

Berg says professionals are bound ethically to "protect society"

Ethics: should we be told how?

by Brian Mahoney

The University's Senate Task Force on Ethics came down in 1985 recommending that all students receive instruction in ethics as part of their university education. Since then different faculties at the U of A have been re-evaluating the ethics component of their programs and some are developing new approaches.

Professor Anne McLellan, Associate Dean of Law, says the U of A has "the only law school in Canada that has a compulsory course in Professional Responsibility." It is a half-year course students usually take in third year so "it will still be fresh in their minds" when the graduates roll out into the articling world.

Professor John Law clarified: "The course has been offered for the past 8 or 9 years." It is run on a "small section format" with a limit of about 25 students in each class to facilitate discussion.

The instructors are two full-time professors, a number of judges and sessional instructors currently practicing law in Edmonton. The instructors are given "a freedom of action" allowing them to choose how they will impart a sense of ethical responsibility to the students, be it open discussion or case studies or a combination of techniques.

The goal, said Law, is to make clear "the obligations you owe to your profession and to yourself" through exposure to doctrinal rules, "proper attitudes", and an overview of the profession. This, hopefully, would prevent one from "just running right through unaware you even had an ethical problem," said Law.

The Faculty of Agriculture and Forestry requires students to take a fourth-year course in professional ethics. Dean Roy Berg says professionals are bound ethically to "protect society" and have a "responsibility to practice with competence and to keep up-to-date" with



"AND NOW ON THE ASPECTS OF EVILNESS ..."

developments in their field.

He noted this also applies "when not charging a fee; even off-the-cuff remarks must be supportable."

The faculty has close contact with the Alberta Institute of Agriologists (AIA), some of whose members sit on the university's Professional Accreditation Board and help decide who will join the profession. As well, the registrar and current president of the AIA speak to the fourth year students about issues in professionalism.

Other faculties are in the process of developing programs to deal with the instruction of ethics. Dr. Roger Smith, Dean of the Faculty of

Business, acknowledges that ethics are important "in all phases of business situations." When asked how ethics could be taught, he said, "... good professors can go through cases, indicating how they might approach them."

As to gauging the success of the efforts, "... if the students don't

feel that it's been helpful to them, then we'll need to reevaluate the program."

The Faculty of Medicine is now developing the final stages of its ethics instruction program. Dr. John Dossetor is one of three directors overlooking ethics who take the view that "ethics is not something

you take a separate course for." Therefore ethics instruction is a component in all 3 phases of the 4-year program.

For example, in a phase III clinical course "a patient is presented by the student or nurse (to the class) in regards to the specific ethical problems of the case ... Ethics is a participatory experience, not a someone-takes-and-spoons-it-at-you experience."

Dossetor believes "ethics involves societal issues as well as medical ones," and foresees a day when ethics instruction will involve not only health care students but "wider communities" as well.

He gives the example of the possibility of a bioethics forum at the Citadel Theatre, inviting the public at large. And he hopefully describes as "a dream" the concept of a Bioethics Centre near the university to serve the community in general.

Dr. Judith Golec of the Faculty of Arts said that because Arts is not a professional faculty, there is no specific training in professional ethics. However, ethics "runs through all courses" in Arts and a student "could hardly take a course in Arts without being exposed to the ethics of human organization."

Most agreed that there was no way to ensure that ethics instruction was effective. Professor McLellan: "I don't think we have any way of knowing how successful a course is. All we can do is raise the issues, discuss them, and try and make them understand why they are important ..." Or, as Agriculture's Dean Berg puts it, "you can lead a horse to water ..."

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