

# Moral formation of students at Catholic business schools

Helen T. McCullough

Integritas Institute for Ethics at the John Paul2 Newman Center at University of Illinois Chicago  
[helenmccullough@integritasinstitute.org](mailto:helenmccullough@integritasinstitute.org)

## Introduction

First let me thank Catharyn Baird, Jay Brandenberger, Jessica Warnell, Dale Fodness, Robert Walsh and other members of their teams for their insight and work in this area. This session explored the importance of the Catholic identity and the mission of the Catholic business schools as defined by the views of its stakeholders. As reported, in the paper, 'The search for identity', the term 'Catholic' can be promoted with success to mean Ethics, Integrity, and Respect, yet when asked 'What does the Catholic heritage contribute to your graduate education' approximately 45% of the students said 'nothing' and only 18.3% said they can relate Catholic to 'ethics' and 'integrity'. This suggests students do not recognize Catholic Values as Ethics and Morals, as opposed to the future MBA prospects where 26.5% anticipate an ethical orientation in coursework from a Catholic university. Could the low ratings of students and alumni be explained by a vague understanding of the definition of 'Catholic values'? It certainly suggests an area for improved awareness of the Catholic identity in the curriculum. But, does it matter for moral formation?

## Seven Points to Moral Development

To bring about moral development in the student, which is the end goal by any name, the following 7 steps suggest an approach:

1. Raise the awareness of the students' values, personal integrity, and character traits to the level of conscious understanding for full reflection.
2. Once the student has identified their value system, work to show alignment to the Catholic Social Teachings of: Human Dignity, Solidarity, Subsidiary, and Justice.
3. The student experience should include growth in critical thinking<sup>1</sup> to allow the student to explore their individual frame of reference, assumptions, and biases to achieve many benefits including the ability for empathy of another's situation.
4. Additional coursework in basic ethical theory should also be included. Among these are Kantian<sup>2</sup>, Utilitarian<sup>3</sup>, Virtue Ethics<sup>4</sup>, Ethics of Care<sup>5</sup> and Rights<sup>6</sup> theories.
5. With the basic skills of Catholic Social Teaching (Human Dignity, Ethics, Integrity, Values, Social Justice, Economic Justice and Stakeholder Views), as was pointed out by our authors, the students are ready to explore Moral Reasoning (right vs. wrong or Moral temptations) and Ethical Decision Making (right vs. right dilemmas). All curricula should include a process for recognizing and discerning ethical dilemmas. Values in Tension as presented by Catharyn Baird: autonomy vs. equality and rationality vs. sensibility are similar to two of Rushworth Kidder's constructs of Ethical

Dilemmas as described in his book, *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living*<sup>7</sup>. These Right vs. Right dilemmas include:

- 1.1. Individual vs. Community
- 1.2. Justice vs. Mercy
- 1.3. Short-term vs. Long-term
- 1.4. Truth vs. Loyalty

Given ethical decision making is relevant, what extent does the business curriculum cover ethical theory and is a process for discerning ethical dilemmas offered? Without the ability to think through an ethical dilemma in business, the student is left with only the uneasy tension between multiple right paths, for example “I want to tell you the truth, a right choice, and I must be loyal to my managerial responsibilities, another right choice. A process to understand stakeholder implications and outcomes of decisions is required.

6. Integrate these ethical constructs throughout curriculum with the technical aspects of the subject matter (finance, accounting, marketing, and management). This integration should be offered through experiential learning of business cases to integrate the theory with the practice. Experiential learning is essential to raise awareness of values, integrity and ethics within the student, and to give practical experience to draw upon in future situations. Key experiential learning events across the business disciplines include service projects, ethical problem solving in the situation, action research studies, etc. Some ideas may require students to interview ethical members of the community and ask the student to support their findings with ethical theory. Service projects can be integrated into the business program to offer hands on experience with Catholic social teaching. Or cases from the headlines can be evaluated each week. Jay Brandenberger, Jessica Warnell, and Annie Kelly, authors of the longitudinal study reviewed a business school, whose focus is on student service. Their study recorded 90% of students responded that the most important service is: ‘to build opportunity through the creation of jobs, enterprise, and products that serve human needs’. Supporting the need for experiential learning within the curriculum.
7. As students leave the university setting and become members of teams within corporations, group pressure can lead to ‘group think’<sup>8</sup>. Values and actions that were clear cut at graduation become vague and diluted over time especially in a dynamic, competitive, and aggressive business environment factoring in growth of personal responsibilities – family, mortgage, etc. Reinforcement of the ethical experience is important to continue ethical development. To maintain this awareness into their career, the student also requires tools to consistently increase their ethical efficacy. Tools such as a personal guide to increase ethical capacity that the student consults on a periodic basis and references books, seminars, alumni gatherings, and studies to support ethical efficacy for life long learning. Additionally, as ethical dilemmas are practiced, students’ confidence grows in making ethical choices.

## My Critique

Besides these 7 steps, measurements of success are important as noted by our of *The Search for Identity*, perhaps increased awareness of ethics and values should be expected from the Catholic Business School experience. Recognizing that some self-selection occurs in measuring Catholic

Social Teaching in a Catholic population, did a change *really* result in the underlying values or merely raise awareness to a functioning level and integrate the values into conscious thought?

The authors of *How Ought We to Live? Exploring Values Without Prescribing Values: Management, Marketing and Public Policy Classroom Experience*, presented a Jesuit University's approach to Values-Center Curriculum. The integration of Catholic Social Teaching and Values-Centered marketing approach seems inviting. However, these case examples seem to bias the students to take one position: Marketing to Children along with Tobacco and Alcohol advertising are implied bad products to market. Recognizing that we live in an advertising/marketing heavy world, how much focus is placed on Responsible Marketing? We don't want to drive the students out of Marketing, only drive towards Responsible Marketing.

Here's what the student may find upon graduation: In the workplace, often employees (especially junior staff members) are placed in positions to follow managerial direction which the employee may now find in tension with their value system. The employee has a choice to 'go along to get along' or to leave. The Values-Based course has created this tension in the student. The student/new employee should also ask themselves, 'What recommendation should I make to Product Management? How can I bring Responsible Marketing techniques to my workplace? With this new integration of values and business decisions, we must also *prepare* and *empower* the students with the practical tools to take a positive action *AND* to act as change agents with this new awareness. Ah, yes, ignorance was bliss for these alumni.

Catholic Social Teaching manifests itself in a framework of Corporate Social Responsibility, offering a more acceptable term in secular settings. The change in business to focus more on Corporate Social Responsibility and Codes of Conduct, may allow Catholic universities to promote Catholic Social Teaching as a competitive advantage placing additive value on these teachings.

Given that Moral Learning is a preferred character trait of business persons; all curriculum would do well to include experiential learning of this and other traits such as values, integrity, and ethical decision making. All universities should attempt to measure and track success of increasing moral reasoning in the students.

## **Summary**

The student must understand their values, some constructs of ethical theory, a process for ethical decision making, and then, integrate these principles with practical experiential learning thus developing moral reasoning and moral courage for ethical actions.

Thank you for your time and this opportunity to share my thoughts with you! Enjoy the rest of the conference.

## End Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Brookfield defines critical thinking as the intentional reflection on the assumptions underlying our and others' ideas and actions, and contemplating alternative ways of thinking and living.

<sup>2</sup> Immanuel Kant believed human beings possess certain moral rights and duties regardless of utilitarian benefits. Kant's Categorical Imperatives: First imperative, action is morally right only if reasons for the action are reasons that all should implore to act upon in a similar situation, including universalizability and reversibility. Second imperative, respect each person's freedom by treating them as they have consented to be treated and allowing them to choose their pursuits. In addition, Kant states that people should never be used as a means to an end; they are in and of themselves an end (Durant, p. 210).

<sup>3</sup> Utilitarian Theory states that actions and policies should be evaluated on the basis of benefits and costs that the action imposes on society. As long as the benefit is greater than the moral harm, the choice is the best solution.

<sup>4</sup> Virtue based ethics (Ontological) original work by Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas further developed Virtue Ethics which are character traits that are demonstrated by moral persons. The four cardinal virtues are Justice, Courage, Wisdom, and Moderation. These were enumerated by the Greek philosophers. The three supernatural virtues of Faith, Hope and (unselfish) Love are part of the tradition of Christianity, Judaism and Islam.

<sup>5</sup> Ethic of Care emphasizes caring for the concrete well being of those near to us.

<sup>6</sup> Rights Ethics includes treatment according to an individuals' right. Personal rights, contractual rights, justice and fairness govern the action.

<sup>7</sup> Rushworth Kidder describes an ethical decision process in his book, *'How good people make tough choices'*.

<sup>8</sup> Group think results from a team action that blindly follows without reflection or challenging the position and without reviewing consequences of the action. A common parable of the Abilene Paradox describes an uncomfortable family drive on a hot summer day because one person suggested the trip to avoid boredom and all were too polite to disagree.

---

## References

- Brookfield, S. (1987), *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- Durant, W. (1961), *The Story of Philosophy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, Inc.
- Harvey, J.B. (1988), *The Abilene Paradox and Other Meditations on Management*. Lexington, MA: Lexington Books
- Kidder, R. (1995), *How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living*. New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, Inc.
- Velasquez, M. (2002), *Business Ethics Concepts and Cases*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, Inc.