

University curriculum and the fight against corruption

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ABSTRACT

Corruption, at all of its various levels, is one of the most serious threats to the stability and development of a civil society, unravelling much of what the education sector tries to achieve. Corruption compromises integrity and morals; it hinders economic development; it stumps investment and misuses public resources; it contributes towards creating extremes of wealth and poverty; it acts as a regressive tax, it gradually wears away public trust in the institutions of state; and it is associated with organized crime (World Bank and the U.S. Agency for International Development 2000). Yet, as is true with most problems, treating the symptoms will not bring effective and long-lasting changes. It is the underlying causes that must be addressed, which involves changing how people are taught and not taught to behave. In this regard, university curriculum is both the cause and potentially the cure.

Keywords: corruption, university curriculum, informal rules, moral conciseness, value paradigm

INTRODUCTION

Informal rules, represented by generally recognized patterns of behaviour, traditions, customs, and culture are an important part of every society. These rules are the culmination of the ethical and value systems of the society and must be in harmony with the formal rules. If the informal rules become too distant from the formal rules of a society, people become tolerant of individuals who disobey the formal rules. As a result, one's tolerance for corrupt behaviour becomes positively correlated with the degree of acceptance of informal rules in his/her immediate society.

To have an effective and lasting campaign to combat corruption, the campaign must seek to empower individuals to develop their own moral conscience, so that they will personally make the "right" decision and follow the "right" way of life—even at the sacrifice of their seemingly immediate interests. As utopian as this may sound, it is this approach that needs to be fully examined and pursued in any campaign to promote global ethics and moral development. It is this approach that upholds the inherent dignity of all individuals and recognizes their intrinsic worth and capacity. It is this approach that will move the informal rules of a society closer to the formal.

Through this approach, moral development becomes a process that leads to the creation of a personal moral compass that is congruent with the formal rules of a society. The underlying

principle that such a program builds upon is that the source of moral behaviour initiates from an individual's understanding of "the moral law of cause and effect" (Smith 1992) rather than through inculcation of a moral credo or a set of rules for moral behaviour.

As individuals encounter and sustain positive or negative experiences with the law of cause and effect, a personal value paradigm (Hatcher 1998), which is the system by which we make choices, is constructed. Thus, an effective campaign for moral development must incorporate this moral law of cause and effect in all of its programs, which in turn will lead to a slow but sustainable development of a correct individual value paradigm.

UNIVERSITIES AND THE PERSONAL VALUE PARADIGM

As globalization advances and societies become more culturally diverse, the different rules (both formal and informal) mesh and sometimes clash. University campuses, particularly those that are internationalizing, experience this acutely and serve as a prime example as to why it is important to have an obvious, transparent value system that everyone can recognize and respectfully adopt. It is here where the curriculum and those who teach it have, in some cases, failed and have promulgated a sense of moral relativism.

In a survey administered to 205 upper-class students enrolled in a course in business ethics at Baylor University in Texas, 9 out of 10 students responded that they would act unethically if they are guaranteed that they will not be caught or penalized for their actions (Woods, Longenecker, McKinney, and Moore 1988). A more recent study conducted at a large south-western university in the United States by Buckley, Wiese, and Harvey (1998) found that the probability of being caught and penalized effectively predicted the likelihood of engaging in unethical behaviour. The findings were in the expected direction: the lower the chances of being caught, the higher the indication of engaging in the unethical behaviour. In other words, our future business leaders look upon unethical business behaviour as a matter of risk analysis of being caught. In fact, Cole and Smith (1995) suggested that the term "business ethics" has become an oxymoron to the business leaders in the US. Stevens, Harris, and Williamson (1994) found that university business faculties have a slightly higher tolerance for questionable business practices than do faculty in other disciplines. Once a society systematically acts unethically when guaranteed safety, then that society is corrupt. As Aristotle said, "We are what we repeatedly do." But that is not to say attempts are not being made to change business practices for the better, as can be seen by the increasing acceptance of the United Nation's Global Compact. The UNGC, initiated in 2000, asks that businesses adopt 10 principles in the areas of anticorruption, environment, labour, and human rights that are universally applicable. As more international businesses adhere to the compact, thereby leading by example, the workplace becomes more in tune with anticorruption practices (Cabrera 2005).

Still, that top-down example does not resolve the disconnect between curriculum (theory) and the workforce (practice); universities need to recognize the behaviour and needs of the dynamic business sector so that students can be properly prepared to excel in that arena. Yet,

today, the idea of incorporating moral education in university programs is a controversial one. Three myths exist at the heart of this controversy.

Myth 1

A person's value paradigm is formed by the time they begin their university studies. This conviction is shared by parents and university professors alike. It is argued that the basic character of an individual is formed at a young age by the interactions the individual will experience with family, friends, teachers, and other units of the society. Some believe that "the moral standards of students have already been set...by the time they reach a [university] program" (Hosmer 1988). It is undeniable that an individual's parents are the first and the most significant shapers of character and the value paradigm, and thus, early moral development is an essential part of the development of the core values that will remain firm throughout the adult years.

Counter-Myth 1

The value paradigm of an individual can change and improve at any point in that person's life. In other words, our value paradigms determine our choices, but as we make different choices through education our value paradigms develop and change. To illustrate this point, we can look at scholastic dishonesty in higher education. Although students may enter their university studies with different levels of tolerance for cheating, their behaviour can be positively changed by various programs and courses, academic honour codes, and dedicated faculty. The significant presence of principled people and shared standards all have the power to reshape a person's character (Schwartz 2000).

Myth 2

It is not the responsibility of university faculty to foster a value paradigm. An alarming number of university faculty feel that it is not part of their tenure track to foster a value paradigm. "In focus groups...parents assert that universities should simply provide the facts, tools, and skills needed to ensure their child's future occupational success. Nothing more, nothings less. To those parents, university is about 'getting the diploma' so their child can get on with life" (Schwartz 2000).

Counter-Myth 2

A value paradigm can and should be taught by university faculty. Many experts today believe that, for example, business professors should teach ethical skills and behaviour (Nazario 1992). Ernest L. Boyer, one of the most influential educators in the United States, in his landmark study, "College: The Undergraduate Experience in America," argues that the formation of character must be an essential aspect of any university education. University education in its fullest sense is inescapably a moral enterprise to guide students to know and pursue what is good and worthwhile. Faculty must play an important role as examples in such an educational process.

“Nothing is more influential in a young person’s life than the moral power of quiet example” (Schwartz 2000).

Myth 3

Moral education is linked to religious or conservative ideology. It is about possessing the “correct” views or standing for the “right” issues and is inherently patriarchal. To act morally one has to be religious, and religion should not have a place or a voice in our mature, secular university system.

Counter-Myth 3

Moral education encourages and inspires students to develop an ethical value paradigm that will enable them to be responsible and morally mature participants of their society. Virtues such as honesty, respect, justice, and moderation are not inherently religious, liberal, or conservative. They are immaterial and nondenominational dimensions of life that give it meaning and purpose. Through moral education, virtues will become a natural expression of individuals’ personal and civic responsibilities.

Boyer, in his studies, has demonstrated that at the heart of present-day higher education lies the belief that the responsibility of universities are to cultivate specific skills or teach certain branches of knowledge. He asks: “Education for what purpose? Competence to what end?” In 1964, Harvard University adopted as a motto the Latin word *Veritas*, or Truth. There is a direct relationship between a value paradigm and *Veritas*, and thus it must become a legitimate part of university education. In the words of Marcel Proust “the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes.” This is the true meaning of education as an agent of transformation.

NEW CURRICULUM AS ALTERNATIVE

Most educators agree that the primary goal of education is to develop participants in society that will serve as agents of change for the common good. This cannot be achieved by the mere transfer of information and knowledge. We need to develop a university curriculum that will contribute to an educational process that facilitates individual and social transformation through the development of a human-centred value paradigm in all aspects of university life. Such a curriculum will take students through a critical examination of the concept of collectivism versus individualism in various disciplines. The students will then move on to look at the human-centred conception of “the conscious” as an alternative to these two extremes and begin to derive meaning in life without sacrificing commitment to the overall good of the collective.

It is not possible, nor desirable, to go into details of a new curriculum for individual faculties and programs, though it is possible and desirable to discuss the underlying principles necessary for such discourses to be based upon. The details for new curriculum must be explored

and agreed upon only after extensive discourses and explorations, both in time and volume, among all parties involved.

PRINCIPLES TO PONDER

The new curriculum must look at “oneness” as an inevitable result of the integrative and disintegrative forces at work in the world today, and will offer to its participants the gift of transformation. Its goal will not be, as it is now, a sheer variety of experience, but self-directed and purposeful change. Oneness in its true sense does not mean uniformity, but rather “unity in diversity.” In other words, cultural diversity is preserved and protected, while the global good, and not the local or national good, takes priority.

Specific moral leadership principles for the new curriculum could include the following:

- consultation as a tool for decision making;
- ethical and moral principles as guides for actions;
- egoless evaluation of one’s own strengths and weaknesses;
- creative and disciplined initiatives for the common good;
- using systematic reflection to guide “learning by doing”;
- investing power and resources into educational activities;
- inspiring in others a visionary future based on shared values and principles;
- fostering relationships based on interconnectedness, mutuality, and service.

Emphasis in the curriculum is placed on the student’s moral responsibility to search for and recognize truth. Such recognition must inevitably lead the student to apply that truth in all aspects of his or her life. The curriculum must encourage students to find principles that can serve as the basis for their lives. These principles will serve as a driving force for their decisions and actions. Also, in addition to their steadfastness to their adopted principles, the curriculum must teach students to remain open to the investigation of new principles so as to allow for continuing growth.

For such a curriculum to evolve from theory in the student’s mind to deepening in his or her character, students must complete substantial hours of community service as a requirement for graduation. This will serve as a motivating factor for personal and collective transformation.

And finally, for such a curriculum to function properly, an appropriate university environment is essential. In his report (2001) to the President’s Commission on the Undergraduate Experience, Lee C. Bollinger, president of the University of Michigan, used a metaphor that a university must function like a city. Good, liveable cities embody many of the virtues and experiences that a university can provide. Cities are both a gathering place and a crossroads, compact and set apart but dedicated to the open, dynamic interchange of ideas, experiences, and goods among intimates and strangers. In the same way, a university can uniquely offer its students an educational community that is at once civic-minded, cosmopolitan,

inclusive, diverse, dynamic, and welcoming. In such a “city” students gain entry into an inclusive, expansive community and have access to the tools for exploration and change.

Such a vision of a university education would mean to offer its students the gifts of its breadth, variety, and energy. Its curricular rules and teaching culture should foster interdisciplinary exploration, participation in research, collaboration, and active learning. Its campus geography should encourage the integration of inquiry and social life, the development of relationships with faculty and staff that are not confined to classes and office hours, and the nurturing of a culture (not just a policy) of diversity through engagement with students of varied, unfamiliar backgrounds (University of Michigan 2001).

A university should offer its students the gifts of cosmopolitanism and civic imagination. “It should provide ample opportunities, both curricular and co-curricular, for international experience, community engagement, and contributions to campus and public life.” In addition, “it should offer students the gifts of access and transparency, providing them with the tools to grasp (in both senses) its complex resources” (University of Michigan 2001).

CONCLUSION

The world is fighting a crucial war against corruption. As a social, political, and economic cancer, corruption destroys economies and makes it impossible for a healthy recovery. Corruption comes in many shapes and sizes, and much of it does not involve financial gain. Theft of employers’ time, abuse of authority, refusal to recognize conflicts of interest, favouritism, and lack of disclosure are examples of nonmonetary forms of corruption. The effect of corruption is catastrophic. It subverts the democratic process and undermines stability, justice, and cooperation for the common good. Nations in transition from authoritarianism to democracy are particularly vulnerable to corruption. The public’s level of tolerance of corruption, as part of everyday living, is one of the highest in the former Eastern Bloc Countries.

It is time to pause and reflect on our previous prevention methods and the disappointing results they have produced. We must go beyond laws and policies, and target the underlying motivations of why individuals participate in acts of corruption. This war can only be won by decreasing the ever-growing gap between the formal and informal rules of our society.

It is necessary to create programs that will help individuals adopt a healthy value paradigm that is incongruent to the formal rules of the society. A global educational philosophy that is centered on moral education is an essential part of such programs. Universities all over the world in cooperation with scholars, philosophers, educationalists, politicians, parents, and students, must create a new curriculum based on principles of morality and ethics. Today, as the university’s graduates’ connections to the larger world become more varied, specialized, and interlinked, students need better ethical maps and guides with which to navigate their education and chart their growth. Universities must rise to this challenge and cooperate with other elements of society to graduate participants of society that are moral, ethical, and globally minded.

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