

Helping Students Reflect on Values, Ethics, & Success

A one-page practical guide for faculty & staff

Why this matters: Students are constantly making decisions about academics, relationships, leadership, and careers. How they define success, and how they pursue it, shapes not only their personal outcomes, but their impact on others. Ethical reflection helps students pair ambition with responsibility, intention with broad awareness, and success with the common good.

What Ethical Reflection Really Involves

Ethical behavior is shaped by both reasoning and behavior.

- **Reasoning** helps students think critically about right vs. wrong and about consequences.
- **Behavioral ethics** reminds us that unconscious biases, social pressure, incentives, and situational factors can quietly influence decisions, even for people with good intentions.

Helping students slow down and reflect builds habits that counter these pressures.

Three Simple Questions to Ask Students (Anytime)

These questions can be used in class, advising, leadership programs, or career conversations:

1. **Character:** What kind of person should I be? (e.g., compassionate, fair, honest, respectful, responsible)
2. **Code:** What if everyone did this? Would it respect others' rights and not just use others?
3. **Consequences:** What will produce the most benefit and least harm over time for all impacted?

These questions provide a shared ethical language without requiring that everyone agrees.

Quick Ways to Integrate Ethics

- *In everyday conversations:* "Who might be affected by this decision?"; "What unintended outcomes might occur?"
- *Before group projects or leadership roles:* Add a 2-minute pause: "How could this impact people who aren't in the room?"
- *In assignments or reflections:* Ask students to include a short paragraph on ethical impact.
- *In career conversations:* "If this advances your career, what trade-offs could impact others?"

Common Behavioral Ethics Traps to Name for Students

Making these visible helps students recognize them:

- Self-serving bias: Justifying actions that benefit us personally
- Social pressure: Conforming to avoid conflict or stand out
- Time pressure: Making fast decisions without reflection
- Rationalization & Normalization: "Everyone does it, so it must be okay"

Encourage students to pause when they feel rushed, pressured, or incentivized.

What We're Ultimately Helping Students Do

- Think beyond "Is this successful for me?"
- Ask "What impact does this have on others and the broader community?"
- Develop habits of reflection they can carry into leadership, careers, and civic life

Ethical reflection isn't about telling students what to think—it's about equipping them to reason well, recognize pressures, and pursue success we can all be proud of.

Want more tools or resources? Reach out to discuss workshops, discussion prompts, or practical ethics resources (e.g., free videos) you can use with students. Contact Nick Lennon at nlennon@gmu.edu.