

# Ethics in higher ed equips students for leadership

## THE EVE OF MY INAUGURAL

combat mission was anxious, if not lonely. Of course, my initial thoughts were practical, but it didn't take long until they became philosophical. Restless about my ability to do my job under intense pressure was top of mind – not so much the “do this and then that” but fixated on the various contingencies and backups if things didn't go as planned as the mission unfolded. Eventually, and while not any less intense, faith, family, and freedom consumed the few hours of rest before “go time” – in that order!

My training and preparation for the hours ahead of me stretched back to being a student at the Air Force Academy. At the start of our second year, we went through three weeks of

Survival, Evasion, Resistance, and Escape (SERE) training in the Colorado Rocky Mountains.

The confidence that had been instilled in me then was reflected in almost all

my unsettledness in those apprehensive moments as I laid staring at the ceiling. “Resistance” was at the center of my thinking about the “what ifs” for tomorrow. Sure, I could survive, evade, and would be happy to think about escape – but how would I do if captured and began the next phase of my military service as a prisoner of war?

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During SERE, we all memorized the Code of Conduct as our ethical guide for this situation and were trained with lectures followed up with practical application after being “captured” in those mountains as I sat for days in a prison cell with only a rusty coffee can to handle my biological needs. The plan during interrogation: name, rank, and service number. Nothing more, nothing less.

Today, in the domain of higher education, I see this Code of Conduct as “catholic” in the sense that we acknowledge we are not in control, yet we have “free will” to choose how to act. Our faith, our honor, and our integrity are the only things we possess that no one can

take from us: we must *choose* to give these away. College students must be taught this truth.

While the virtues are urgently important to teach students and the Beatitudes are the crown jewels for our spirituality, they must be grounded in living truthfully as Christ has taught us. How are we to be “Ambassadors for Christ” without living a life of integrity? Matthew's Gospel offers us Jesus' direct teaching: “Let your ‘yes’ mean ‘yes,’ and your ‘no’ mean ‘no.’ Anything more is from the Evil One” (Matt 5:37).

The challenges to our integrity as we seek to prepare tomorrow's leaders with Catholic higher education — the longest continuously operating educational system in the world — are not unlike those seen in the business world. What does a purposeful life look like? How do we teach the use of artificial intelligence as a workplace tool? Does ethical behavior change as we leverage social media?

Business leaders are called in the workplace to lead so others can perform with excellence and, when compromise presents itself, to choose to do the right thing. That choice in that moment will reflect their education. This is the true mission of Catholic higher education: to form not only skilled professionals, but principled leaders whose ethical compass is shaped by faith, integrity, and a commitment to truth. By instilling these values, Catholic colleges and universities prepare graduates who are equipped to navigate the complexities of the modern workplace and serve as beacons for ethical leadership in any field they enter.

Our Lady of Philermos, Our Lady Seat of Wisdom, Our Lady of Perpetual Help, *ora pro nobis*. **L**

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