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Tuesday, December 27, 2005

Ethics a campuswide pursuit at UVSC

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DAVID R. KELLER AND BRIAN D. BIRCH - Daily Herald

Utah Valley State College President William A. Sederburg has identified ethics as one of the institution's "pillars of distinction."

Despite this noteworthy honor, the ethics program at UVSC remains surprisingly misunderstood. Stakeholders in UVSC's past, present and future deserve to be adequately informed regarding the nature of ethics programming at UVSC.

UVSC is unique within the Utah System of Higher Education for its ethics programming. So it is not too surprising that references to a nonexistent ethics department are common on our campus.

This misnomer usually confuses two distinct entities: The Center for the Study of Ethics and the Department of Philosophy and Humanities. This conflation assumes that the same entity which organizes UVSC's well-known public forums is the same entity that administers the Ethics & Values course.

A probable source of the ambiguity stems from the fact that both the Ethics & Values course and the Center for the Study of Ethics were founded by the same visionary scholar and administrator, Dr. Elaine Englehardt, who has been at UVSC for nearly 3 decades.

Nonetheless, it is important to realize that the course and the center have distinct genealogies and functions at UVSC.

The genesis of the core General Education Humanities Ethics & Values course required of all associate and baccalaureate degree-seeking students dates back to the mid-1980s when UVSC received a three-year grant from the National Endowment of the Humanities to develop and implement an interdisciplinary core humanities course.

At present, more than 47,000 students have completed this course (approximately 1,800 fall semester), which has been applauded by scholars throughout the county as a model for interdisciplinary ethics education. In the words of James Faulconer, former dean of general education at Brigham Young University, "one of UVSC's ... greatest strengths may be the Ethics & Values course because it models the integration and interdisciplinarity that one would hope for in

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all general education courses(.) UVSC is to be commended for pioneering the idea of a core course in ethics(.)"

Independently of the Ethics & Values course, UVSC also has been a national leader in a college-wide program called "Ethics Across the Curriculum." In the early 1990s, the Department of Education awarded UVSC a highly competitive grant to implement EAC. This program is aimed at getting students and faculty to think about the unique ethical challenges to a wide variety of disciplines, from automobile repair to computer science to nursing to public policy.

The EAC program led to the formation by the Utah State Board of Regents of the Center for the Study of Ethics, currently the only academic ethics center in the USHE.

What is critical to note is that the center does not offer credit courses, but rather organizes public forums and supports ethics scholarship.

Subsequent grants to UVSC have assisted in the formation of the international Society for Ethics Across the Curriculum and the creation of its peer-reviewed journal, Teaching Ethics, which is currently housed at UVSC.

Perhaps most noteworthy, in its most recent visit UVSC's accrediting agency commended UVSC "for the development and implementation of its Ethics Across the Curriculum Faculty Fellows Program and its national recognition as the recipient of the Theodore M. Hesburgh Award to Enhance Undergraduate Teaching and Learning. The Ethics Center is to be commended for its dedication to the exploration of ethical issues across a variety of academic disciplines."

What is important for residents of Utah County to keep in mind is that discussion about the moral nuances of personal and professional life occurs across different disciplines in many places in many contexts. The study of ethics has many faces at UVSC and is not the sole province of one campus entity.

We are strongly committed to ethics education at UVSC and believe that by engaging students in civil dialogue, we are preparing them to become well-rounded human beings, productive employees, and engaged citizens.


David R. Keller is director of the Center for the Study of Ethics, and Brian D. Birch is Chair of the Department of Philosophy at UVSC.

This story appeared in The Daily Herald on page A5.

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