

Being the Ethical Professor

By Ken Andersen

The October 21 Science Times section of *The New York Times* on “Ethics 101: A Course About the Pitfalls” details many complicated issues scientific researchers encounter: ownership of data, who has the right to be listed as an author on a paper, sharing of knowledge, data manipulation, requests for laboratory equipment desired but not needed for a research project. Two things particularly caught my attention: The first was the claim by scientists that even though they are not experts in ethics, they are the right people to teach courses in the ethics of doing science since “by and large people who are ethicists are not going to know much about the practical issues of doing science.” Scientists generally said they were largely self-taught in scientific ethics: anyone who runs a lab deals with ethical issues several times a day. The second, a case study in which a prospective hire for a tenure-track position was asked by the prospective department head to include some expensive equipment in his start-up laboratory request that he didn’t need for his lab but that the department wanted.

I take two lessons from the article: First, those of us without formal training in ethics nevertheless must address the ethical issues that arise in our work and that we are the proper people—no, the essential people—to do so. That is part of being professional, a member of a profession. Second, the individuals with whom we work or to whom we are responsible may create an ethical climate that places our values at risk. We are part of that ethical climate as our actions help to create and shape that climate and we are affected by it.

Given the furor over corporate (Enron/Comcast/Tyco), governmental (take your pick), and, yes, academic scandals (Baylor’s football cover-up), it is not surprising there has been a surge of newspaper articles, magazine articles, and books focusing on ethical issues and calling upon the academy to enhance the ethical education of its students.

Change, which describes itself as “The Magazine of Higher Learning,” and is editorially controlled by the American Association of Higher Education, gave its entire September-October 2002 issue to the topic of “Ethical Issues in Teaching and Learning.” The six articles featured are well worth thoughtful consideration.

The focus upon the role of higher education in promoting ethical action is as old as the institutions of higher education in this country. The 1987 statement by the AAUP (see sidebar) notes: “membership in the academic profession carries special responsibilities.” The statement stresses intellectual honesty. “Professors make every reasonable effort to foster honest academic conduct and to ensure that their evaluations of students reflect each student’s true merit.”

A paragraph by Peter Markie in *Professor’s Duties: Ethical Issues in Teaching* summarizes a powerful view of the role a teacher: “Professors also represent certain values. We are supposed to inspire our students by communicating a vision of intellectual excellence and to help them acquire the qualities needed to make that vision a reality in their lives. Some of the qualities—analytic skills, verbal skills—are intellectual abilities, some—self-discipline and perseverance—are traits of character, and others—a commitment to the truth and objectivity, a belief in the value of free inquiry—are moral values. Like all values, these last are best taught by word, example, and expectation. Our role includes acknowledging them in word, displaying them in action, and holding students to them in their course work.”

If recent events have taught us anything, it is that we should pay less attention to what we proclaim and give focused attention to what we do. And here I will make a claim that some may dispute: Because we as members of the academy have declared ourselves to be educators, we have a particular responsibility to deal with the ethical issues that are present in every stage and aspect of the educational process where we have a role. We are not just dealing with intellectual capacities, we are dealing, as Professor Markie states, with traits of character and moral values.

We could spend a long time just listing the areas in which we as teachers do things every day that have profound ethical implications. But typically we do not think of the ethical implications unless there are unique circumstances: unusual significance, conflicting tensions, concerns of one sort or another. This is

one reason that Aristotle stressed the importance of habit because we tend to repeat the same patterns and be comfortable in them.

Are we sensitive to the ethical dimensions of the grading standards we employ and the range of grades assigned? Are our standards publicly announced? Do we treat similar cases in a similar manner? Are our letters of recommendations honest, fair/helpful to the prospective employer/graduate school as well as the candidate? Is evaluation of merit of our colleagues or the article under review fair, free of personal bias? Do we participate in the governance of our institutions addressing such questions as intellectual property rights?

As educators and members of the professoriate, are we:

- Utilizing our capacity to choose values and action?
- Keeping current given in our area of primary interest given the growth in knowledge?
- Carrying our share of the responsibilities of maintaining the discipline and the unit in which we work?
- Exercising responsible, critical judgement of our activities? Professionals are expected to be “self-policing.”
- Aware of and meeting professional and ethical standards and appropriately enforcing that expectation for others?
- Being honest with and fair to all parties involved?

As Paul Simon wrote in his Oct. 31, 2003 Point of View column in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*: “If you are in a position of responsibility in education [and I argue we all] be willing to do ‘the little extra’ that ultimately can be meaningful. It may require risking a little, and most of us are risk-averse. But without that small risk, you won’t change things.”