary institutions, we could learn a thing or two from these heretics.

Allow me to paint a picture of how things could look different, and perhaps even better, if faculty members expended their efforts not for their own sake, or for the university's, or even (horror of horrors) for their discipline's sake, but rather for the students' sake. A student-centered focus would of course entail changes in pedagogy. Can a star physicist on the faculty teach physics with the student in mind? Can this professor involve undergraduates in original research? Can she or he teach in a way that deliberately and creatively prepares students to navigate their way in the world after graduation? And, germane to the topic of this essay, can this faculty member have any engagement with students outside of physics? Does the faculty member have any responsibility to students outside the classroom? Can he or she legitimately raise ethical issues or examine moral questions with students?

Spurred by our 2004 strategic plan's emphasis on learner-centered education, many faculty members at USC have been diligent and creative about engaging students holistically and pragmatically. For instance, our professors have been at the forefront of the university's nationally recognized community-outreach efforts, devising courses that involve students in our local neighborhoods and that take advantage of our location in the heart of a diverse megacity. A large proportion of our students engage in service learning, either for credit or as volunteers; and by the time they graduate about 80% of USC's 16,500 undergraduates have volunteered in the community or have undertaken service projects as part of their coursework. Of course, most of our students arrive on campus with experience in community service from their high school years, having been required to log a certain number of hours in order to graduate. At USC, by contrast, no one is checking each student's accumulated hours; and there is no graduation requirement compelling community service. Instead, we have created a culture of public service here, starting with leadership and commitment at the highest levels of the administration and faculty. To my mind there is no question that this deliberate culture of giving back and of good citizenship is influencing many of our students' ethical development.

Likewise, faculty members from across the disciplines either teach ethics courses or integrate ethics into their syllabi. The Department of Philosophy is, naturally, a stronghold for the systematic exploration of ethics; but ethics instruction is also offered in journalism,

business, medicine, healthcare management, neuroscience, engineering, law, environmental studies, education, and pharmacy, among many others. From what faculty members tell me, it is clear that many students are interested in exploring moral dilemmas; and their professors are happy to oblige. One professor who teaches business ethics at USC reported that at the beginning of each course she asks her students to list their top ten values. Year in and year out, “money” has never appeared on the lists of these students. Values such as happiness, family, faith, and “making the world a better place” top their lists. The glaring absence of lucre as a central value is perhaps all the more astonishing when one realizes that these are M.B.A. students.

At the Keck School of Medicine of USC, the curriculum is structured so that at the end of their first week, medical students recite the Hippocratic oath for the first time; and the following week they write their own oath, which is reviewed and discussed with their faculty mentors. This personal oath is then used as a tool for self-reflection throughout the 4 years of their medical studies, and at the insistence of faculty members the students return to their oaths in order to remember their idealism amidst the deluge of intellectual demands. I am told that not all the students eagerly explore the mandatory “touchy-feely” issues of ethics because they involve – as opposed to the sterner stuff of biology, chemistry, anatomy, and so forth – the more elusive matters of human nature, personality, culture, and psychology. However, the majority of our medical students grasp the importance of ethical instruction, thanks in large part to the insights and insistence of their faculty mentors.

Efforts outside the curriculum are also engaging students in ethical exploration. USC’s “Visions and Voice” series features plays, music and dance performances, lectures, film screenings, and many other special events both on and off campus. What distinguishes “Visions and Voices” from a run-of-the-mill performance series is that every event includes a reflective component wherein students hold dialogues with artists, writers, and the USC professors who have organized the event. These interactions encourage active exploration of USC’s core values, including freedom of inquiry and expression, appreciation of diversity, commitment to serving one’s community, entrepreneurial spirit, informed risk-taking, ethical conduct, and the search for truth. In addition, several times a year our “What Matters to Me and Why” series, sponsored by the USC Office of Religious Life, draws standing-room-only crowds of students who come to hear a student-selected faculty member speak from the heart about his or her values, beliefs, and motivations. I once had the privilege of participating in this series, and I found it fascinating to witness the extent to which students were genuinely interested in what I believe at my core and how I arrived at those beliefs.

I believe that a more student-centric college or university will necessarily give faculty a greater role in the formation of character and the cultivation of the more mature understanding of ethics and values that we desire for our students. Focusing on what the student needs will encourage faculty members to consider matters of moral and social responsibility central to their teaching, no matter what their discipline, and, as Derek Bok (1990) stated, “integral parts of all sound analysis” rather than mere “digressions or sentimental irrelevancies” (p. 81). A student-centered environment might also mean that faculty members evoke the kind of engagement in learning that will allow the lessons in virtue found in Plato, Marcus Aurelius, Thoreau, and Ben and Jerry to stick.

I am well aware that what I am proposing will meet with resistance on the part of many faculty members. Professors already have their hands full helping their students acquire knowledge and skills and creating new knowledge. Helping students acquire virtue and character, to separate the wheat from the chaff in their value systems, is more hard work

laid on top of hard work. Nonetheless, I think that we have taken the easy route by not addressing the ethical components inherent in our disciplines.

“There is really only one liberal study that deserves the name,” wrote the Stoic philosopher Seneca two millennia ago, “—because it makes a person free—and that is the pursuit of wisdom. Its high ideals, its steadfastness, and spirit make all other studies puerile and puny in comparison” (Seneca 1969, p. 151). Seneca went on to criticize scholars who teach Homer for wasting their time teaching mere literary exegesis and neglecting to teach students how to be better people. Teach me instead, he enjoined, how to keep on course for noble ideals even after my own shipwreck. The music scholar may explain how bass and treble harmonize, but “I would rather you brought about some harmony in my mind and got my thoughts into tune. You show me which are the plaintive keys. I would rather you showed me how to avoid uttering plaintive notes when things go against me in life.” Likewise

the geometrician teaches me how to work out the size of my estates rather than how to work out how much a man needs in order to have enough. . . . You geometers can calculate the area of circles, can reduce any given shape to a square, can state the distances separating starts. Nothing’s outside your scope when it comes to measurement. Well, if you’re such an expert, measure a man’s soul; tell me how large or how small that is. You can define a straight line; what use is that to you if you’ve no idea what straightness means in life?” (pp. 153-54).

## Conclusion

The scholars on our campuses generally have no desire to be gurus or philosophers. They wish to pursue intellectual truth, and this of course is their mandate and calling. However, the future of society will be determined not solely by developments in science and technology, but also to a great extent by whether the members of society can comport themselves with some modicum of the timeless virtues – goodness and beauty; courage, wisdom, and prudence; justice and compassion; and, yes, truth. If we can engage our students in the pursuit of wisdom, in this rare and precious context and crucible of the heterogeneous and heterodox campus, where their beliefs are shaped and reshaped in part by the differing moral views around them, then perhaps, when confronted with the powerful temptation to succumb to herd mentality, our students might actually do us proud by maintaining their intellectual and moral autonomy, taking responsibility for their actions, and doing the right thing.

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