Center for Ethics

Annual Report to Advisory Council

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Prepared by Elizabeth Whiting Pierce

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CFE History

Character Formation at a Historically Baptist College, for Religiously Diverse Students

The 2012-2017 Strategic Plan provides the earliest—to my knowledge—public record of MHU’s intention to establish a Center for Ethics (CFE). The Center was tasked with “encourag[ing] the formation of ethical decision-making skills” by “including ethics in curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular programs and [by] providing resources to the wider community.” That task is not explicitly religious, but it falls under Strategic Priority 5: “Mars Hill will encourage the formation of ethical decision-making skills and maintain an environment conducive to Christian faith development.”

In a conversation in March 2016, then-president Dan Lunsford indicated that MHU’s growing religious and cultural diversity was a key concern motivating the CFE’s creation. Dr. Lunsford wanted MHU to be a place that supported students’ growth into moral maturity. But the question remained, how does a university support students’ character development without imposing a particular religious worldview on them? How does a university promote ethical decision-making among young persons with diverse moral convictions? The CFE was an attempt to answer that question in practice if not in theory.

Dr. Barry Sharpe, then a faculty person in the Business Department, oversaw the CFE’s beginning stages in 2012. Activities that would later constitute the CFE’s work fell under the heading of the “Ethics Across the Curriculum Program.” These activities included: recruiting and equipping 12-14 instructors to teach the First Year Seminar in Ethical Reasoning (FYS 112), a required course for all first year students; researching the possibility of MHU’s participation in the NCICU Ethics Bowl Program; generating the curricular designation of “Ethics Intensive” courses in preparation for the creation of a Certificate in Ethical Reasoning.

Dr. Sharpe completed his work at MHU around 2015. Dr. Guy Sayles, Assistant Professor of Religion, served as interim director of the Ethics Across the Curriculum Program. During that time MHU began a search for the first Director of the Center for Ethics. The position description allocated three fourths of the director’s time to teaching courses in the Religion, History, and Philosophy Department and one fourth of his/her time to CFE administrative duties. MHU offered the position to Elizabeth Whiting Pierce in April 2016.

As I hope will be evident in the remainder of this report, CFE programming does and will address the concern raised by Dr. Lunsford; the CFE exists to support students’ character development. In particular, it promotes students’ development as ethically-engaged citizens in a religiously and culturally diverse society. This mission is not identical to character formation within the Baptist tradition, but it is certainly compatible with the deepest roots of that tradition. The CFE pursues this goal by guiding and empowering students to take responsibility for the institutions they belong to, starting with MHU.

CFE Mission, Vision, and Justification

Mission

Equipping students for redemptive and creative participation in a democratic society

Vision

The MHU Center for Ethics aims to deepen students’ understanding of, critical engagement with, and commitment to democratic values: personal responsibility, collaboration, freedom, equality, and dignity. Furthermore, we seek to empower students to embody their convictions in and through the basic institutions of a democratic society: local, state, and national governments; religious, ethnic, and cultural communities; not-for-profit organizations; businesses; and a free press.

Toward this end, the Center for Ethics pursues the following learning goals:

1. Students will be able to articulate, evaluate, revise, and enact their personal moral convictions.
2. Students will be able to respectfully engage others’ moral convictions.
3. Students will be able to develop shared expectations for conduct with people who differ from them religiously, racially, socioeconomically, ethnically, and/or ideologically.
4. Students will be able to collaboratively pursue shared values and goals within the institutions named above.

Justification

This particular mission and vision deserve to be the CFE’s focus for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they clarify MHU’s existing commitment to “citizenship in the community, the region, and the world.” “Citizenship” is one of those words used so frequently, for so many purposes, that its meaning is unclear. Perhaps it has something to do with being generally responsible, generally beneficent? The CFE’s mission and vision correct that fuzziness; they define citizenship as personal activity motivated by the values that sustain a liberal (governed by rights and the rule of law) and democratic (governed by the people) society; i.e. personal responsibility, collaboration, freedom, equality, and dignity.

These values need a shot in the arm at the moment. Data from the World Values Survey indicate that American young people feel less commitment to democratic values than previous generations. According to Foa and Mounck,

In the United States…41 percent of those born during the interwar and initial postwar decades state that it is “absolutely essential” in a democracy that “civil rights protect people’s liberty.” Among millennials, this share falls to 32 percent….[O]nly 10 percent of citizens born in the interwar years and 14 percent of baby-boomers say that it is “unimportant” in a democracy for people to “choose their leaders in free elections”….Among millennials, this figure rises to 26 percent.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Anecdotally, these data seem consistent with attitudes of MHU’s student body. Conversations with students indicate that MHU students feel socially disempowered, unable to participate in collective decision-making either on campus or in public life. MHU’s 2017-2022 Strategic Plan also recognizes this problem and addresses it. Goal 1 of Section III is to improve students’ “sense of…ownership in their respective experiences at MHU.” The CFE’s programming, especially the Certificate in Ethical Leadership, support that goal.

In addition to addressing a pressing social problem, this mission and vision fit nicely within MHU’s institutional landscape. The CFE’s mission and vision complement the Center for Community Engagement’s mission and vision without redundancy; the former focuses on empowering students to take responsibility for the institutions they belong to, first and foremost MHU, while the latter equips students to help communities in which they are often guests. Similarly, the CFE’s work is congenial to but different from the Hester Center’s work, which focuses on peace and justice but without any explicit commitment to democracy.

Lastly, this mission and vision address the challenge Dr. Lunsford named in 2016 (see “History”): how can a university support the moral development of a religiously and culturally diverse student body? One way forward—and it is not without problems—is to promote democratic values. These values were developed in large part to address the reality that, in a diverse society, ethical conflicts often arise among people of good conscience. These values leave a great deal of room for individuals to disagree, but they also keep open the possibility that citizens might—eventually, occasionally—develop shared understandings of common goods. The CFE equips students with perspectives and skills towards that end.

Current and Under-Development Programs

Academic Programs

**FYS 112: First Year Seminar in Ethical Reasoning**

All first year students are required to take First Year Seminar in Ethical Reasoning. Each spring, 10-14 instructors teach 10-17 sections of the course. It “introduces students to the foundations of ethics discourse and to the practical application of ethical decision-making.” In order to offer this course, the CFE trains instructors from a variety of disciplines—sociology, political science, music, English, nursing, etc.—to teach ethics. This faculty development is one of CFE’s major tasks.

**Certificate in Ethical Leadership (under development)**

MHU Certificates recognize students’ acquisition of “non-traditional skills and other experiences acquired during their college careers.” The Certificate in Ethical Leadership will recognize a student’s ability to 1) identify an ethical challenge or opportunity at MHU, 2) articulate the nature of that challenge and opportunity, and 3) find partners both on-campus and on-campus 4) with whom to collaboratively address that challenge or opportunity through some on-campus project. For instance, a student might partner with the National Wildlife Federation and MHU Facilities to install a rain garden. The certificate indicates that a student has the capacity both to reflect upon and to practically embody her values in institutional form. The certificate will involve 14 credit hours: 6 hours in ethics-intensive courses; 6 hours in leadership-oriented courses; and 1-2 hours implementing the on-campus project. To sustain these projects, the CFE will sponsor a yearly leadership retreat and a mini-grant program.

Extracurricular Programs

**Ethics Bowl Team**

Each fall semester,a group of 6-9 students meet regularly to practice persuasive and professional public speaking on ethical challenges. In February, they attend the NCICU Ethics Bowl at the NC Legislative Building in Raleigh. The event includes: 1) an ethics bowl competition consisting of 4-8 rounds of debate, and 2) several professionalization opportunities such as an awards banquet, networking receptions, and informal cross-campus interaction. MHU won 2 and lost 2 rounds this year and fielded a full team.

**Events**

The CFE sponsors (or co-sponsors) 2-6 events per year that aid students, faculty, and staff in engaging ethically important issues. This year’s events included: a 5-day trip to Washington, D.C. where 9 students and 3 chaperones attended the Friends Committee on National Legislation Spring Lobby Weekend; a faculty workshop on teaching students to source information ethically; a Red/Blue Workshop aimed at improving bi-partisan understanding, attended by a group of 16 students, faculty, and staff; and a faculty workshop on MHU’s Academic Integrity Policy.

CFE Future Programming Options

**CFE Affiliate Faculty Program**

Many MHU instructors are interested in learning more about ethics pedagogy and ethical theory, especially as these apply to their disciplines. This program would provide faculty with additional resources—workshops, travel funds, course releases, etc.—to develop these capacities and share them with other instructors. This program would also equip faculty to supervise students pursuing the Certificate in Ethical Leadership.

**CFE Affiliate Staff Program**

Staff persons will be key partners in the Certificate in Ethical Leadership since students will need to work closely with them to implement their projects. This program would both train staff persons to work with students in their on-campus projects and reward them for doing so via public recognition, recognition during their professional assessments, small stipends, increased job flexibility, etc.

**Alumni Mentors Program**

This program would connect current students with successful, ethically-engaged MHU graduates. Ideally, these relationships would help students recognize opportunities and avoid common pitfalls in their early careers. Vocational discernment would be a key goal.

**Friends of the Center for Ethics**

A friends program would support fundraising and help students network with businesses, non-profits, and governmental agencies.

**Mini-Grant Program**

Students who participate in the Certificate in Ethical Leadership will have access to a mini-grant program to fund their on-campus projects. This program could be expanded to allow non-certificate students to apply.

**Leadership, Madison County**

Many cities and counties have local leadership development programs (LEAD Atlanta, LEAD Asheville, etc.). These programs acquaint persons of various professions—business, religious, charitable, government, police, etc.—with each other and with the shared challenges facing their community. These programs also incubate plans to address those challenges. This kind of program could enhance MHU’s relationship to Madison County and provide student participants with an excellent professional development opportunity.

**Ethics Coffee Hour**

Social connections makes a great many other activities possible. The coffee hour could nurture the relationships that often motivate students’ participation in other campus programming.

Budget Proposal and Justification, 2018-2019

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | 2016-2017 | 2017-2018 | 2017-2018 | 2018-2019 |  |
| Description | Budget | Budget | YTD Expend. | Request | Amt increased/  (reduced) |
| Consultant | $1,500.00 | $1,000.00 | $0.00 | $1,000.00 | $0.00 |
| Travel | $3,500.00 | $0.00 | $18.61 | $2,000.00 | $2,000.00 |
| Meals | $500.00 | $500.00 | $186.10 | $500.00 | $0.00 |
| Program Supplies | $3,500.00 | $2,500.00 | $44.19 | $3,000.00 | $500.00 |
| Office Supplies | $500.00 | $300.00 | $0.00 | $150.00 | ($150.00) |
|  |  |  |  |  | $0.00 |
|  |  |  |  |  |  |
|  | $9,500.00 | $4,300.00 | $248.90 | $6,650.00 | $2,350.00 |

Consultant: $1000

The Center for Ethics (funded by the Ethics Across the Campus budget #) is a new entity on campus. This newness means it stands to benefit significantly from consultant services. This year, I hope to spend $1000 in early August consulting with Steven Benko, Assistant Professor of Religious and Ethical Studies at Meredith College. Dr. Benko oversees the teaching team for an ethics course similar to MHU’s FYS 112 course.

Travel: $2000

Travel funds will allow me to attend one of two yearly professional development conferences pertinent to the Center for Ethics’ work: The Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum (SEAC) and The Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (APPE). SEAC disseminates new approaches in ethics pedagogy. It equips me with faculty development resources for FYS 112 instructors. APPE studies the role of ethics in various professions. Attending it equips me to design extra-curricular programs that prepare students for ethical engagement in “the world of work.”

Meals: $500

Meals will be an especially important tool next year as a means to recruit students to participate in a brand new program, the Certificate in Ethical Leadership.

Program Supplies: $3000

This year, most program supplies funds have gone/will go to FYS 112 faculty development. The largest expenses will be incurred in May for an FYS Instructors’ End-of-Year Workshop. Expenses include: a speaker honorarium, speaker travel expenses, and meals for the two-day workshop.

Next year, program expenses will grow in order to support the new Certificate in Ethical Leadership program. Expenses will include: 1) a student training weekend retreat in the early fall; and 2) a mini-grant program to support student leadership projects in the spring.

Office Supplies: $150

$300 seems more generous than necessary.

Questions to Consider

What role should students play in the CFE’s leadership?

What should the CFE’s work look like in five years? What programs should be offered? How many and what sorts of students should be involved? How should faculty and staff be involved?

What funding would be necessary to accomplish that vision? Where should those funds come from?

What personnel changes, if any, would be needed?

Where are the low-hanging fruit opportunities for CFE to partner with other departments on campus?

What long term partnerships—on or off campus—should the CFE build? Who should be involved in building those relationships?

1. Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounck, “The Danger of Deconsolidation: The Democratic Disconnect,” *Journal of Democracy*, July 2016, Volume 27, Number 3 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)