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Ethical Decision Making

Ethical decision making results from the act of reflection; to be effective, it must be a legitimate part of the everyday process of making decisions.

The process of rational and moral decision making to be used in conjunction with a set of "academic principles of responsibility" includes a proposed code of professional ethics for the academic community (Reynolds and Smith 1990). Within the context of this code, the first step in making a moral decision is to define the concrete ethical issues, as not all issues have moral dimensions. The second step is to review the alternatives for resolving the issue. The third step is

to carefully consider each alternative in relation to the academic principles outlined as well as any other set of values. The fourth is to check the proposed solution against one's intuitive moral judgment, imagining oneself in the position of those individuals who will be affected by the decision. Finally, one must act on one's deliberate judgment.

Another model describes the process of ethical decision making as having two distinct levels (Kitchener 1985). The first is intuitive based on prior experience and similar to a "common sense" response. The second is the critical evaluation level involving ethical rules, ethical principles, and ethical theory (Kitchener 1985).

Ethical rules include codes of conduct that apply to professional practice. Ethical codes are generally developed by professional groups and organizations. Codes can be used as teaching tools, as a method of socialization of new professionals to the values and standards of the specific profession, and as a guide for practical situations. Five ethical principles are particularly relevant for higher education: respecting autonomy, doing no harm, benefiting others, being just, and being faithful.

These five principles serve as ethically consistent, relevant guidelines upon which ethical decisions can be based. They would be overturned only by strongest ethical obligations, related to doing the least amount of avoidable harm.