

WHAT THE MINDANAO STATE UNIVERSITY HAS DONE TO INSTILL ETHICS IN PUBLIC SERVICE

EMILY M. MAROHOMBSAR

President

Mindanao State University

INTRODUCTION

The need for more resolute effort to instill ethics in public service has never been as acutely felt as it is today. The present scenario evokes Arnold's lament in "Dover Beach":

The Sea of Faith

Was once, top, at the full, and round earth's shore

Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.

But now I only hear

Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar

Daily reports are unnerving. Faith in the entire officialdom is at its lowest ebb. Ethics seems to have departed from public service, and with it, respect for people down the whole length and breadth of the bureaucracy. Public officials, uniformed, robed, or otherwise, have joined the scum of the earth, and outdo each other in venality, brazenness, and notoriety. The situation is rife with materials that would surely make a sumptuous fare for the delectation of satirists like Swift and Voltaire.

An academic community like the Mindanao State University (MSU), as the "forging place" that Comenius calls it, must be in the forefront of the effort to raise humanity to the moral high ground where it properly belongs, and keep man proudly erect, thus readily distinguishable from his crouched ancestor. Freud has shattered the idea of a "person" as a *Homo sapiens* - a rational free agent, and thus very much in control - with the thesis that there is something incalculable in each man which may at any moment rise to the surface and upset the normal balance. It is the noble aim of education to tame that wild man within.

As a molder of character and mind, the University must shine as a temple of the true, the good, and the beautiful. Being a literature teacher, like E.M. Forster, I recognize as my lawgivers Erasmus, Montaigne, and a host of other poets and

artists, not so much Moses with the forbidding mien. I believe that teaching is an art and teachers are artists. As artists, they must not teach by lectures and precepts, or by haranguing their students. They must touch the latter's lives by example. They must themselves embody the true, the good, and the beautiful.

INCULCATING VALUES IN MSU

Let me start answering the question, What the Mindanao State University has done to instill ethics in public service, by relating the sectors in a university community, the students who shall be the professionals of tomorrow with the faculty and administrators who are today's professionals in public service.

For any reform to be effective, the prerequisite is still the inculcation of values. Computerization or high technology or global networking has not changed that prerequisite. There can be no ethics in public service when those who serve the public do not have the specific dispositions of character. Increased monitoring devices can be suggested, safeguards against possible abuses can be offered; yet the most well-intentioned structural reforms cannot succeed when the people involved are lacking in moral commitments.

In the Mindanao State University, instead of the usual values of excellence and success, I am stressing the following three virtues: perseverance, public spiritedness, and integrity (PPI). (1) Perseverance is a lowly virtue but indispensable for the acquisition of technical competence in the course of lengthy professional training. More so for the MSU which, in addition to the usual functions of instruction, research, and extension, has the unique mission of facilitating the integration of the minority groups into the national body politic. For students who have been educationally disadvantaged for quite some time, perseverance is an essential ingredient. Particularly students who might not have the privilege of having educated parents or the privilege of quality home instruction. (2) By "Public-spiritedness" I am referring to that which orients one to the common good. Ours is a state university, funded by people's money, generating every graduation day hundreds of professionals. Moreover, professionals are licensed by the state; the society invests in their education, they are expected to conform to the public standards, and to accept responsibility for their enforcement. (3) By Integrity, I mean uprightness that has to do with moral posture. The upright professional refuses to put his nose to the ground; he equally refuses to bow before the powerful client, the influential colleague, and outside pressures. I would like to add a fourth: Fidelity. To quote Conrad:

*Those who read me know my conviction
that the world - the temporal world,
that is - rests on a very few simple
ideas, so simple that they must be as
old as the hills. It rests notably,
among others, on the idea of fidelity.*

But, of course, values cannot be taught in the same way as other subjects or courses. Values are learned because they are lived, practiced, and displayed by everyday behavioral patterns. They are not obstructions that are taught by precepts. This is where the faculty and administrators come in. They should be the role models. Indeed in MSU there are genuine role models, not all, but enough to start the task of instilling ethics in public service. By the way, the MSU-Marawi campus or the mother campus is a residential campus; hence, making role-modeling doubly imperative.

Another task being started by MSU for the same purpose is concretization of the common good. This is not actually a separate task; it is intertwined with the previous one. In fact, concretizing the common good goes hand in hand with the development of public-spiritedness. The concept of common good has remained a theoretical construct for long; students early in their academic lives learn to define it; by the time they have graduated from college, they must have waded through dossiers of what the common good is.

Unfortunately, the common good is still perceived as an ivory-tower condiment for the books and for utopians only. We have just started in and out of the classroom attempts to tie-up the common good with individual interests. We have just begun formal and informal lessons on aligning or realigning of personal efforts with common efforts, of gathering under the big common-good umbrella all small umbrellas of private pursuits. The lesson that one cannot genuinely enjoy life for sometime when all others suffer, that self-realization is achieved only in a social setting; that the individual human can reach the peak of development only in a singular planet which he inhabits with many others – a big lesson.

It is in this connection that I would like to comment on Reverend John Carroll's paper where he talked of Max Weber's bureaucracy, "carrying out specific tasks efficiently and *impersonally* and according to predetermined rules oriented toward the objectives of the organization, not allowing their *personal* concerns to intrude on their official performance except to the extent that proper performance of their duties will ultimately bring promotion and advancement in their careers."

I think that separating the personal from the official is one reason for difficulties in concretizing the common good, in making it a part of our daily lives. In many cases, they think that whatever is efficient is impersonal; whatever is efficient is official. On the other hand, whatever is personal is improper and selfish which should not be the case.

In MSU, I take time out to meet regularly the different sectors of the University. And the more problematic their cases, the longer the time allotted to them, the higher is the prioritization. I, in my *official* capacity attend to them *personally*. I explain to them why certain requests cannot be granted. Sometimes I suggest the areas where they can intensify their efforts which shall be sanctioned by the University because it will redound to the common good. I make them realize that the personal good or the good of the individual need not conflict with the common good.

THE UNIQUE MISSION OF MSU

Let me expound on the unique mission of the University – to promote and accelerate the economic, political, and socio-cultural development of Mindanao particularly the Muslim and other cultural communities and shall facilitate their integration into the mainstream of the national body politic.

Meaning, in MSU we have all kinds of people, majority groups and minority groups, privileged and underprivileged sectors. Hence, I make use of two principles: the principle of equality and the principle of equity. Without these two, it would be impossible to instill ethics in public service.

At MSU, we see to it that rules and policies apply uniformly. Punishment and reward are distributed without regard for the usual distinctions. There are standing committees or bodies entrusted with the investigation and evaluation of cases of wrongdoing. For students' offenses, there is the Student Discipline Board. Cases involving the faculty and staff are deliberated on by the University Ethics Committee. We have a set of sanctions for the personnel and another for the students to keep them in line and maintain the desired moral order. Offenders against the norms or policies of the University are meted out appropriate penalty ranging from fines, reprimand, lower priority in the award of travel and study grants, and dismissal from the service for erring personnel, and from suspension to expulsion for transgressors among students.

Although an avowed liberal, I am unabashedly conservative, but not a Puritan, in regard to morals. As practitioners of the noblest profession, we in Academia are expected to keep our character above question, our integrity unassailable. Any breath of scandal is enough to dent one's reputation and credibility as a role model. MSU, as I said a few pages back, is not a colony of saints, but I can confidently declare that we have still a few good men and not because of the stern reminders we issue now and then, certainly not because our uncompromising stance cows them into bovine obedience, but because of their innate sense of decency and delicacy.

My administration is implacable in teaching student offenders lessons in honesty and discipline. Many students rue the day they dared to cheat at examinations, tampered their records, attended a class as surrogate for a relative or friend, or resorted to violence. The dispensation of justice is swift and remorseless.

So much for sanctions. Now we turn our attention to rewards. Faculty members are promoted or awarded regular items and tenure for efficient, dedicated service. As a matter of policy, faculty performance is evaluated every semester. Among the points for which they are rated are their fairness in dealing with students, their recognition of their limitations, and their conscientious fulfillment of their daily duties. There are many opportunities made available to the devoted public servant. These include travels and furtherance of one's training. The screening conducted invariably includes character check.

Students who shine as leaders and distinguish themselves as models that others may emulate receive due recognition. We have institutionalized the practice.

We hold recognition affairs and give tribute to the deserving. We also confer various awards, the most coveted of which is the University Leadership Award. A high premium is placed on character.

As an administrator, I do not believe in whipping up the University constituents to moral ascendancy and spiritual regeneration through memoranda, exhortations, or tirades. But whenever necessary, I deliver sermons during dialogues, convocations, flag-raising ceremonies, and meetings. Last January, we launched the Moral Recovery Program. Unit heads were required to participate in the three-day Facilitators' Training Workshop and were directed to spread the light.

Universities exist because of the belief in redeemable humanity. Our mission as public servants is to help raise man to his full height, to grow vertically by leading a moral, self-disciplined, life, and learning to love order, harmony, and refinement. But to be able to accomplish this mission, we the living agents of the University, must teach by the suasive power of virtue.