DEVELOPING ETHICAL REASONING:

MEETING THE CHALLENGE

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EVALUATING HONOLULU COMMUNITY COLLEGE’S CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL REASONING REQUIREMENT

David Cleveland        HCC Researcher

David Fink            Student Research Assistant
BACKGROUND

The majority of students who transfer from HCC to four year colleges/universities, transfer to the University of Hawaii - Manoa. As a consequence, to facilitate effective transfer/articulation, for the past three decades HCC has mirrored UH-Manoa’s General Education curriculum requirements.

In the Fall of 2001, UH-Manoa implemented a new General Education Program - which included several “Focus” requirements: Writing Intensive (previously required), Contemporary Ethical Reasoning, Hawaiian/Asian/Pacific, and Oral Communications.

HCC faculty concurred that the development of ethical reasoning skills should be a general education priority and quickly adopted the revised General Education requirements and implemented the changes in the Fall of 2002.

The Contemporary Ethical Reasoning “E” requirement was adopted to ensure that students graduating with an HCC Associate of Arts Degree would complete at least one course that placed heavy emphasis on the development of ethical reasoning skills.

When UH-Manoa met with community college faculty leaders to announce their proposed General Education Plan, the assembled group was assured that this new focus requirement could be met at any baccalaureate course level (100 to 400 level courses). Furthermore, the “E” designation process would be structured like the Writing Intensive designation process - hallmarks (criteria) for “E” focus courses would be developed and individual campuses would form certifying/monitoring boards to decide upon granting faculty/classes the “O” Focus designation.

Two years ago, UH Manoa announced that “E” Focus courses would now be restricted to upper division (300/400 level) classes - effectively eliminating the possibility of offering “E” Focus classes at University of Hawaii Community College campuses after the Spring of 2004.

Despite a series of protests to the UH Manoa faculty leadership, the UH Manoa Chancellor’s Office, the UH Vice President of Academic Affairs, the UH President, and the UH Board of Regents, UH Manoa has persisted with this General Education requirement modification.

HCC is left in something of a “Catch 22” situation. Our accrediting body (WASC) requires that the college’s general education program ensure that student outcomes include:

A recognition of what it means to be an ethical human being and effective citizen: qualities include an appreciation of ethical principles;

HCC’s adoption of the “E” Focus requirement ensured that students receiving an Associate an Arts degree would be required to take at least one course which focused on the development of these ethical reasoning skills.

The original “E” Focus Hallmarks included:

- Ethical issues are fully integrated into the main course content
- At least one semester credit-hour (30% of 3 credit course) focuses on ethical issues
- Minimum of 8 hours of class time spent discussing ethical issues
- Disciplinary approach(es) give students tools for development of responsible deliberation and ethical judgment
- Students achieve basic competency in analyzing/deliberating contemporary ethical issues to help them make ethically determined judgments.
Each “Focus” area was to have a Focus Board that reviewed, certified, and monitored qualified courses/faculty to ensure that expectations, hallmarks, and standards are met in “E” Focus courses.

**“E” FOCUS EVALUATION DESIGN/ADMINISTRATION**

Chris Ann Moore (E-Focus Chair) and David Cleveland (HCC researcher) worked together to develop the Spring 2006 HCC “E” Focus revised evaluation instrument. The new instrument was modeled after the UH-Manoa “E” Focus evaluation form - containing comment items from earlier evaluations as well as a set of scaled items that addressed the Hallmarks and facilitated quantitative analysis.

“E” Focus faculty were then asked to administer the evaluation - either online in a web version or by completing hard copy evaluations (required manual input by student research assistant).

All but one of the faculty conducting “E” Focus courses in the Spring of 2006 participated in the evaluation effort.

A total of 71 students completed the evaluation in seven classes.

**FINDINGS**

HCC E-FOCUS COURSES FAR EXCEED MINIMUM HALLMARK EXPECTATIONS

PERCENTAGE OF COURSE DEVOTED TO ETHICAL ISSUES

The first “E” Focus Hallmark requires that at least 30% of a course focus on ethical issues.

In the pie chart below, note that all respondents reported that 31% or more of their class focused on ethical issues.

87% of respondents reported that more than half of the class focused on ethical issues - clearly far exceeding the minimal Hallmark expectation of 30%.

% OF COURSE DEDICATED TO ETHICAL ISSUES (N = 68)
PERCENTAGE OF CLASS TIME DEVOTED TO DISCUSSION OF ETHICAL ISSUES

The second “E” Focus Hallmark requires that at least eight hours (approximately 20%) of class time be spent in the discussion of ethical issues.

All “E” Focus respondents reported that at least 31% of their classes were devoted to the discussion of ethical issues.

85% of respondents reported that more than 50% of class time was devoted to the discussion of ethical issues.

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% OF CLASS TIME SPENT DISCUSSING ETHICAL ISSUES (N = 67)

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COMPLIANCE WITH ALL OTHER HALLMARK EXPECTATIONS CONFIRMED

The bar graph below shows that virtually all respondents agree/strongly agree with statements associated with the remaining hallmarks.

Figure 3: BAR GRAPH - E FOCUS SCALED ITEMS - RANK ORDERED BY COMBINED PERCENTAGE OF STRONGLY AGREE/AGREE RESPONSES

E-Focus Scaled Items

I feel more competent to evaluate ethical issues.
The ethical issues in this class related to the course content
The instructor introduced techniques for deliberating on ethical issues
I feel more capable discussing ethical issues

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GREATER COMPETENCE EVALUATING ETHICAL ISSUES

96% of respondents reported that they now felt more competent evaluating ethical issues.

ETHICAL ISSUES RELATED TO COURSE CONTENT

94% of respondents confirmed that the ethical issues examined in their classes related to course content.

INSTRUCTOR INTRODUCED TECHNIQUES FOR DELIBERATING ON ETHICAL ISSUES

93% of respondents reported that their instructor taught them how to deliberate on ethical issues.

MORE CAPABLE DISCUSSING ETHICAL ISSUES

91% of respondents are now able to more capably discuss ethical issues.

RESPONDENT COMMENTS

WIDE RANGE OF ETHICAL ISSUES DISCUSSED IN “E” FOCUS CLASSES

Below are some of the contemporary ethical issues that student reported were discussed in their classes:

Female genital mutilation, homosexuality, capital punishment, assisted suicide, instruction of intelligent design in schools, stem cell research, organ transplants, domestic violence, gender inequality, pre-marital sex, abortion, sexism, rape, income inequality, same sex marriage, bombing of Pearl Harbor, and physician assisted suicide

WRITTEN CONFIRMATION OF VALUE OF “E” FOCUS CLASSES

The “E” Focus requirement goal was to ensure that HCC A.A. graduates are able to effectively analyze and deliberate the ethical questions associated with decisions and judgments.

Student responses and comments suggest that the vast majority who complete these classes have achieved these desired student learning outcomes. Representative comments in this area include:

I thought I knew all I needed to know about morals but after this class I realized that it wasn’t even half as much as I learned....The topics are gruesome, but it does totally relate to our future and how it does affect us.... Helped me to clarify my views on certain ethical issues and back it up with different theories of ethics...not many courses that challenge you so deeply and allow you to learn so many points of view...I recommend that everyone take this class for it allows one to see the bigger picture or to be able to analyze or evaluate issues of situations unbiased....you to focus on a particular topics and can devote lots of thinking and evaluations....
CONCLUSION

The evaluation findings confirm that HCC’s “E” Focus courses meet/exceed the Hallmark expectations and, thereby, contribute to the quality of the Associate of Arts General Education Program.

The quality of the E-Focus program was further verified/maintained through the Spring 2006 E-Focus recertification process which required all E-Focus faculty to re-demonstrate that their courses fulfilled all E-Focus expectations. This process included an assessment component in which faculty discussed how their own assessment procedures (including imbedded assessment) verified that desired student learning outcomes were being attained. The E-Focus Board’s rigorous, continuous review of E-Focus classes has ensured the continuous quality improvement of the program.

Additionally, Spring 2006 A.A. graduates ranked the development of their ethical reasoning ability as one of the top educational components of the HCC A.A. Program: 73% of Spring 2006 A.A. Graduate respondents assigned a rating of Excellent to the development of their ethical reasoning abilities; 18% rated this development as Good - none rated ethical reasoning development as Poor.

Despite its apparent success, the program faces a perplexing dilemma.

WASC standards require that General Education Programs ensure that students develop ethical awareness and reasoning capabilities. HCC liberal arts faculty insist on the inclusion of an ethical reasoning general education requirement not only because of the WASC standard, but because faculty recognize the necessity of such an educational component if we seek to develop the generally educated graduate. The addition of an “E” Focus requirement at HCC helped ensure that A.A. graduates develop these mandated skills. However, UH-Manoa now limits “E” Focus courses to 300 or 400 levels. As a consequence, HCC students can no longer fulfill their UH-Manoa baccalaureate General Education “E” Focus requirement at HCC.

Continuing to designate HCC courses with an “E” will prove to be confusing to students who may believe that by completing an HCC “E” focus course, they will meet their UHM baccalaureate “E” requirement.

While HCC must ensure that its graduates possess ethical reasoning skills, the faculty might consider eliminating the use of the “E” designation of courses.

An active debate about the use of an “E” designation is being conducted on the campus - there are faculty who believe that a separate, HCC “E” designation should continue despite the non-transferability of the “E”, and other faculty who believe that the “E” designation should be discontinued, but that the requirement that students complete a course that has been certified as focusing appropriately on ethical reasoning.

This could be accomplished by replacing the current “E” Focus requirement with a values/ethical reasoning requirement. New, non-Manoa community college level “hallmarks” could be developed by which existing and new courses could be designated as A.A. General Education values/ethical reasoning requirement. Students would be clearly informed that while these classes fulfill the A.A. requirement, if they transfer to UHM, they must take an “E” Focus class to fulfill Manoa’s General Education Contemporary Ethical Reasoning requirement.

Ideally, the development of such a requirement will include other UH Community Colleges to ensure uniformity, fluid transfer, and seamless articulation. Since WASC Standards require ethical reasoning, other campuses may now be willing to participate and adopt such a requirement.

Such designated courses will still not fulfill the UHM “E” Focus requirement, providing the participating UHCCs the flexibility to develop hallmarks that while meeting WASC expectations open inclusion to more classes.
For example, Illinois Wesleyan University has an Analysis of Values General Education Requirement which can be fulfilled by 31 different courses including *Fairy Tales of the 20th Century*, *Ethics and the Idea of Self*, *Human Sexuality, Environment and Society*, *International Human Rights*.

By expanding the number of courses that meet the community college ethical reasoning requirement, students will have greater selection (those who transfer to UHM will, of course, taken a second ethical reasoning class at the 300/400 level) of courses to fulfill the requirement, the college will not face problems funding the requirement (these classes will meet other Gen Ed distribution requirements), students will be less likely to “dodge” the requirement, and a broader group of faculty will be involved in integrating ethical considerations into course content. As a consequence, students will be more likely to take several classes that examine ethical issues.

In conclusion, the Spring 2006 E-Focus evaluations coupled with a Spring 2006 A.A. Graduate study document the college’s success in incorporating effective ethical reasoning into the general education curriculum. Over the past three decades, HCC has actively pursued increasing the quality of general education in its transfer, A.A. Program. Recent assessment activities verify that the college has succeeded on many these fronts, including writing, critical thinking, oral communication, Hawaiian/Asian/Pacific understanding, and ethical reasoning.

Having once, apparently, solved the dilemma of ensuring ethical reasoning development in the A.A. curriculum, it is somewhat disappointing that the structure of this successful curriculum has to be revisited.

Makes one wonder what happened to: *If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.*