Mercer’s Moral Climate, Part II
Is Mercer at War with Wisdom

Background:

Students in Paul Lewis’ Honors Service Learning course (HON 321) in the spring of 2012 conducted research intended to follow up on research on Mercer’s moral climate conducted during the spring of 2010 (and summarized in the round table discussions posted on this site). This time, the research was inspired by the discussion of the “war on wisdom” in one of the class texts, *Practical Wisdom: The Right Way to Do the Right Thing*, by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe (New York: Riverhead Books, 2010).

Rather than interviewing many people, we decided, in consultation with Tanya Sharon of the Department of Psychology, to engage in exploratory, qualitative research about (1) the extent we value the kind of situational flexibility that is a mark of practical wisdom/good judgment and (2) the extent that the institution fosters such situational flexibility/good judgment.

Class members conducted 30-45 minute interviews with persons whom we predicted would be thoughtful and careful in their answers. The interviews were recorded (with permission) and transcribed. We interviewed the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts (hereafter abbreviated CLA) and the Dean of Students. We also interviewed six faculty members (two each at the ranks of assistant, associate, and full). Three professors represented the humanities, two were in social science and one was in natural science. We interviewed ten students, all from CLA. By gender, six were male and four female. By class year, two were freshmen, four sophomores, two juniors, and one was a senior.

Interview guides were prepared as follows:

**INTERVIEW GUIDE: STUDENTS**

**Opening**

Our Honors Service Learning Course wants to explore how well Mercer fosters practical wisdom among members of the student body, faculty, and administration. By practical wisdom we mean the ability to make good or sound judgments in complex situations where there is no obvious right or wrong answer. We want to investigate how institutional policies and practices at Mercer can help or prevent people from making these kinds of judgments that are crucial to a life well-lived.

Our research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. We hope to gather information that will eventually be used to strengthen Mercer as a distinctive institution of higher education. To that end, we would like to interview you—and with your permission record the interview—about your experiences here and how they have hindered or helped you exercise sound judgment.
We are particularly interested in the extent to which professors encourage you to use your own judgment in the classroom and, if you are involved with a student organization with administrative authority, we would like to learn how much leeway you have in using personal judgment.

**Demographic Information**
1. Number of years at Mercer
2. Gender
3. Major/minor? (any special tracks such as Honors/GBK/Service Scholar?)
4. Extracurricular activities?
5. Educational background before Mercer? (private vs public HS, home school, any other colleges?)

**Questions**
1. What do you see as the place of rules or regulations in society (e.g., necessary evil, unnecessary evil, bulwark against chaos, etc.)? Why?

2. Accelerated Reader, which rewards students for reading is an example of how we sometimes use incentives to promote desirable behaviors. What do you think about incentives (e.g., necessary evil, unnecessary evil, bulwark against chaos, etc.) Why?

3. Please think of a specific experience at Mercer in which you were asked to make an important or significant judgment. Describe the situation (inside and/or outside the classroom), how you made the decision, the outcome, and any “lessons/insights” gleaned from the experience.

4. Do professors provide you with opportunities within the classroom to exercise sound judgment? This could include how they structure assignments, set up attendance policies, the testing procedures, whether they offer encouragement to attend SI or tutoring, or other classroom incentives, procedures and regulations. **Prompt: how well do these policies, etc. work in motivating you to do the right thing?**

5. Do your extracurricular activities provide you opportunity to exercise sound judgment? How so? Can you give a specific example?

6. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given time to reflect on and assess their motives for study. Where and how have you had opportunity to engage in this kind of reflection? Would you want more such opportunities? Why?

7. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given time and space to reflect on how education contributes to their goals. Where and how have you had opportunity to engage in this kind of reflection? Would you want more such opportunities? Why?
8. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given opportunity to synthesize and integrate insights from all dimensions of their college experiences (both curricular and extra-curricular). Where and how have you had opportunity to engage in this kind of reflection? Would you want more such opportunities? Why?

9. We recognize that no institution is perfect. However, on the whole, how good a job would you say Mercer does in helping people become more discerning persons who can make good, sound judgments in ambiguous situations? In short, does Mercer foster or hinder the development of practical wisdom/sound judgment?
   - Explain (probe for specifics).
   - What do we do well?
   - What do we need to improve?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add or that we should know?

Thank you so very much for your time, and for sharing your views and experiences.

**INTERVIEW GUIDE: FACULTY**

**Opening**

Our Honors Service Learning Course wants to explore how well Mercer fosters practical wisdom among members of the student body, faculty, and administration. By practical wisdom we mean the ability to make good or sound judgments in complex situations where there is no obvious right or wrong answer. We want to investigate how institutional policies and practices at Mercer can help or prevent people from making these kinds of judgments that are crucial to a life well-lived.

Our research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. We hope to gather information that will eventually be used to strengthen Mercer as a distinctive institution of higher education. To that end, we would like to interview you—and with your permission record the interview—about your experiences here and how they have hindered or helped you exercise sound judgment.

We are particularly interested in the extent to which you try to foster sound judgment in the classroom and how well you are allowed to exercise sound judgment in your role as a professor.

**Demographic Information:**
1. Rank
2. Gender
3. Dept, classes taught
4. Length of service, prior experience, [awards]

**Questions:**
1. What do you see as the place of rules or regulations in society (e.g., necessary evil, unnecessary evil, bulwark against chaos, etc.)? Why?
2. Accelerated Reader, which rewards students for reading is an example of how we sometimes use incentives to promote desirable behaviors. What do you think about incentives (e.g., necessary evil, unnecessary evil, bulwark against chaos, etc.)? Why?

3. Think of a specific experience at Mercer in which you, as a professor, were asked to make an important or significant judgment, such as in applying a policy to a specific student’s situation. Describe the situation.
   - How much latitude did you have in making that decision?
   - Is this amount of latitude normal or unusual in your experience at Mercer?
   - Was the policy helpful? Explain.
   - Did incentives play any role in this case? If yes, were they helpful? Explain.

4. What opportunities exist within your classroom for students to exercise sound judgment? This could be in relation to assignments, attendance policies, testing procedures, encouragement to attend SI or tutoring, or other classroom procedures and regulations. Do students seem to grasp and use these opportunities? Explain.

5. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given time to reflect on and assess their motives for study. Do you try to provide this kind of opportunity in the classroom? If yes, how? If no, why not?

6. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given time and space to reflect on how education contributes to their goals. Do you try to provide this kind of opportunity in the classroom? If yes, how? If no, why not?

7. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given opportunity to synthesize and integrate insights from all dimensions of their college experiences (both curricular and extra-curricular). Do you try to provide this kind of opportunity in the classroom? If yes, how? If no, why not?

8. Do you see yourself exercising sound judgment in how you design courses or adapt to the needs of a class as the semester goes on? Explain. Give examples.

9. We recognize that no institution is perfect. However, on the whole, how good a job would you say Mercer does in helping people become more discerning persons who can make good, sound judgments in ambiguous situations? In short, does Mercer foster or hinder the development of practical wisdom/sound judgment?
   - Explain (probe for specifics).
   - What do we do well?
   - What do we need to improve?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add or that we should know?

Thank you so very much for your time, and for sharing your views and experiences.
INTERVIEW GUIDE: ADMINISTRATION

Opening

Our Honors Service Learning Course wants to explore how well Mercer fosters practical wisdom among members of the student body, faculty, and administration. By practical wisdom we mean the ability to make good or sound judgments in complex situations where there is no obvious right or wrong answer. We want to investigate how institutional policies and practices at Mercer can help or prevent people from making these kinds of judgments that are crucial to a life well-lived.

Our research is qualitative and exploratory in nature. We hope to gather information that will eventually be used to strengthen Mercer as a distinctive institution of higher education. To that end, we would like to interview you—and with your permission record the interview—about your experiences here and how they have hindered or helped you exercise sound judgment.

We are particularly interested in the extent to which you try to foster sound judgment among faculty and how well you are allowed to exercise sound judgment in your role as dean.

Demographic Information
1. Length of service
2. Gender
3. Prior administrative experience
4. Academic experience (including area of specialization)

Questions
1. What do you see as the place of rules or regulations in society (e.g., necessary evil, unnecessary evil, bulwark against chaos, etc.)? Why?

2. Accelerated Reader, which rewards students for reading is an example of how we sometimes use incentives to promote desirable behaviors. What do you think about incentives (e.g., necessary evil, unnecessary evil, bulwark against chaos, etc.)? Why?

3. Think of a specific experience at Mercer in which you, as a dean, were asked to make an important or significant judgment that would affect a professor, student, or staff. Describe the situation.
   • How much latitude did you have in making that decision?
   • Is this amount of latitude normal or unusual in your experience at Mercer?
   • Was the policy helpful? Explain.
   • Did incentives play any role in this case? If yes, were they helpful? Explain.

4. What opportunities exist within your school for professors to exercise sound judgment? This could be in relation to classroom, committee work, etc. Do professors seem to grasp and use these opportunities? Explain.
5. Do you see yourself promoting sound judgment in how you design and/or implement policies? What role, if any, do rules or incentives play in how you design policies? Do rules and incentives have the desired effect? Explain/give examples.

6. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given time to reflect on and assess their motives for study. How good a job do you think your school does of offering such opportunities? Explain.

7. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given time and space to reflect on how education contributes to their goals. How good a job do you think your school does of offering such opportunities? Explain.

8. Research suggests that colleges foster wisdom among students when they are given opportunity to synthesize and integrate insights from all dimensions of their college experiences (both curricular and extra-curricular). How good a job do you think your school does of offering such opportunities? Explain.

9. We recognize that no institution is perfect. However, on the whole, how good a job would you say Mercer does in helping people become more discerning persons who can make good, sound judgments in ambiguous situations? In short, does Mercer foster or hinder the development of practical wisdom/sound judgment?
   - Explain (probe for specifics).
   - What do we do well?
   - What do we need to improve?

10. Is there anything else you would like to add or that we should know?

Thank you so very much for your time, and for sharing your views and experiences.

INITIA FINDINGS: Mercer is not at war with wisdom

Reasons:
1. Faculty, students, and administrators all largely agree that rules are important but limited, although one administrator suggested that in some ways (e.g., in structuring and grading assignments) students seem to want more structure so that they don’t have to make so many judgments.

2. Students are more positive about incentives than faculty.

3. Faculty feel free to use good judgment in designing syllabi, conducting courses.

4. Faculty largely see themselves as trying to design classes in such a way as to help students develop good judgment.

5. Administration tries to create space for faculty to exercise judgment, not just in classroom but in other realms (e.g. committee work).
6. Students and faculty largely agree that time for reflection depends on the size of the class, the nature of the class and is sometimes is confined to office hours. Students specifically named UNV, FYS, and Great Books or other discussion courses as most helpful.

7. Students, faculty, and administration all think that Mercer is doing a pretty good job at fostering good judgment:
   - All agree that there are lots of opportunities through extracurricular activities, service-learning, engaged learning, etc.
   - Students seemed especially aware that it is their responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities.
   - Students gave mixed reports on the value of classroom policies, especially attendance policies.

8. Very few people had relevant concrete suggestions for what Mercer could do better to promote good judgment.

For Further Research:

1. We need to engage a larger and more representative sample size.

2. We need to compare experiences across colleges (e.g., how does the culture of the business school compare to CLA?)

3. We need to explore dynamics between deans and upper administration.

4. We need to probe more deeply into possible tensions, e.g.,
   - Are rules/policies interpreted and applied equitably?
   - Does the exercise of good judgment lead to the appearance of unfairness?
   - What kind of reflection is most helpful/useful?

5. Additional questions:
   - What can/should we do to encourage students who are slackers to take advantage of opportunities?
   - What can/should we do to help students learn to do the right things for the right reasons, not simply incentives? What are developmentally appropriate expectations for undergraduates?