

Ethics in Academia

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In the summer of 1981, five Lafayette College faculty, supported by a Sloan New Liberal Arts grant, began meeting to plan an interdisciplinary senior colloquium on health issues. In the group were professors of psychology, religion, economics, engineering, and English (myself). Until that point, I had valued my discipline and explored its connections with other subjects in the humanities and social sciences but had not engaged in any sustained intellectual conversations with my colleagues in the sciences or engineering, who, it turned out, took pride in the priority of their own work and its connections with related sciences. We emerged from our summer meetings with a syllabus for a team-taught course that formally recognized the relationships that we had all been inclined to treat as incidental.

For me, the centerpiece of the summer planning activities was a visit to a local hospital, where, having viewed a powerful homemade film of a cancer victim's last months of life, we were warmly welcomed by the Director of Critical Care and admitted to every corner of the hospital, including the intensive care unit. Eighteen years later, one of our team members serves on the ethics committee of that hospital, working closely with the same physician who showed such hospitality then, grappling with the ethical questions that each new situation presents not only to health care professionals but to all humanity.

I was reminded of that summer planning team recently when I read an amazing book by a Lafayette College graduate, now a neurosurgeon, called *Judith's Pavilion* (Steerforth Press, 1997). The author, Marc Flitter, who spends his days drilling skulls and carving people's brains, ever so delicately, speaks candidly and compassionately about his failures, the judgment calls that didn't work and the surgeries that should have. Seldom has the humanity of a physician been shown in such sharp relief; though one would think those of this breed immune after thousands of encounters with the weight of death, they still respond with humility and respect for life.

Perhaps the medical profession most dramatically profiles the relationship between science and ethics and the academy's need to include ethics in the curriculum of those who take the Hippocratic oath in the immensely complicated world of modern health care. Yet health care professionals are by no means alone in the need to respect both the disciplinary and personal codes of ethics that inform their daily behavior. An historical look at a typical college faculty handbook reveals that statements on academic freedom, as promulgated by the American Association of University Professors some 30 years ago, and on plagiarism now share space with an inventory of policies and procedures that have become the measure of expectation in the academic world. What faculty handbook today does not have a policy on sexual harassment, research fraud and misconduct, institutional animal care, research involving human subjects, patents and copyrights, and equal employment? What dean of students these days is not familiar with the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act of 1974 and the Buckley Amendment, grade appeals, alcohol and drug abuse, date rape, and Title IX? And what student body or faculty does not have a statement of governance, reflecting the rights and responsibilities of the individuals in those collectives?