INTRODUCTION

While many professors consider ethics as integral to their disciplines, most economists tend to see it as tangential, or even foreign to their subject. Indeed, economists learn this early on; most introductory economics textbooks completely dichotomize the normative, “un-testable” world inhabited by ethicists, from the positive, empirically-grounded realm of economics.

Admittedly, some economics professors who basically agree with this conventional wisdom will include ethical applications, as ventured by economists, as a small component in their economics courses. But many of these professors would find it unnecessary, and even counter-productive, to offer an entire course combining ethics, as ethicists understand the subject, with economics. After all, as an economist might put it, the division of labor dictates that they focus on economics, leaving ethics to philosophers and religion professors. Furthermore, the “human capital investment” required for them to teach such a subject would involve enormous opportunity costs, as they would have to divert much time from more “productive” uses.

Yet a number of economics professors do recognize the usefulness of an entire course that integrates ethics and economics. They might support such a class for a number of reasons. First, there exists a strong historical link between ethics and economics. Adam Smith, for instance, was actually a professor of moral theology (Sen 1991, 1-7). Second, biases inevitably arise from the judgments economists make when they choose and interpret facts through theoretical prisms. Facts don’t exist in a normative vacuum (MacIntyre 1984, 79-87). Of course, certain methodological steps can reduce bias in economics, such as increasing the realism of
theoretical statements. But eliminating normative judgments from economics remains impossible. Indeed, attempting to completely reject them might even have negative effects; ethical considerations might motivate economists in ways they find important. Finally, supporters of a course combining ethics and economics might note that the economy is influenced by the ethical views of its members, and vice versa (Robinson 1964, 3-9). Hence, it appears important to understand the context and makeup of the ethics that inherently inhabit both the discipline and the economic agents it studies.

Left to a specialist trained in philosophical or religious ethics, such a course might suffer from un-rigorous mischaracterizations of economic theory and an ignorance of empirical tendencies. However, in the hands of an economist, the course could contain simplistic caricatures of ethical frameworks, and even dogmatism. A strong faculty development program can adequately address these concerns, and provide educational benefits that more than compensate for the substantial investment of faculty time and resources. Of course, other factors such as faculty interest, manifested in part by at least some previous training in ethics, provide an important element in the success of any program in ethics across the curriculum.

This article describes how the multidisciplinary program in ethics at St. Olaf College has addressed these and other issues. Specifically, this paper describes and assesses our faculty development program, highlighting my own involvement in acquiring the human capital necessary to teach a course which applies ethical frameworks to both economic theory and the economy.

ETHICAL ISSUES AND NORMATIVE PERSPECTIVES AT ST. OLAF

St. Olaf College began requiring a course in “Ethical Issues and Normative Perspectives” (EIN) with the graduating class of 1998. Unlike many other curriculums which include an ethics requirement, St. Olaf’s EIN program has faculty from across the college teach entire classes in normative ethics. Many colleges limit the teaching of their ethics courses to those with graduate specialties in ethics. Alternatively, some schools require ethics as merely one component of a course. Furthermore, some classes in ethics at other colleges focus on applied ethics, emphasizing consciousness-raising, legalities, or etiquette. However, at St. Olaf, entire courses across the curriculum center on normative ethics as understood by ethicists, with applications by faculty to their own disciplines.
Because the EIN class replaced the requirement of a third religion course, some opponents of this change feared it would make St. Olaf College less Christian. They cited the many schools which, although founded as Christian, have become secular in nature. Of course, many factors contribute to the Christian character of a college other than the number of required religion courses. Indeed, as some supporters noted, the change could even enhance St. Olaf College’s Christian nature. If, under the EIN requirement, faculty across the curriculum could acquire the knowledge to teach the ethical aspects of their discipline, including a perspective in Christian ethics, it could benefit students who may have otherwise only discussed such topics in their religion courses. To help ensure this would occur, each EIN course must have a Christian component.

Obviously, there were other criticisms of the change. To address the concern that the course would merely serve as a soapbox for the professor’s point of view, each EIN class must address more than one ethical perspective. On the other extreme, to reduce the fear that students would end up as naive moral relativists, faculty teaching EIN courses would gain exposure to the meta-ethical problems of moral relativism, as well as the pedagogical issues involved with teaching competing ethical frameworks.

Because only a handful of professors at St. Olaf have graduate specialties in ethics, and St. Olaf must offer some 30-35 EIN sections per year, many faculty from across the disciplines, including philosophy and religion, have had to receive significant amounts of training in ethics. In the summer of 1995, I, along with a member from each of the religion, philosophy, social work, and psychology departments, received a planning grant to design a faculty development workshop. We then developed and received funding for the workshop, which eventually trained two cohorts from fourteen different departments: twelve professors during the summers of 1996 and 1997 and thirteen during the summers of 1997 and 1998. Additional funding mechanisms have more recently prepared other professors to teach EIN courses.

I had already received some training in ethics, and taught economic justice at the introductory level, before attending the workshop. I gained some formal training in ethics in the graduate economics program at Notre Dame, where I had twice taught a first-year seminar in economic justice. I taught a similar introductory level course six times at St. Olaf. To further my knowledge to teach these introductory classes, a member of the religion department at St. Olaf had tutored me as part of a grant. I
participated in the workshop to upgrade my training to teach a more rigorous course in economic justice for juniors and seniors.

The workshop mostly consisted of reading and discussing major works in ethics. The reading in philosophical ethics extended from Greek philosophy to post modernism. Similarly, we read and discussed major Christian writings from the Bible to the present. We also delved into articles and books on pedagogy. Some participants, including myself, gained supplemental tutoring from either the philosophy or the religion professor who co-lead the workshop. Each participant had to submit a sample syllabus of their proposed EIN course, as well as an original paper pertaining to the workshop. Workshop participants continue to meet periodically to discuss problems, strategies, and readings relevant to their ethics classes. We also have an EIN coordinator and a center consisting of resources for the EIN courses.

A college-wide committee made up primarily of specialists in ethics and the members of our workshop planning committee chose the faculty for the workshop. A General Education Committee, also established under the curriculum revision, had the job of approving or denying the specific EIN courses that the workshop participants proposed. This committee eventually approved all of these courses.

**MY EXPERIENCE WITH AN ECONOMIC JUSTICE COURSE**

My class in economics and ethics applies both philosophical and Christian ethics to topics such as income distribution, unemployment, international trade, the environment, education, debt forgiveness, private property rights, charitable giving, usury, consumer protection, welfare reform, health care reform, and workers’ rights. Thus, it differs from classes in business ethics by highlighting broader economic issues, although I do cover some topics specific to running a business such as affirmative action and corporate downsizing.

I begin the course by explaining the importance of a class that combines economics and ethics, noting the rationales mentioned earlier. I include the epistemological issues associated with the problematic dichotomy of positive versus normative economics. I also utilize the philosophy of science literature in examining economic methodology, highlighting the importance of non-empirical criteria in theory choice.

The next section encourages students to examine and discuss their own ethics as they begin the course, focusing on issues of tolerance, rela-
tivism, and absolutism. I relate their viewpoints to those of students who have participated in experiments such as the prisoner's dilemma.

After explaining how several major tenets of conventional economic theory reflect certain normative biases, I discuss a number of basic definitions, schools of thought, and controversies in ethics. For instance, I explicate the major controversies surrounding emotivism, consequentialism, deontological ethics, virtue ethics, and moral objectivism.

The next component of the course relates the major relevant frameworks in philosophical ethics to economics. It essentially draws from the four major paradigms of normative ethics in the history of economic thought: Utilitarianism, Libertarianism, Welfare State Capitalism, and Marxism. I explore issues such as negative versus positive rights, consequentialism, utility maximization, alienation, and the labor theory of value here.

As with philosophical ethics, the section on Christian ethics includes justifications of the gamut of economic systems from capitalism to communism. Both areas of ethics also address more specific economic policies. I incorporate the Bible, of course, as well as texts from the Middle Ages and the Reformation to the present, including recent Church treatises on economic justice. These Christian writings address such topics as private property, charitable giving, greed, idolatry, work, leisure, usury, just prices, justice, the common good, and taxation. Students already have some background in theology before taking Economic Justice, as all EIN classes have a two-course prerequisite in religion.

While students should gain substantial knowledge of the various frameworks in ethics mentioned above, getting students to constructively challenge each other, and themselves, when grappling with the relevant ethical issues, poses perhaps the greatest challenge in an economic justice course. I have utilized a number of pedagogical strategies to stimulate such critical thinking and constructive discussion. Counting participation for a significant part of the total grade, breaking the class into small groups for preliminary discussions based on assigned questions, and requiring reaction papers all seem to foster class interaction. The reaction papers, due at the beginning of the class period in which we discuss the assigned readings, seem particularly effective in encouraging students to not only read the material, but to assess it as well; I evaluate these papers based on the student’s effort in summarizing and critiquing the assigned readings (Pernecky 1993, 89-91). I also require a longer paper and give exams to encourage students to read and critically engage the material.
But my unique debate format perhaps most effectively achieves the goals of having students identify the moral aspects of economic questions, apply the relevant ethical frameworks, and develop and respectfully discuss their own assessments of the issues at hand. This pedagogical approach also fosters both communication and research skills, and promotes the student’s understanding of the economics and ethics in the course.

Because few students have experience at forensics, I do not utilize a Lincoln-Douglas approach for the debates. Rather, the format I have developed consists of a presentation by the pro and con sides, followed by an informal, conversational rebuttal stage. In the presentations, team members organize their content to minimize redundancy. Each member of the pro side, and then con side, takes approximately ten minutes to present their argument, often utilizing PowerPoint. The teams, which consist of either two or three students, must apply the relevant economic theory and ethical frameworks to their side of the issue. They must also cite empirical studies and/or data to support their argument. I base most of my evaluation of the presentation portion of the debate on these criteria. Unlike many other professors who assign team projects, I defer to each group’s preference concerning whether this portion of each team member’s grade will solely reflect their individual performance. If a team specializes so that, for instance, one member applies all of the relevant economic theory, another covers only the empirical research, and the third presents the ethical applications, I assess group grades for these categories. However, I only evaluate the “strength of the arguments” made in the presentation individually, noting such qualities as voice variation and eye contact (Pernecky 1997, 136-137).

I also grade their rebutting individually, and tell students not to filibuster or interrupt each other while conversing so that everyone can respectfully make their points. Of course, individual evaluations may reduce the incentive for group cooperation, but students still must coordinate their presentations. Furthermore, they should still find it beneficial to develop their ideas with the rest of their team’s assistance. The remainder of the period actively involves the rest of the class, which can make comments and ask questions of the debaters (Pernecky 1997, 136-137).

I also incorporate student preferences in deciding on, and assigning, debate topics. After determining the topics as a class, I assign students to teams based on the preference sheets they hand in, on which I’ve listed the propositions and the dates for the various debates. On these sheets, they rank their preferences according to the proposition and the side of
the issue they wish to defend. Some students care more about a proposition, whether pro or con, while others care less about an issue than representing a liberal or conservative viewpoint in a debate. Some students may even decide that the timing of the debate matters most to them, rather than the topic or the political bent.

I take an egalitarian approach to assigning teams based on these rankings, preferring to keep all students from their low-ranked preferences even if it deprives some of their top picks. I can usually assign students to one of their top three choices because at least several students must demonstrate an interest in each side of a proposition for me to include it. Furthermore, some slack usually exists so that the number of possible spaces for the teams exceeds the number of students. Specifically, if I do not have a multiple of four or six for class enrollment, teams may have two or three members. (I apprise the class that there are pros and cons to having only one other student on their team.) Because I usually have two rounds of debates during a semester, I try to assign a student to their first choice in the second debate if they were assigned to their second or third ranked preference in the first debate. To make this easier, the debate preference sheets include both rounds of debates for the semester.

I phrase each proposition in such a way that both sides have a significant political constituency, so that both teams can find a significant amount of material for their positions. For instance, very little support has existed over the past several years for defending the status quo in welfare policy. Rather, the debate concerning welfare reform has centered on utilizing push factors (i.e. “sticks,” such as time limits) versus pull factors (i.e. “carrots,” such as a higher minimum wage). Thus, I phrase the proposition accordingly. The debate topics have included state lotteries, affirmative action, immigration policy, publicly-subsidized sports stadiums, internet taxation, labor and environmental standards in free trade agreements, social security privatization, the minimum wage, and drug legalization.

Because students must publicly present and defend their views on these topics, and because they meet with me as a team before their debates, they usually develop fairly cogent arguments. Of course, incorporating their preferences when assigning teams usually results in students defending viewpoints which accord with their previously-held normative perspectives. However, they frequently gain a less absolutist understanding of an issue as they go through the process of designing and arguing a debate, and often end up in a “middle ground,” or occa-
sionally even switch sides! Whatever they conclude, my intent is not to create a paradigm shift in their thinking, but rather to develop a more sophisticated understanding of the issue at hand. Indeed, students ultimately begin to model the teacher’s role as intellectual; they research, organize, and present material. In the process, many discover that while both sides of their issue may contain a significant degree of relativism, they must nevertheless commit to a viewpoint based on some common standards.

**Assessment**

In attempting to understand the impact of the faculty development program on EIN classes, including my Economic Justice course, we utilized a student questionnaire. But first, a professor from another college, with experience as a dean, more directly assessed the workshop. This evaluator attended several workshop meetings and also developed and administered a faculty questionnaire to gauge participant sentiment towards the workshop. He assessed the workshop members’ papers and proposed syllabi, as well as the meetings and questionnaires. The reviewer focused on how well the workshop had proceeded toward meeting its goals of improving pedagogy, enhancing philosophical and theological literacy, and promoting interdisciplinary dialogue among the faculty. The reviewer felt the workshop met these criteria. He reported that the discussion leaders were knowledgeable and adept at explaining difficult material, and that they respectfully facilitated discussions, making faculty members feel quite comfortable in participating. He also noted that the participants were enthusiastic about the interdisciplinary nature of many of the conversations, which they felt had greatly enhanced their understanding of the various ethical perspectives. (To increase interdisciplinary learning, participants often led discussions in a topic related to their discipline.) Furthermore, he found that pedagogical questions were frequently addressed, including strategies to deal with the relativism which arises from considering different ethical perspectives. The reviewer also noted that the participants self-reported greater confidence in teaching the course based, in part, on their enhanced theological and philosophical literacy (Ferry 1999, 1-3).

The evaluator also offered several suggestions to improve future workshops. For instance, he felt they should include a smaller number of participants to facilitate discussion; the workshop meetings were usually attended by at least twelve faculty. Also, the reviewer urged greater inter-
action between the specialists in ethics on the faculty and the workshop participants, although three such ethicists did lead discussions during the workshop (Ferry 1999, 4-5). The reviewer characterized the assigned papers as serious and of high quality; they related one or more normative traditions to the participant’s teaching, discipline, scholarship, or personal development. He also stated that the syllabi both addressed a variety of ethical perspectives and challenged students to examine their personal viewpoints (Ferry 1999, 4).

The second assessment tool, the student questionnaire, offered insights into the effectiveness of both the workshop and individual classes. A sample of 190 students answered questions near the end of the spring 1999 semester based on the student outcome goals for EIN classes. These goals tend to reflect what students believe they can achieve with the knowledge they’ve obtained, rather than merely focus on the knowledge itself (Ozar 2001, 1-14).

Table 1 compares the results for the sections taught by workshop participants to those who had graduate specialties in ethics (and thus did not participate in the workshop). These responses (in terms of the means), along with those from my EIN course from the fall semesters of 1999 and 2000, correspond to the survey questions as indicated below, where the numerical scores for the questions’ categories were:


Table 1: Student Evaluations of Student Outcome Goals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questions</th>
<th>Non-Workshop Faculty</th>
<th>Workshop Faculty</th>
<th>My EIN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(1) This course increased my ability to identify the moral dimensions of important problems or issues.</td>
<td>5.08</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>4.95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(2) This course increased my ability to analyze and engage in debates or discussions about important moral problems or issues.</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>4.99</td>
<td>5.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
There was also a category on the questionnaire for “don’t or doesn’t apply”. In relation to the professors with graduate specialties in ethics, these evaluations indicate that the workshop participants (myself included) tended to do a comparable job in effectively achieving the major curricular goals for the EIN course!

![Table 1: Student Evaluations of Student Outcome Goals](image-url)
Some have noted that economists might find it relatively difficult to achieve many of these curricular objectives because we seem to cover topics that tend to excite less of a normative response from students. For instance, an increase in interest rates or the minimum wage might engage students less than discussions about capital punishment or abortion. However, I have found that students often get quite animated about economic topics because, in part, of the political nature of such issues.

I have also used other student course evaluations to assess my EIN classes. Not surprisingly, I have discovered that students tended to assess the class more positively, and both performed better and participated more, when I offered the course without credit towards the economic major. When credit as an elective towards the economics major was given beginning in 1998, many of those who registered may have primarily done so for that reason. Only those truly interested in the subject matter may have enrolled in the course when it did not count towards the major. Also, as expected, a class size closer to ten students tended to succeed more than those of approximately twenty.

CONCLUSION

With the assistance of a rigorous faculty development program, even economists can achieve student outcomes similar to those of highly trained ethicists. And some economists might find that the returns to the requisite human capital investment outweigh the costs involved. Based on St. Olaf College’s experience, faculty workshops should include pedagogical discussions, interactions with specialists, and ongoing conversations among those teaching ethics courses. They should also have fewer than twelve participants in each workshop cohort, which should read and discuss both classical and modern ethics. Class size, evaluation methods, and factors such as whether the course counts toward the major may also affect student outcomes. Such courses can help fill the curricular void left by overspecialization, in economics and elsewhere.

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NOTES


We finished the reading on philosophical ethics with Post Modernism, using writings by Jurgen Habermas, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Gertrude Himmelfarb, and Richard Rorty. For the classics in Christian ethics, we utilized works by Calvin, Luther, Augustine, Aquinas, Jonathan Edwards, and Pope Leo XIII, as well as the Bible. We supplemented this list with works by Reinhold Niebuhr, Joseph Allen, Peter Berger, John Paul II, and the U.S. Catholic Bishops, along with one by Waldo Beach and H. Richard Niebuhr. We also incorporated the writings of several specialists in ethics from the St. Olaf faculty, who also led workshop discussions: Ed Langerak, Doug Schuurman, and Ed Santurri.

Finally, we read and discussed pedagogical writings pertaining to teaching ethics by Marge Midgley, Daniel Callahan, William Perry, and Barry Schwartz, along with one by Robert Ashmore and William Starr.

2 My paper “On the Role of the Christian in the Economic Kingdom” compared and contrasted the views of Calvin, Luther, Tolstoy, John Howard Yoder, Nicholas Waterstorff, Joseph Allen, and Michael Novak on this topic.

3 I lead the discussion on Marx.

4 None in the latter group were from the religion department that semester.

5 Interestingly, the overall numerical average of the combined responses were virtually identical between my two EIN sections, as were the number of respondents; 19 out of 20 for each section, creating a sample size of 38 in the last column in Table 1.

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well.

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