

A DONOR'S PERSPECTIVE

Michael S. Rapaport
Union Alumnus

This issue of *Teaching Ethics* includes articles and features by faculty from Union College who participate in the Rapaport Ethics Across the Curriculum Initiative. I am writing this introductory article at the request of initiative's chair who asked me to explain the origin of my program and my motives for supporting it.

Union is my *alma mater*. I graduated as a liberal arts major, class of '59, when Union was still an all male college (it became co-ed in 1971). Union still remains a small, private, liberal arts and engineering college. It was founded in 1795 on the northern frontier of the then new United States, at a time when warfare had been almost continuous from 1690 through 1814. After graduating Union I attended Columbia University and for almost four decades practiced law, initially in litigation and then in business planning, real estate and trusts and estates law.

As a practicing lawyer, I have seen a variety of irregular behavior. However, nothing in my life experience and practice of the law prepared me for the corporate catastrophes that began in 2001 with the Enron and Arthur Anderson scandals that spread through manufacturing and banking, and for which the end is not yet in sight. As these events were unfolding, Professor Hal Fried of Union's Economics Department asked me to co-sponsor the North American Productivity Workshop (NAPW) to be held at Union in 2002. I was hesitant, but I eventually agreed to help fund the workshop, provided that a keynote speaker on the *ethics* of productivity was included in the program. Once the organizers got past their skepticism over "what does ethics have to do with productivity," we were on our way. The conference included several dynamic IBM presentations and a special presentation on the highest level of productivity in the 20th Century. It turns out that Nazi Germany's production of guns, tanks, and airplanes reached its peak in 1944-5! Of course, this productivity was achieved by means of the inhumane duress inflicted on workers. The international academic audience was startled and, to

their credit, the ethics of this situation was a hot topic at the dinner that followed.

As the Enron scandal continued to unfold, I witnessed the spectacle of college graduates being convicted and jailed. A few were thieves in the classic sense. For the most part, however, the defendants were shocked to find themselves indicted and seemed not to comprehend the nature or gravity of their actions. They never considered that their actions might be condemned or that they might face sanctions. I was intrigued by the irony that those considered the best and the brightest, those who had enjoyed every advantage that college education offers, had become felons who did not have a clue that they had done anything wrong.

Motivated by the business audience's reaction to the NAPW address on Nazi productivity and by well-educated corporate felons' astonishment at finding themselves condemned, I decided to create a program that helps young people to identify ethical issues. With the help and guidance of Professor Fried, a pilot program was developed in Union College's Economics Department. In addition to funding the initiative, my major contribution was to insist that it focus on recognition of ethical issues. I am not sure ethics can be learned or taught, but recognition that there is an issue is the prerequisite to making an ethical decision. If people do not recognize that there is an ethical issue they will not be able to address it; and the opportunity to come to an ethically responsible decision is lost.

The pilot project began slowly with junior faculty. At the end of the second year we had a stewardship meeting. To my amazement about a dozen Economics faculty members, including almost all of the senior professors, discussed their great excitement and interest in integrating a unit on ethics into their respective courses. A senior professor declared with great enthusiasm that he had not had as much fun teaching his course in years.

Buoyed by the success of the Economics pilot, I sought a way to extend it across Union College's curriculum. For almost three years I have been working with Professor Bob Baker and Professor Anastasia Pease to create a program where few saw the need for one—at least not initially. Their program of in-course training, speakers and the methods they chose to develop the program are set forth in this issue of *Teaching Ethics*. The success of their ethics across the curriculum initiative involved more than careful planning and hard work; it involved a forward looking and imaginative faculty with a deep interest in their students and a strong relationship with the college administration.

Together the faculty and the Union College's new president, Stephen Ainlay, sent to the Board of Trustees a revised mission statement that included, for the first time in Union College's history, a commitment to "develop ... ethical contributors to ... our society."

I would not be honest in sharing my thoughts with you, the educators of our future leaders, if I did not mention the personal satisfaction that I receive from encouraging the development of students capable of recognizing ethical issues. I also should mention another motive. Union College is often characterized as "the best kept secret in higher education." Those who cite this quotation with pride often fail to perceive the criticism inherent in this statement. It is my hope that Union will receive the credit and recognition that it deserves for developing a successful ethics across the curriculum program. When I first came up with the idea of sensitizing students to recognize ethical issues in 2002, neither I, nor anyone I was working with at Union, had any idea of how important educating to develop sensitivity to ethical issues would become. At this moment, as our country is in crisis, in part because of ethical lapses, we now know that the recognition of ethical issues is more vital than ever if the United States and the world are to continue to grow, to prosper, and to improve living conditions for all humanity.

