



# Contours of Character: Exploring Virtues and Vocations through Internships and Storytelling

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This is an unpublished conference paper for the 11<sup>th</sup> Annual Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues conference at Oriel College, Oxford University, Thursday 5<sup>th</sup> – Saturday 7<sup>th</sup> January 2023.

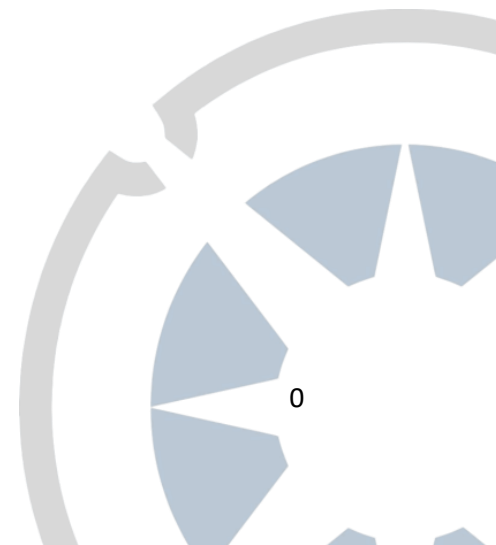
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## **Contours of Character: Exploring Virtues and Vocations through Internships and Storytelling**

### **Abstract**

The Ethics and the Professions Programs at the University of Portland (USA) tap into the life experiences of individuals and organizations within the local community to create pathways for pre-professional students to have *previews of coming attractions* for some of the moral moments that occur in the professional world of work. These include an innovative summer internship experience and a dynamic storytelling protocol for discussing ethical decision-making. The practical engagements generate opportunities for pre-professionals and professionals alike to grow in personal character and vocational understanding as they reflect on the working world and the pursuit of a coherent morality.

### **Foundation and Beginnings**

The University of Portland (UP) is a Catholic university in Portland, Oregon, guided by the Congregation of Holy Cross. At UP, we center the teaching, “We shall always place education side by side with instruction; the mind will not be cultivated at the expense of the heart. While we prepare useful citizens for society, we shall likewise do our utmost to prepare citizens for heaven” (Blessed Basil Moreau, CSC; Founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross). The University has an undergraduate enrollment of approximately 3500 students, pursuing courses of study within the schools of business, education, engineering, nursing, and College of Arts and Sciences. In September 2022, *U.S. News & World Report* ranked UP as the #1 university in the “Regional Universities – West” classification for 2022-23. In February 2021, UP was ranked #1 in the nation as top producer of Fulbright U.S. students among master’s level institutions.

Established at UP in 2014, the Dundon-Berchtold Institute for Moral Formation & Applied Ethics (DBI) offers classes, public events, student-faculty research support, and interactive experiences for

students, faculty, staff, graduates, and the local community to ensure that the University meets its “aspirations both to form the moral character of its students and to conduct sustained ethical reflection in applied aspects of business, science, engineering, education, health care, and the arts” (Fr. Mark L. Poorman, CSC; 20<sup>th</sup> President of the University). As parts of the University’s core curriculum, all undergraduate students at UP take two classes taught by the Department of Philosophy, PHL 150: *Engaging Philosophy* and PHL 220: *Engaging Ethics*.

### **Ethics and the Professions Internship Program**

From 2013-2018, UP partnered with the M. J. Murdock Charitable Trust and was the recipient of a US\$92,400 capacity-building grant through the Trust’s *Vision and Call Internship Program*. This was the spark to create UP’s Faith-Based Leadership program and allowed 36 students to participate in summer internships at non-profit, faith-based organizations throughout Portland, Oregon, and Vancouver, Washington.

The Ethics and the Professions Internship (EPI) program is the legacy program of this completed Faith-Based Leadership program initiative and is now sustainably scaled and funded as a signature program of DBI. Students who participate in EPI are paid through funds from DBI and not paid by their host organization.

The earlier Faith-Based Leadership program limited the organizations that could host interns to non-profit, faith-based organizations within the community. As an intentional expansion and enhancement, EPI has pursued additional placement sites for interns to work in support of organizations that work in the public and for-profit sector, as well as non-profit organizations whose missions are not necessarily faith-based. Participating partner organizations have included Catholic Charities of Oregon, *Portland Monthly* magazine, WorldOregon, Make-A-Wish Oregon, and Hour Children of Long Island, NY.

As with many, other summer internship opportunities, EPI interns’ commitments and expectations include:

- Participation in pre-internship preparation conversations and programs;
- Dedication of 29 hours per week, for an 8-weeks work internship during June and July;
- Payment for work as an intern, at an hourly rate of pay above legal minimum levels;
- Participation in post-internship reflection and evaluation exercises.

However, what differentiates EPI from traditional summer internship experiences are EPI's program architecture and the explicit goals of the program that contain traditional internship commitments and expand to include additional elements.

The overarching goal of the EPI program is to provide undergraduate UP students with meaningful work experiences in addition to opportunities to explore the ethical fabric and fibers of different professional spaces and vocational paths.

To achieve these ends, the interns' 29 hours committed to the EPI program each week are segmented:

- 20 hours per week of dedicated internship work on projects for the host organization;
- One hour per week of protected time to have an "Ethical 1:1 Conversation" with a member of the host organization;
- One hour per week for debriefing, reflection, and accompaniment with the EPI program director and staff;
- One hour per week for cohort conversations and connection with the other EPI interns and EPI program director;
- The balance of time (up to the 29 hours weekly maximum) to work on an "EthicsExploration" project of personal interest, vocational connection, or individual design.

While the majority of each week's 29 hours are dedicated to the actual work of the internship placement, the one-hour "Ethical 1:1 Conversations" each week are at the center of the EPI experience. Each intern asks a different colleague each week to reserve a one-hour block of time for a

personal conversation about professional decision making, personal values, and some of the moral moments that happen within the working world. To facilitate these potentially vulnerable discussions and to suggest starting points, the DBI staff has generated a series of 30+ conversation starters that include themes of purpose, duty, decision-making, conduct, and relationships (See Appendix). Interns and conversation partners are free to begin anywhere they like and continue along whichever paths are comfortable and desired. Over the course of the eight-weeks of the internship experience, each intern will end up having eight or more of these “Ethical 1:1 Conversations.”

In post-internship evaluations and reflections, interns have uniformly shared how privileged they have felt to have had these series of highly personal and revealing conversations with real co-workers about the work that they were doing and how they approach their commitments. Similarly, during post-internship evaluations, partners at the organizations who host the EPI interns have shared how valuable it was for their work teams to engage in the “Ethical 1:1 Conversations” with the interns who were new to their organizations.

Two hours of each intern’s week are dedicated to accompaniment. These take the forms of weekly conversations for one hour with the EPI director and staff, and as a gathering of the cohort of all EPI interns who are participating in the summer program. Weekly themes and shorter readings help to give a curricular arc and trajectory to the eight-weeks of these personal check-ins and broader cohort conversations. The progression of these themes includes Getting Established, Organization Culture, Ethical Leadership, Ethical Decision-Making, Feedback: Getting & Giving, Colleagueship and Teamwork, Organizational and Personal Mission & Values, Reflection and Next Steps. To highlight and add personal texture to specific themes, guest speakers from the community have been included in cohort conversations to share their unique stories with the interns.

The EPI program is not designed to place students into internship positions that directly mirror or follow from their academic major and courses of study at UP. As examples, students studying accountancy are not placed into internships with accounting firms through the EPI program; students

studying nursing are not promised placements with organizations that are within the health care sector. Rather, interested students submit applications to participate in the EPI program; they do not apply for specific internship placements with specific organizations. Through the application process and interviews, the EPI program director and DBI staff determine best fits for potential interns and host organizational needs.

Past intern-and-organization pairings have included a student studying nursing placed with the mission integration office at Catholic Charities of Oregon, a student studying finance placed with the development office at Make-A-Wish Oregon, and a student studying biology and Spanish writing copy with the *Portland Monthly* magazine. The EPI program director and staff seek to match interns' unique backgrounds and skills with the requirements and needs of host organizations' internship position descriptions.

As interns may not necessarily be placed into internship positions that correspond with their vocational interests and academic pursuits, a flexible window of time is built into the weekly commitment of 29 hours to EPI. The intent of this non-prescribed window of time is to create space for the intern to explore the ethical contours and texture of an area, a topic, an emerging question, or a vocational landscape that is of personal interest. This is called their "EthicsExploration" (EthEx) project and is designed as a space to promote curiosity and cultivate individual interests. At the end of the summer, interns share their EthEx projects with the whole cohort.

As examples, interns in past summers have used the time for their EthEx projects to pursue questions connected to the criminalization of poverty, personal mission statements, motherhood and working moms, professional ethics in journalism, and organizational commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

In April 2022, the *Portland Business Journal* included an article featuring the Ethics and the Professions Internship program. Select reflections from this article include:

Lauren Carlos (EPI intern 2020): Ever since the EPI internship, the questions we discussed as a cohort and in the one-on-one conversations still resound in my mind and in my day-to-day at work. I'm always thinking, "How are this organization's values aligning with my own?"

Fiona McCann (editor-in-chief of *Portland Monthly* magazine; host for EPI interns 2020, 2021): Having EPI students on board was a valuable reminder of the ethical responsibility that comes with the power of our platform, and it energized our thought processes around it. We're particularly aware of the need to constantly evaluate our decisions around the voices we amplify, the stories we tell, and who gets to tell them. I strongly believe that ethics are at the core of what we do as a media organization and should be a constant element of consideration and conversation.

Derrick Olsen (president, WorldOregon; host for EPI interns 2020, 2021, 2022): We know that they will help us to excel and challenge us to concisely describe the decision-making behind our ethical and mission-driven work. The EPI interns' thoughtful questions spark further discussions across departments, and the conversations are an avenue for staff to reflect upon their own work.

The first year of EPI coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic in the summer of 2020. This dynamic internship experience has successfully been hosted as a virtual experience, as a hybrid virtual/in-person work experience, and as a predominantly in-person experience. Through the first three years of EPI, the sizes of cohorts have been 6, 6, and 4 interns. Given the human and financial resources dedicated to executing EPI, the target size for future cohorts is 6-8 interns per year.

### **Ethics in the Community Storytelling Experience**

The Ethics in the Community Storytelling experience is a refined expansion of the interactive Academy Character Enrichment Seminar (ACES) witnessed by DBI staff on an invited visit in 2014 to the United States Air Force Academy in Colorado Springs, Colorado. At UP, this initiative is a community dialogue bringing together experienced professionals and eager pre-professional,

undergraduate students for focused conversations about character and ethical decision-making in the workplace.

The Ethics in the Community Storytelling (ECS) experience has proven to be an excellent tool to bring to life some of the content and theory from undergraduate students' required course in ethics, as well as a valuable pathway to engage the local community as storytellers and collaborators in our educational endeavor.

Well in advance of the ECS experience, members of the community are recruited to serve as storytellers. These storytellers are asked to think through their life experiences and asked to be prepared to share with a small group of undergraduate students an ethical dilemma that the storyteller personally experienced. The storyteller is asked to think through and recall the details, circumstances, persons, and other elements that constituted and were connected to the dilemma.

For the ECS experience itself, a storyteller is seated at a table with 5-6 students, and a specific storytelling protocol guides the telling of the stories.

- For 10 minutes, the featured storyteller shares the texture, circumstances, elements, and details of the ethical dilemma that was personally experienced. However, the storyteller only tells the story up to the moment when the storyteller arrived at the decision point and needed to make a choice regarding how to act/not act.
- For five minutes, the students are invited to engage in questions and answers with the storyteller to learn additional information and to clarify details. The task for the students at the table is not to try to “solve the ethical dilemma” presented by the storyteller and not to name the “right course of action.” Rather, the goal is for students to suggest and articulate questions that they think would be important to ask in such a situation.



- For five minutes, the storyteller is asked to share with the students how the storyteller ultimately did walk through the ethical dilemma, including any outcomes, consequences, and wisdom that guided or was learned through the experience.

Reflecting the diversity and authenticity of human choice, some stories exemplify moral courage while others involve character challenges and resulting consequences. So, what types of ethical dilemmas do these storytellers share with undergraduate students? Storytellers for the ECS have shared ethical dilemmas concerning the submission of expense reports, professional codes of conduct, offering to watch a pet for a work colleague who is traveling, the politics of homeowners' associations, uses of limited resources in health care settings, military personal decisions, demanding clients for a consultancy firm, dilemmas with superiors and subordinates at work, forensic accounting, and improper professional conduct.

Students who have participated in an ECS event report that this interactive experience is interesting and memorable for them, as the situations are very real ("a case study come to life") while the stakes are very low for them. Similarly, storytellers have shared that the time they spent preparing to share their stories was a gift, as it required them to reflect upon their own ethical principles and values (past and present), and to try to understand better why they chose to act/not act in the ways that they did.

Early experiences of the ECS nights included eight storytellers seated at eight different tables with 5-6 students per table. After sharing their story and engaging in the 20 minutes storytelling protocol with the students at their table, the storytellers would rotate to a new table and share their same story again with a new table of students. This was repeated, so that storytellers would share their same ethical dilemmas with three different tables of students.

Participating students shared the feedback that they really enjoyed hearing the three dilemmas and thinking through the important ethical questions that they would want to be sure to ask if presented with a similar situation. However, the participating storytellers shared that they enjoyed the

interactions with the students, but they were disappointed that they were not able to hear each other's stories, each other's thinking, and each other's resolutions. They wanted more of that!

During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECS experiences were successfully hosted over Zoom that featured three storytellers and 12-18 students. The storytellers each took turns as the featured speaker for 20 minutes at a time, following the established storytelling protocol. While the experience lacked the intimacy of being seated at the same table with each other and students, being on the same screen for Zoom did provide the added benefit of allowing the storytellers to hear each other's dilemmas and stories.

Additionally, the ECS experiences hosted over Zoom during the pandemic allowed for the inclusion of speakers and students who were geographically separated and/or unable to gather at the same location. Harnessing these positive experiences from distance learning, the Dundon-Berchtold Institute supported UP's Pamplin School of Business and hosted a *Business and Ethics Storytelling* experience over Zoom to promote continuing education for alumni/ae and members of the greater Portland community. The same storytelling protocol was used to engage a different audience for different purposes.

Storytellers from diverse occupations and with varied positional leadership enrich the breadth and depth of the ethical dilemmas shared. As importantly, storytellers who are earlier in their careers are recruited, in addition to more seasoned and experienced working professionals. A student who helped to plan one of the first ECS events shared, "I would like to hear a story of challenges from a person who is one or two promotions ahead of where I will likely start in an organization, rather than a dilemma from an older executive director or CEO. I might or might not ever be an executive director, but I sure will hope to be promoted."

At the ECS experiences, it is stressed to participating students that their task is not to try to solve the dilemmas that they hear, but rather to recall the language, theories, and practices from their ethics

course at UP to help them generate questions that would be important to ask in such a situation. As some athletes develop and refine muscle memory over time, we want to encourage our students to dedicate time and effort to develop *moral* muscle memory to think and act in just and prudent ways when they encounter ethical dilemmas in their own lives.

## **Conclusion**

Anchored in the virtues of curiosity and compassion, the Dundon-Berchtold Institute creates and facilitates moments of encounter, accompaniment, and dialogue for the University of Portland and civic communities. Through experiences and conversations, we explore the values that drive the decisions we make and the habits we practice that form and inform who we are and who we are becoming.

Addressing a gap in pre-professional and professional education, the Ethics and the Professions Programs build upon the foundations of the University's required course in ethics and offer intentional opportunities for professionals and students alike to recognize the role of character in their pursuit of a vocation and a coherent morality.

## **APPENDIX**

### **Ethics and the Professions Internship Program (Ethical 1:1 Conversations)**

#### **Goals and Benefits**

The overarching goal of the EPI program is to provide undergraduate UP students with meaningful work experiences in addition to opportunities to explore the ethical fabric and fibers of different professional spaces and vocational paths. Specifically with these weekly ethical 1:1 conversations,

interns have the chance to engage in conversations with diverse professionals about the ethical dimensions of work, different industries, and vocation. These conversations not only enhance interns' immediate experience and understanding of the work and industry of the host organization, but they prompt considerations that can inform interns' futures as professionals themselves, citizens, and members of families and communities. Additionally, through these ethical 1:1 conversations, different employees at the host organizations have the opportunity to reflect on the ethical-professional dimensions of their working lives and organizational practices (e.g., their roles, organizations, industries, career journeys, and personal life callings).

### **Conversation Starters**

Below is a list of potential framework questions or starting points for these ethical 1:1 conversations, broken into topical categories. When they meet, interns and conversation partners might consider choosing a few of these questions to begin and guide their discussion. However, there is no expectation that interns and conversation partners will address all or even most of these prompts. Rather, these questions are simply available to spark ideas as needed.

#### **PURPOSE**

- What drew you to the work that you are doing?
- What core values or principles guide you in your professional life?
- What do you view as your role in society?
- What is the goal or target of the work of the organization?
- What core values and principles guide the organization?
- What is the role of this organization in the community?

#### **DUTY**

- What does duty look like in the professional world?
- Beyond your job description, what other duties do you feel called to promote?
- What are some of the duties that you have within your work organization?
- How do you prioritize what you view as your duties or responsibilities?

- How would you describe the structure of professional accountability at this organization?

#### DECISION-MAKING

- When making decisions, do you have a formal process that helps to guide your consideration of what to do?
- How do you make decisions when risk or uncertainty are involved?
- What are some of the ethical dilemmas that pop up at work?
- How do you know you have made the right ethical decision?
- Does the organization have habits or protocols for making decisions?
- Who at the organization is responsible for ethical decision making?

#### CONDUCT

- Have you had experiences of conflict between professional codes and personal values?
- Have you ever made an error in judgment that you had to address with your employer? How did you handle it?
- Are there professional codes of conduct that help to frame the work that you perform and that the organization does? Are there any limits or benefits to these codes?
- Where do employees find guidance on how to navigate potential ethical dilemmas at work?
- What should an employee do if experiencing a conflict between the law and one's own personal values or between professional codes and professional judgment?
- What should employees do if they find themselves in a situation—or in a business or personal relationship—that creates a conflict of interest for them at work?

#### RELATIONSHIPS

- How do you prioritize the responsibilities of the multiple relationships in your life?
- How do you personally navigate the impossibility of pleasing everyone?
- Who are some of the groups or populations that are impacted by the work of the organization?
- How are these populations prioritized when the organization makes decisions?
- How would you describe the social or relational culture of your work organization?

#### GENERAL

- How does your work life influence the person you are becoming?
- How do you define failure?
- How do you think your organization defines failure?
- What does integrity look like between the personal and professional worlds?
- How can we make the world different?