

Saints and Scamps: Ethics in Academia. By Steven Cahn.
Rowman and Littlefield. 1986.

With this book the author proposes to give faculty members in higher education a code of professional ethics akin to codes in medicine and law. Under the major headings of teaching, scholarship and service, personnel decisions, and graduate education, he covers such topics as the role of instructors, examinations, grades, the morality of scholarship, departmental obligations, faculty appointments, tenure, voting procedures, faculty dismissals, and some serious shortcomings of graduate faculty performance.

Since the book is very simply written, even when most insightful and incisive, and is right 99.44% of the time, the best among us (i.e., the saints adverted to in the title) may feel it so obvious as to be redundant and so simple as to be simplistic. But when we reflect upon some, even many whom we know or have known in academia and remember the horror stories told us by students, perhaps it is needed, greatly needed in fact. Indeed, a strong case could be made for putting a copy of it (at institutional expense) into the hands of each new person entering the profession.

Like a course in ethics this book has no magical power to make its recipients ethical by exposure alone, but if it were well understood by all and sundry in institutions of higher learning that this book has the status of a code, upholdable in the profession in general and consistent with relevant laws, then its effects could well be reformative and salutary in the conduct of the scamps in question and the potential scamps it envisions.

Having already proclaimed it 99.44% correct, it remains for me to raise concern over the missing .56% and to supplement Cahn's book in one respect. He is entirely correct in criticizing the mistake of using student evaluations alone (or for the most part) in assessing a given instructor's teaching performance, but he is a bit too optimistic about the success of peer visitation. Visits by peer groups, even when including professionals from other disciplines and/or institutions, are not foolproof either. If there is prior notification, the instructor can prepare especially well for the occasion, turn on the pyrotechnics, and thus exceed by far his/her normal performance. If, however, there were a policy of visit-at-any-moment, a certain paranoia might set in among all who are up for tenure or promotion. Ideally, of course, each of us ought to be prepared to welcome sincerely any visitor with the requisite bona fides at any time for the purposes of evaluation and review. The effect of this on faculty morale and harmony, however, might be counter-productive. A testiness borne of being on edge all the time is probably not conducive to the best in education. In short, Cahn puts a bit too much trust in peer review and ignores what might be done at the outset to improve instruction.

What he leaves out everybody else leaves out too, or so it seems. Let me,

then, introduce this missing factor. Graduate students who are being prepared for ordinary classroom teaching, especially its lecturing aspect, ought to have to take something resembling what the better seminaries call "practice preaching." Whether we who lecture know it or not, we are continuously being compared in our auditors' mind with TV and with the professional actors who appear thereon. In this comparison, most of us come off poorly. Granted that we are not prepared to be entertaining, we should, nevertheless, have the benefit of seeing and of hearing ourselves on videotape, not once but numerous times and of being criticized and aided by professionals in communication. In graduate philosophy and speech departments this kind of experience could be provided by appointing a rhetorician who in addition to being well informed in an aspect of the discipline also knows how to communicate the contents of that discipline equally well. Other kinds of departments could work out similar arrangements.

In short, those who expect to lecture should have to take a practicum in "practice lecturing" and should be criticized and improved by experts in communication. There are, of course, always eucratic individuals who are simply good at what they do with a minimum of tutelage, but for the general run of graduate students what I am proposing (that Cahn forgets) could be invaluable. Surely the ethics of the profession calls upon all of us to be at our best at the entire range of our work. Areas in which we can improve or be improved for the common good of education are areas in which we should improve or be improved.

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