Towards Developing a Personal Code of Ethics

Throughout this course we have repeatedly emphasized the need to develop a personal code of ethics that will help guide decisions and actions in your personal and professional life. We have explored many examples of unethical conduct as well as heard from guest speaker that have reiterated the point that one must be vigilant against ethical lapses. It is not sufficient to say, “well I’d never do that…” or “this is what I would do” unless there is an established and well-reasoned rationale. Without a clear, well-reasoned and articulated code of ethics, it is easy to slip into unethical decisions or practices. Recall that President Geoffroy told us that unethical actions often start small and escalate over time. This course is designed to help you decide what is ethical and how to improve the odds of consistently making ethical choices.

There are many appropriate adages that describe situations where there is not a formal code of ethics, including, “if you don’t know where you are going, any road will get you there”. This suggests that if you are not clear about your personal values and aspirations, including what is important to you and how you are going to get there, “then any road will do”. In this course, we have emphasized the need for you to be clear about your personal values, and the importance of ethical principles in achieving your personal and professional goals.

Most people think of themselves as ethical, and few would openly admit they are unethical, yet we have discussed numerous examples of unethical behavior and decisions made by people who likely intended to be honest and ethical. Are these examples simply lapses in ethical conduct, or is there something else going on that contributes to unethical conduct? It is likely that a consistently unethical person will occasionally make an ethical choice, which is reflected in the maxim that “even a blind pig will get an acorn once in a while” or “a stopped clock is right twice a day”. However, a major objective of this course is to help you decide what is right, proper and ethical. We don’t want to leave to chance whether you are acting ethically.

This is your opportunity to demonstrate what you have learned in this course by developing and articulating your own personal code of ethics. This is an important assignment and counts for 15 percent of your course grade. Drawing from readings in Josephson and Beauchamp, the numerous examples offered by the guest presenters, class discussions and group reports, it is your responsibility to develop a code of ethics that will help guide you through the many personal and professional decisions that lay before you.

A code of ethics is broader than a list of “do’s and don’ts”. It should include a rationale, and justification and philosophy about values and ethical conduct. For example, a young child might have a code of ethics that includes, “Don’t cheat, lie or steal”. While we would agree these are admirable qualities, these elementary rules lack a rationale. The young child might simply reply these rules are important, because their parents told them. However in your code of ethics we are interested in the rationale that guides or instructs your personal code of ethics. The code of ethics should reflect your philosophy about life.
and draws a connection between your values and how these inform your actions and decisions. A code of ethics is more than a set of rules; it should speak to one’s philosophy. As you consider the content of this course, you should be able to develop a code of ethics that will assist you in dealing with the complex issues of life.

A code of ethics should be a succinct statement of your personal philosophy, what is important to you and why, and how ethical conduct will contribute to achieving these goals. A statement of ethics that will guide your behavior and decision-making should be something that can be used as a reference for future issues. You should be able to articulate your personal code of ethics in 3-5 pages.

Good luck and best wishes.