

Tugging a thread: Ethics as a foundation for learning

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Abstract

As part of Middlebury College's strategic planning process, students, staff, and faculty members contributed their ideas about the value of an ethics and/or intercultural competence curriculum for academics, experiential learning, and campus life in general.

The idea for this feedback project stemmed from concerns that students were engaging in volunteer or internship experiences without enough ethical preparation in advance, or enough opportunities for reflection later. These concerns were especially salient around students traveling, volunteering, or working abroad, particularly in resource-poor settings.

Through focus groups, students, staff, and faculty discussed the extent to which the College should formally incorporate ethics and/or intercultural competence work into the learning environment.

Participants were overwhelmingly in favor of incorporating ethics work as a platform for campus engagement. Although the goal was to address *whether* or not the College should incorporate such curricula, participants were eager to address *how* as well. Participants expressed a belief that ethics work should be an ongoing commitment that permeates the campus environment, evidenced across the board: in residential life, classroom learning, and administrative procedures, as well as off-campus engagement. In addition, participants believed such work to be valuable for important campus concerns around diversity, inclusivity, and the culture of privilege.

BACKGROUND: The National Conversation

"More harm than good? The questionable ethics of medical volunteering and international student placements" (2017)

"Some health programs overseas let students do too much, too soon" (2013)

"The White-Savior Industrial Complex" (2012)

"The moral ambiguity of study abroad" (2006)

The headlines above reflect a **growing concern** about the well-intentioned activities of young people, particularly on student **experiential programs**, and particularly in **resource-poor settings** abroad. In their zeal to travel, gain international experience, and to "help," students are unwittingly damaging the communities with which they interact. While the rapid pace of 21st century globalization makes these ideas seem timely and novel, the seed was planted by the polemicist Ivan Illich in his famous speech:

"To hell with good intentions" (1968)

In my position at Middlebury College, I am charged with developing experiential learning programs for global health students. I am concerned with **how to structure experiences that are educational for students, as well as respectful and harmless toward the host communities**. In thinking about this problem and discussing it with others at Middlebury, I realized that many colleagues, across many different programs and centers, shared my concerns. I wanted to explore **the idea of an institutional commitment to an ethical framework for experiential learning**, and decided to elicit opinions on the idea from faculty, staff, and students. I accomplished this through a series of "Community-Initiated Conversations," an opportunity that was created in concert with the "Envisioning Middlebury" strategic planning process.

"ENVISIONING MIDDLEBURY"

and "community-initiated conversations"

In 2016, under the leadership of President Laurie L. Patton, Middlebury embarked upon a process called Envisioning Middlebury, leading to the creation of a new set of strategic directions for the institution. Over two years, faculty, staff, students, and alumni across **Middlebury's schools, programs, and campuses** (see grey box below) engaged in conversations, sought ideas, and entertained visions of what a future Middlebury might look like. Broad participation from the Middlebury community occurred through: a speaker series; community surveys; small group, facilitated dialogs; and "**community-initiated conversations**" in which community members initiated and organized conversations in any format they preferred.

During fall of 2016, I conducted 5 focus-group style **conversations: 2 with staff, 1 with faculty, and 2 with students**. In total, 59 people participated. The groups were not necessarily representative of their peers on campus; I invited faculty and staff whom I thought would have a stake in the issue and/or be willing to hash out various points of view in an extended conversation. All 10 invited staff members participated. Eight out of 17 invited faculty members participated. Students consisted of a Posse, who were asked to invite friends as well, and my Global Health class.

To each group I posed the following questions:

1. Should the College take a stronger role in cultivating students' humility and ethical perspective before they engage in the broader community?

2. Should a curriculum on ethics and/or intercultural competence be required or voluntary? Campus-wide or program-specific?

3. What obstacles or pitfalls might lie in the path of such an endeavor?

I used the phrases "**ethics**" and "**intercultural competence**" somewhat interchangeably. These are disciplines with distinct academic curricula, but they share some broader foundational concepts (see yellow box). I wanted participants to be able to **conceive of this work in a range of ways**, including the cultivation of personal character traits as well as academic, curricular pursuits.

A student assistant and I each took notes during the conversations. She summarized each conversation with my input, then identified common themes. I summarized the findings in a report to the Provost. In my report, I treated **all participants as equal contributors** to the conversation. With few exceptions, I did not differentiate ideas by role at the College (i.e. faculty vs. staff vs. student), in part because the participants themselves emphasized that they thought such an endeavor should be campus-wide.

The Middlebury network consists of:
Middlebury College ~ Middlebury Language Schools
~ Middlebury Schools Abroad ~ Middlebury Bread Loaf School of English ~ Middlebury Bread Loaf Writers' Conference ~ Middlebury School of the Environment
~ the Middlebury Institute of International Studies at Monterey.

FINDINGS

"This entire campus is an intercultural environment."

Participants closely linked the ideas of ethics and intercultural competence to these foundational concepts:

Empathy
Active listening
Humility
Reflection
Acknowledgement of failure

Faculty, staff, and students all echoed the same themes and were in remarkable agreement in their feedback. Their ideas, hopes and concerns are the following.

This work should be part of Middlebury College's **identity and mission**:

- Who are we? Who do we want to be? We should be intentional about this, and embrace its **normative intent**: nothing we do is value-neutral.
- Admissions plays a role: 1) We should scrutinize our acceptance criteria; 2) an acceptance should be an *invitation* to engage.

This work requires an **institutional commitment**; it should be embedded and overarching in everything we do.

- **No one-offs**: that would lead to checkboxing and faux credentialing in our competitive environment (e.g. "*Excellence in humility!*" or "*Best humility ever!*")
- The work needs to be **reiterated**, incorporated, revisited.
- Empathy is a **lived experience** and must be modeled by faculty and staff.
- We need a **common language** for talking about these issues.

- This work is relevant to creating an **inclusive campus**

To make it work:

- Do a **campus-wide inventory** to assess where the work is already happening.
- Acknowledge that this is a **process, not a product**. ("This is all of our life's work, forever.")
- **Some context-specific, focused programming** is valuable (e.g. for study abroad).
- It must be an **administrative priority**.
- Focus on **questions**, not ideology.

Obstacles:

- How to solve the "bits" problem?
- Risk of "othering" messages
- Cynicism

CAMPUS RESOURCES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Middlebury already has numerous resources that can contribute to ethics cultivation and exploration. Except where noted, the following resources are based in the undergraduate College campus in Middlebury, Vermont.

- First-year student **orientation** program "JusTalks"
- Many academic departments already incorporate discipline-specific ethical considerations into their courses.
- The following **academic curricula** already exist to serve as institution-wide resources:
 - Intercultural Competence Curriculum at MIIS (Monterey)
 - Privilege & Poverty Academic Cluster
- Ethics engagement could be incorporated into the **First-Year Seminar** (universal), the **Sophomore Seminar**, or a number of department-specific **senior seminars**
- The following **centers** could incorporate ethics/intercultural competence training and serve as program-specific resources:
 - Center for Community Engagement
 - Center for Careers and Internships
 - Middlebury Center for Social Entrepreneurship
 - Center for the Comparative Study of Race and Ethnicity
 - Anderson Freeman Resource Center
 - Other potentially participating centers include the Rohatyn Center for Global Affairs, Franklin Environmental Center, and the Scott Center for Spiritual and Religious Life.
- Reinforcement of ethics learning could happen through **residential life**, which at Middlebury is based on a Commons system

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For more information

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