

2005-2006 Annual Report: Contemporary Ethical Issues (E) Focus Board
Roger Babcock, Chair

The Board members included Roger Babcock (Chair), David Bess, Tom Bopp, and John Zuern. Dian Dooley joined in the spring semester. Rick Bigus served as GEC liaison. The only member who served on the Board last year was Bopp; all others were new this year which was slightly less than ideal.

The CEI Board reviewed many course proposals and had interesting, important and enjoyable discussions regarding the intent of the E focus and how to clarify proposal requirements so as to improve quality and reduce requests for clarification. The key epiphany for this year was that the E focus requirements are most importantly skill-based rather than content-based. A relatively high percentage of the proposals (both new and renewal) reviewed did not “get” this.

Policies and Hallmarks

The CEI Board discussed the Hallmarks extensively and came to a better understanding of their intent, finally realizing that many of the proposals received did not in fact address the key attribute of the Hallmarks. Many proposals simply addressed the content requirements of the Hallmarks and did not address how students would acquire basic skills to “responsibly deliberate” and then “make ethically determined judgments.” In addition, the ethics content of many courses was not clear in the submitted syllabi which was thought to be unfair to students and unhelpful with respect to assessment and accreditation review. This led to policy review and two reorganizations of the Proposal Form.

There are six E Hallmarks; three of which are basic and prescriptive addressing the course level (300- or 400-level), the minimum percentage of course content (30%), and the minimum number of hours of class time spent in discussion of E (8). The other three Hallmarks address the skills-based nature of the requirements. The Board interpreted the three remaining Hallmarks to mean that E courses must teach students how to analyze and deliberate on ethical issues in order to reach ethically sound decisions. The Hallmarks and Explanatory Notes state that it is not sufficient to simply include content containing ethical issues, it is not sufficient to include discussions of the ethical issues in readings/movies/etc and what they mean in the context of the course/discipline, and it is not sufficient to simply discuss different theoretical ethical standards. Instead, the Board clearly feels that students must be given a “framework,” or “methodology” and an opportunity to practice it (in discussions and other assignments) to assist them in their future needs to recognize ethical dilemmas and then to make ethically sound judgments. Such a framework involves several steps including: 1. Recognizing the ethical nature and issues of a situation or dilemma, 2. Determining what is known and unknown from various perspectives as well as the options for acting, 3. Evaluating alternative actions based upon one or more theoretical ethical standards (utilitarian, fairness, rights, etc.), and 4. Making a decision considering the various perspectives and then testing it by considering/discussing the consequences. The method should be taught and then

practiced and discussed with the goal that it may be incorporated by the students automatically in future situations.

The Board had problems related to the idea that a syllabus is treated by most faculty and students as a type of contract. As such, a syllabus must clearly state the content and expectations of the course, including in this case, the E content. In addition, the Board felt that with regard to campus- and system-wide assessment processes, it would be helpful if E courses were easily identifiable via syllabi. Ideally, all syllabi should state educational objectives and outcomes. During the year, the E Board became increasingly reluctant to recommend approval of courses either without a syllabus or with syllabi that did not explicitly indicate the E designation and also describe the E content and requirements (including the ethical decision making framework).

The Board felt it was apparent (from both new and renewal proposals) that many applicants had not read the explanatory notes which were felt to be very helpful and could improve proposal quality. Also, several of the existing questions for “renewals” were felt to be assessment-based and not useful for the proposal review process. It was felt that assessment can (and is) addressed in the end-of-semester survey. The issue of requiring a syllabus with new proposals was discussed at length. The advantages of requiring syllabi are that the E content can be verified (if it is not indicated in the syllabus, then there might not be any E content), students are properly informed about the E content and the educational goals and expectations regarding E, and outcomes assessment will be facilitated. The disadvantage stated was that proposals are due 6 months prior to the course being offered and such a requirement might discourage some new applicants to such a degree that proposals would decline in number. In the end, the desire for quality trumped the need for quantity. In the future, if quantity issues arise, then the policy of requiring a syllabus for new proposals can be revisited.

In the first proposal application form revision, the Board decided to combine the requirements for new and renewal applications in order to make space to place some of the explanatory notes on the form. The content of the questions was left virtually unchanged. Syllabi were now requested for all applications (new and renewal) for the first time. In order to address the syllabus requirement issue for “new” proposals, a note was added stating that new proposals could be approved without a syllabus if one were submitted to the GEO within 2 weeks after the start of the semester. The revisions did not have the desired effect of refocusing the applicants on the skills-based nature of the Hallmarks. It was found that many proposals were able to technically answer the questions without addressing the skills-based Hallmarks and proposal quality did not change significantly.

In the second proposal application form revision, the Board decided to reorder the Hallmarks and the Explanatory Notes in order to focus applicant attention on the key skill-based issues rather than the content-based requirements. The wording of the Hallmarks was not changed and there were only minor modifications to the wording of the explanatory notes. However, the application questions were significantly modified. The first question addresses the need for a syllabus and does not allow for approval for

“new” proposals without one. In addition, now “the E Focus Hallmarks must be clearly represented in the syllabus” and an example statement is included. The second question combines earlier questions and clarifies what is being requested. Previously, some proposals submitted lists of ethical issues and lists of book titles which satisfied the questions but were only partially useful at best. The new question requests a more thorough description of ethical issues covered (with an example), the specific associated course materials, and the “ethical choices inherent therein.” The new third question requires the applicant to describe the ethical decision making framework that will be taught to the students and references a web URL for an applied ethics center that describes such frameworks and various ethical standards. The question also requests descriptions of assignments and discussions that will be undertaken. The E Board is hopeful that the new application questions will be helpful to applicants preparing proposals for Spring 2007 and that fewer requests for clarification will be required.

Proposal Review Statistics

Proposals	Spring 2006	Summer 2006	Fall 2006
Approved	45	7	29
Denied	1	2	2
Withdrawn	1	1	1
Total	31	10	32

Note: Additional information was requested from approximately 20 applicants.

Other Issues and Goals

No changes were found necessary for the end-of-semester survey. And it was noted that such changes should be very carefully considered and only made for well-defined reasons since surveys are most useful for comparative purposes.

The E Board plans to offer a workshop for new applicants at the beginning of the Fall 2006 semester to help clarify proposal requirements and share examples of successful applications.

The E Board agreed to accept proposals for course designations just as O and W now do.

The E Board proposes that the other Focus Boards and the GEC consider the idea of “conditional” designations to allow one-semester designations for new course proposals without a syllabus. Currently GEC policy allows only for 3-year approvals and no provision for quality checks or designation revocation. As stated above, based upon review of “renewal” applications, the E Board had concerns regarding the quality of some the E content and skill training provided in courses that have been taught for three years. Additional quality control is perceived to be necessary. The E Board plans to continue to monitor and discuss the inherent quality issues and associated application requirements and procedures.

Finally, the E Board established a goal at the beginning of the year to implement an all-electronic proposal submission and review process. This was perceived to be beneficial for at least two reasons including the desirable move toward paperless procedures to save trees, and the convenience of web-based review of application materials as opposed to review of paper copies of materials at the GE office. Most faculty are now accustomed to both submitting research proposals and providing peer review of proposals and journal manuscripts exclusively through on-line systems. The E Board, which has a relatively low application load, offered to be a test case that could identify and solve problems prior to implementation by all Boards. Specific ideas and issues related to implementation were discussed with the GE staff. Due to staff shortages in the GE office this year, this goal was postponed until next year. The E Board remains committed to this goal.