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The Salt Lake Tribune

Date: 02/09/2000 **Edition:** Final **Section:** Nation/World **Page:** A1

Keywords: UT; Universities & Colleges; Social Issues

Subject: Education **Matter:** University

Ethics Class Fuels Furor At UVSC

Left vs. right, changing role of college lead to uproar; Ethics Class Raises Smoldering Issues at UVSC

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THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

The easy way to explain the months-long uproar over Utah Valley State College's ethics and values class is that it rankled conservative faculty with its debates on topics such as welfare reform, same-sex marriage and abortion.

Easy, but incomplete.

The ethics and values class, required of all students seeking associate's degrees and taught on the Orem campus and via public television since 1988, actually has drawn little criticism in Utah County, the state's bastion of conservatism.

That is why, in hindsight, campus pundits finger a more mundane explanation for the controversy: Unprecedented growth that has precipitated an identity crisis as the college attempts to hold together faculty and programs with distinctly different missions and philosophies.

"We're at the point where we have to revisit ourselves, who we are and how we want to represent ourselves to the community," said Sharon Staples, chairwoman of the humanities and philosophy departments.

The ethics class, it turns out, may have merely brought those growing pains to light.

The brouhaha began last fall after UVSC sociology professor Ron Hammond and several other faculty members questioned an emphasis on ethics in a proposed mission statement. Hammond then zeroed in on the ethics class.

He surveyed his students on whether the class should be required, if they perceived an anti-Mormon bias in its content, and who they thought taught it best. Hammond then sent the findings to all faculty in an e-mail message.

"It was the worst problem I've seen on campus in 23 years," said Elaine Englehardt, who launched the class a dozen years ago. "Suddenly we'd become the radical left wing."

Hammond's actions were seen as lacking collegiality by some faculty, but a vote to impeach Hammond, who is president-elect of UVSC's Faculty Senate, failed.

Still, the tempest revealed a schism in faculty ranks that, while featuring a conservative-vs.-liberal split over course content, has far more to do with rapid growth, poor communication and tension between UVSC's vocational and academic missions.

Founded in 1941 as a purely vocational school, UVSC has made the transition to a state college over the past three decades. Its programs are the most diverse in the state, including one-year programs that teach students to be receptionists, diesel mechanics and cooks and four-year degrees in such fields as psychology, elementary education and accounting.

In 1988, when the ethics class was added as a required course, UVSC had just 6,833 students and 141 full-time faculty. It had just changed its name from Utah Technical College to Utah Valley Community College.

This fall, the school -- which adopted its current name in 1993 to reflect the addition of four-year degrees -- counted 20,062 students and 270 full-time faculty.

A sizeable portion of the faculty has no historical understanding of how and why ethics came to be a required course. Its peculiarity is heightened by the fact UVSC is the only Utah public college that demands students take an ethics course to graduate; the requirement is distinctive nationally, too, outside of theological schools.

"That's the beauty of UVSC," said David Keller, an assistant philosophy professor and director of the Center for the Study of Ethics. "We're inventing ourselves. Because UVSC is changing and developing, we were able to develop this ethics course and get it on as a core class."

It was a cutting-edge move in academia, one that continues to win the school accolades. Jim Faulconer, dean of general education and honors at Brigham Young University, just completed a review of UVSC's general education program that included an analysis of the ethics and values class.

Faulconer praised the program and characterized it as "pioneering."

Until criticism and questions surfaced in the college's Faculty Senate last fall, there had been only minor complaints about the class, said Lucille Stoddard, academic affairs vice president.

"I would have anticipated that there might be more feedback through the years, but there just hasn't been," Stoddard said.

That said, some faculty members viewed the ethics class as a sacred cow no one dared to attack openly -- until the administration blundered by sending the proposed mission statement to trustees ahead of the Faculty Senate.

"All of a sudden that dredged up all kinds of feelings that were lingering there that people hadn't stated," said Ian Wilson, dean of the business school.

Some departments resented not having input into the required class, he said. After meeting recently to "mend bridges and ties," Wilson is working with the humanities and philosophy department to consider creating an ethics class for business students. It would be taught by faculty from the two departments.

"We should have approached them more directly earlier about those kinds of things," he said.

The controversy revealed rifts that had nothing to do with the ethics course, but rather if UVSC's vocational programs can coexist with its academic evolution.

Indeed, said Paul Bean, assistant professor of automotive technology, some trades faculty feel forced to justify their contributions to the college. He takes comfort, however, in the comments of legislators who visited the campus recently and suggested that "if UVSC ever abandons the trades, they would abandon UVSC."

Of course, Bean added, that kind of talk "ruffles the feathers of a few folks that have Ph.D. after their names."

For his part, Doug Miller, assistant professor for hospitality management, said the ethics class became "the magnet for the attention" but the underlying issue is a diverse faculty grappling with academic freedom.

"What we're struggling with is how do we talk about it," he said. "We haven't set the

ground rules," he said.

The need for such a discussion likely will boost attendance at a forum on Academic Freedom and Community Values on Friday at the college.

The symposium, planned before the ethics-class controversy, will focus on "the delicate relationship between educational instruction and the values held by the community."

Miller, a critic of the ethics course during the Faculty Senate debates, has since become a supporter. But he acknowledges its sensitive subjects create risks given the "conservative nature of Utah County" and the possibility an adjunct professor with a "maverick point of view might cross the line and be unprofessional in the course.

"The important thing is that you trust your colleagues in those courses to be professional and to teach rather than indoctrinate," he said.

Keller believes other faculty will have more difficulty adjusting to UVSC's expanding mission and increasingly diverse faculty due to two competing education philosophies that are tied to its vocational and academic missions.

"One philosophy states you learn your ethics and values away from campus, say in church, and the function of a public education is to teach you how to earn money," Keller said. "The other competing philosophy is that a public general education not only aims at providing students with the technical skills to do well at a job, but to make them well-rounded, thinking citizens of a democracy."

Critics of the ethics and values course adhere to the first view, he said.

"The issue of late is only a symptom or sign of a much deeper tension within the school between those two competing philosophies of education," Keller said. "That issue is not resolved, clearly, and won't be for a long time."