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It should not be surprising that our universities generate interesting and urgent ethical challenges....

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It should not be surprising that our universities generate interesting and urgent ethical challenges. After all, higher education is a big business. Scholarship is a demanding discipline. Teaching is a noble undertaking fraught with weighty responsibilities. And liberal education plays a crucial role in the formation of free citizens.

What may surprise is that, at the programs and centers devoted to the study of ethics and the professions that have been established over the last two decades at our leading universities, one profession whose ethical issues the professors generally ignore is their own.

The return to campus this fall brings sharp reminders of the confusion about their purpose that plagues our campuses, and so underscores the need for serious study of university ethics. In the recently published and already critically acclaimed book "Until Proven Innocent," K.C. Johnson and Stuart Taylor Jr. show how the Duke University faculty and administration collaborated with a reckless press and a lawless prosecutor in the rush to convict in the court of public opinion -- and, but for the superb work of their attorneys, in the criminal courts of Durham, N.C. -- three white lacrosse players falsely accused of raping an African-American stripper.

On Sept. 28, at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, "Indoctrinate U," Evan Coyne Maloney's riveting documentary about the war on free speech and individual rights waged by university faculty and administrations enjoyed its Washington premiere. Also, in September, for crystal clear political reasons, following a faculty petition circulated mostly by women from the University of California, Davis, the UC Board of Regents withdrew a speaking invitation to former Secretary of the Treasury and former Harvard President Lawrence Summers.

But don't expect the leading ethics centers -- Harvard's Edmond J. Safra Foundation Center for Ethics, Princeton's Program on Ethics and Public Affairs, or Yale's Program in Ethics, Politics, and Economics -- to sponsor lectures, fund graduate student and faculty fellowships, or publish writings that examine these and numerous other ethical questions that stem from contemporary university life. While lavishing attention on legal, political and medical ethics, and to a lesser extent business ethics and journalism ethics -- worthy areas of inquiry all -- our leading university ethicists have shown scant interest in exploring university ethics.

Celebrating its 20th anniversary last spring, the Harvard University Program on Ethics and the Professions is among the nation's oldest and most distinguished. Yet of the more than 130 public lectures by eminent visitors sponsored over the last two decades by the Harvard ethics program, only three deal with the university -- one defending affirmative action, one defending the propriety of academics engaging in public debate and one defending academic freedom. The program's Web site lists more than 875 publications by over 120 ethics fellows and senior scholars. Hundreds of the writings deal with law and politics and ethics. Hundreds explore medicine and ethics. Dozens discuss business ethics. But only about 10 of the 875 publications, and five of the 120 authors, address university ethics.

Take away a few defenses of affirmative action and multiculturalism, and a few reflections on teaching ethics at the university, and little is left. All in all, after 20 years of generously funding research in practical or applied ethics, Harvard's program has made no discernible contribution to illuminating the challenges of university governance, and the variety of duties and conflicts confronted in their professional roles by professors and administrators.

Much the same holds true of the Yale Program in Ethics, Politics, and Economics and the Princeton University Center for Human Values.

What explains the neglect by our leading university ethics programs of a vital topic that so plainly falls under their purview? The major cause is probably routine thoughtlessness: Surrounded by like-minded souls and therefore protected from questions that might rock the boat, and from research projects that might call for scholarly retooling, it may never occur to many ethics professors that, no less than law, medicine, business and journalism, their profession too is worthy of systematic scrutiny.

One cannot rule out that a few ethics faculty may have convinced themselves that professors and administrators, because of their peculiar virtue, already confront and wisely dispose of all the moral dilemmas and professional conflicts of interest that come before them. It would not be the first time that intellectuals, so aggressive in finding false-consciousness and self-interest in others, concealed or overlooked their own.

Nevertheless, if they are impelled or compelled to overcome disciplinary inertia and intellectual orthodoxy and turn their attention to their own profession, professional ethicists will discover a trove of fascinating and timely questions. Here are a few:

Is it proper for university disciplinary boards, often composed of faculty and administrators with no special knowledge of the law, to investigate student accusations of sexual assault by fellow students, which involve crimes for which perpetrators can go to jail for decades?

Should universities have one set of rules and punishments for students who plagiarize or pay others to write their term papers, and another -- and lesser -- set for professors who plagiarize or pay others to write their articles and books, or should students and faculty be held to the same tough standards of intellectual integrity?

How can universities respect both professors' academic freedom and students' right to be instructed in the diversity of opinions?

What is the proper balance in hiring, promotion, and tenure decisions between the need for transparency and accountability and the need for confidentiality?

What institutional arrangements give university trustees adequate independence from the administrators they review?

Is it consistent with their mission for university presses to publish books whose facts and footnotes they do not check?

In accordance with what principles may a university bar ROTC from campus because of the military's "don't ask, don't tell policy" concerning homosexuals, while inviting to campus a foreign leader whose country not only punishes private consensual homosexual sex but is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, and who himself denies the Holocaust and threatens to obliterate the sovereign state of Israel?

By exploring these and myriad other issues, our ethics programs would do more than fulfill their mandate. They would also vindicate liberal education by demonstrating the premium academicians place on ensuring that their own practice conforms to the proper principles.

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