

Sustaining the Moral Compass of College and University Students

I would like to thank the Government of Mexico City for inviting researchers, teachers, students, and administrators to come together for the 3rd International Congress to address such an array of timely and important topics. In keeping with the theme of sustainability, I have chosen to speak on the topic of "Sustaining the Moral Compass of University and College Students."

I have been thinking about this issue since I graduated from college. In 1986, thousands of people honored my classmates and me during our commencement services. It was the last time that we'd be together as a class, and the university pulled all the strings to celebrate our academic and personal accomplishments. At the point in the ceremony when awards were announced, a Rhodes Scholar and several post-graduate scholars were recognized. When the final and most coveted award, as decreed by the Vice Chancellor and President, was announced, my name was called. To my astonishment, I received the Algernon Sydney Sullivan Award, an award named after philanthropist, mediator, orator, devout Christian, and family man, Algernon Sydney Sullivan.

The recipient of this award, a man or woman in the graduating class who is selected by a vote of the faculty, "is one who exhibits Sullivan's ideals of heart,

mind, and conduct as evidenced by a spirit of love for and helpfulness to others, who excels in high ideals of living, in fine spiritual qualities, and in generous and unselfish service to others. “ I was proud to have been selected by the faculty, because, on a purely superficial level, this signified the faculty’s awareness of my contributions to my alma mater as a student; more importantly, on a personal level, it validated the way I conducted and lived my life.

Days after receiving and accepting this public acknowledgement of my character, I went to the library to learn more about the award and Mr. Sullivan. Once I had a better understanding of the significance of this award, in my mind, my acceptance of it came with a lifetime of responsibility to conduct myself in a manner consonant with Algernon Sydney Sullivan. I decided that this was a heavy burden to bear. Thousands of people witnessed my receipt of this award, and I believed that I would never again be able to make a mistake. Years have passed, and I no longer have any anxiety about living up to others’ expectations. Like everyone, I make my share of mistakes, but I continually strive to maintain my high standards of conduct and a commitment to “helpfulness to others” in a manner that honors Mr. Sullivan.

As a result of being the recipient of the Algernon Sydney Sullivan award, I have been very interested in how young people, especially college and university students, develop morally. It is no accident that having a career in Student Affairs provides a unique opportunity to explore why students make the moral

decisions that they make. The college years are a time when students are independent and for many it's the first time that they are confronted with making decisions and judgments that reflect their moral character and impact their lives.

Much has been written about understanding the moral compass of students, and I'd like to focus primarily on the role that colleges and universities can play in helping to define these questions for students.

Here is an interesting observation from Michael Sandel, a professor of government at Harvard University: "If colleges and universities are to be something more than places that provide basic training for the world of work and consumption, they have to concern themselves with larger moral and civic purposes."

Sandel frames the fundamental issues that higher education in America has addressed since its inception. In the 17th century and the beginning of higher education in the United States, colleges had a clear moral purpose—they were founded by leaders of churches and had religious affiliations. Yale University is an example. This vision was fulfilled in 1701, when the charter was granted for a school "wherein Youth may be instructed in the Arts and Sciences [and] through the blessing of Almighty God may be fitted for Public employment both in Church and Civil State" (Yale Charter).

As American higher education has developed, we have seen many private colleges move away from the

religious connections of their founders, and we have seen the development of superb public universities that serve a diverse range of students. Still, the issue of students and their connection to moral and civic issues remains.

From my perspective and experiences in higher education over the last three decades, I have seen the ebb and flow of these issues. In the 1980s, when I attended college, there was a national discussion of South Africa and whether or not colleges and universities should invest in a country that embraced apartheid. This created interesting and impassioned moral discussions on campuses across the country about divestiture and our commitment to a society a world away. At the same time, there was a push for students to go to Wall Street and become masters of the universe, which was, in many ways, a precursor to the financial meltdown of 2008. We can all hear Michael Douglas in the film, Wall Street, playing Gordon Gecko and his admonition that "Greed is good."

Today, students still struggle with these conflicting issues. On one hand, they are intensely focused on their careers and consumption and making a way for themselves in a competitive global marketplace. They want the best cell phones and huge flat screen televisions and upscale cars soon after they graduate. Isn't that why they put all that time into introductory chemistry or the American civilization series?

On the other hand, they are highly interested in issues connected to sustainability and the environment

and how they can assure that there will be a healthy planet for their children and grandchildren. On the grand scale, college students are struggling with the moral dilemma of what it means to be a good global citizen.

Carol Geary Schneider, president of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, captures the challenges of higher education and moral preparation:

“Today, about one in three Americans has completed a two- or four-year college degree; the new goal is to raise that number to six out of ten Americans. This priority reflects a widespread understanding that the global economy places a premium on higher-level skills and offers dramatically lessened opportunities for those who lack them,” Schneider argues.

“Yet the new policy emphasis on “access and completion” has been strikingly devoid of any discussion about what today’s students actually need to accomplish in college. To date, the discussion has focused on jobs and job training; even the call for “higher-level skills” has been left vague and underdeveloped. The time is right, then, for higher education itself to advance a compelling public vision of the learning that matters most in college, moving beyond credit hours to focus on the capabilities Americans will need for a turbulent global environment and a diverse democracy facing unprecedented challenges.”

Schneider cited a recent study that included 23 widely diverse college campuses and 33,000

respondents who were asked about preparing students beyond the issue of jobs and careers. In this study, 93 percent of students and 97 percent of academic leaders, faculty, and student life professionals either “strongly” or “somewhat” agreed that preparing students for lives of integrity and ethical responsibility is an essential goal of a college education.

So how are colleges and universities preparing students to lead lives with “integrity and ethical responsibility?” As a senior associate dean and dean of student affairs at Yale College, I see the necessity of encouraging students to explore the moral and ethical dimensions of their behavior every day. My job, on one level, is about student life in the trenches. My office deals with the reality of students behaving at their worst: honor code violations, allegations of cheating, or egregious behavior. Let me state for the record that students at Yale and other universities across the country are, for the most part, solid young adults who are interested in their education and generally seek to live exemplary lives. But some of them fail from time to time. The question for those of us in student affairs is how we can transform those failures into teachable moments. How can we encourage students to analyze the moral dimensions of their actions?

Let me give you an example of a very difficult situation at Yale this year. Many of you, I am sure, saw the news coverage or video on YouTube. On a late October night, a group of fraternity pledges from Delta Kappa Epsilon walked blindfolded on campus in single

file. They were chanting extremely derogatory comments about women.

“No means yes. Yes means anal.”

They used defamatory words to describe women. They talked about necrophilia.

I cannot begin to explain how absolutely appalled the Yale campus was with this misogynistic, reprehensible behavior. Immediately, there was a campus-wide effort to hold the fraternity accountable and discuss the implications of this act. The Yale College Dean’s Office convened two meetings between DKE members and the Yale Women’s Center to discuss the issues of rape prevention, gender respect and sexual harassment. We continue to work as a community to foster that dialogue. The fraternity apologized for their behavior. But the discussion clearly did not stop there.

The University responds vigorously and appropriately when hateful words are used that violate the civility and mutual respect that are essential to its community values. The Dean’s Office asked the Executive Committee (which is Yale College’s judicial body) to investigate the entire episode in which chanting and possible hazing occurred, and to review whether any of the fraternity’s actions violated the Undergraduate Regulations.

The Dean of Yale College met with the president of the DKE national fraternity - who directed the local chapter to suspend all new member activities. The Dean

discussed additional steps, both educational and punitive, and asked the national organization to limit DKE's activities indefinitely, save socially supportive volunteer initiatives.

Yale President Richard Levin and Yale College Dean Mary Miller emphasized that while the university protects free speech, "we are committed to maintaining an environment that fosters a learning community of men and women founded upon mutual respect. We will confront hateful speech when it has been uttered, and we take this opportunity to do so in no uncertain terms: No member of our community should engage in such demeaning behavior."

While President Levin and Dean Miller acknowledged the Yale fraternity's apology, they said "an episode like this breaches the trust that is essential to preserving a community of free and open discourse. We call upon those responsible to reflect deeply, and to embark on a course that will heal the hurt they have caused."

In the weeks since the incident, Yale students, administrators, faculty and alumni have continued to discuss the moral and ethical implications of the fraternity members' actions. This represents a classic case of how we can take a clearly hurtful and, frankly, embarrassing episode in the life of a university and try to learn something from it. It frames fundamental ethical questions about what is hate speech, how should individuals make moral decisions in the midst of group

pressure, how can we take responsibility for our actions. . . .the list goes on.

While college and universities strive to integrate moral and ethical reasoning into the curriculum, real life experiences often provide the best context for all of us to get a sense of the moral compass on campus. In my student affairs role, I see a living laboratory of people struggling with issues related to honesty, integrity, decency and personal responsibility. I remain confident that our students are learning invaluable lessons from the independence and freedom of their undergraduate experience, and they leave college, like I did, with a sense that they need to be exemplary citizens. They will invariably hit bumps in the road, but they will continue to learn.

Let me read you an excerpt from President Franklin Roosevelt on the occasion of his second inaugural in 1937. The historical parallels to today are strikingly similar, and his advice is amazingly relevant today:

“Old truths have been relearned; untruths have been unlearned. We have always known that heedless self-interest was bad morals; we know now that it is bad economics. Out of the collapse of prosperity whose builders boasted their practicality has come the conviction that in the long run economic morality pays. We are beginning to wipe out the line that divides the practical from the ideal; and in so doing we are fashioning an instrument of unimagined power for the establishment of a morally better world.”

Thank you.

Bibliography

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Carol Geary Schneider

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