

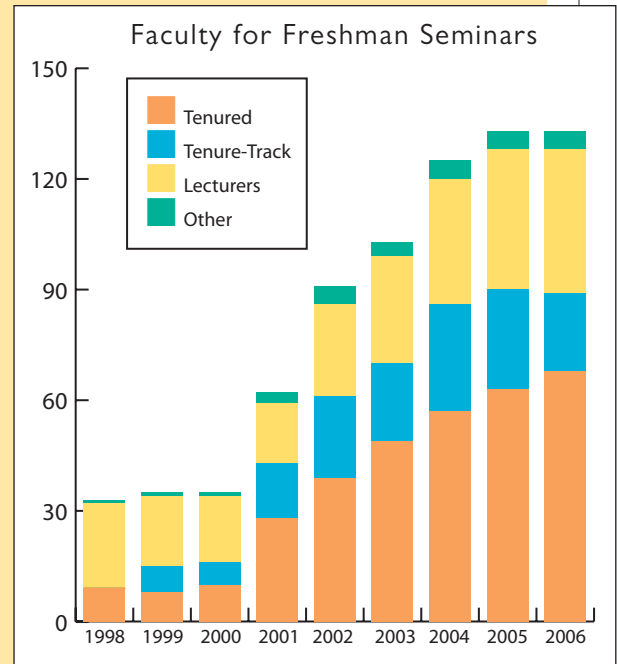
government, business, and other professions prompt demands for more and better moral education.” Limiting ethics considerations to a simple code of behavior for one’s particular profession, it says, reinforces “parochial and technical conceptions of professional life,” and fails to recognize that professionals must weigh ethical considerations every day as new situations arise. The center supports programs that exercise professionals’ ethical muscles, that train them to navigate situations where it isn’t clear how the Hippocratic Oath or a lawyers’ code of conduct might apply, or where a professional code and a more general moral sensibility seem to point in opposite directions. The center also urges broadening the definition of ethical behavior beyond decisions made by individuals, so people learn to apply ethical principles to actions that institutions take and to the cultures that institutions create.

Thompson is exceedingly modest, but he will allow that the center was the first major interdisciplinary ethics program at any university, and the first such program to integrate so deeply into all the professional disciplines. (It was also the University’s first interfaculty initiative.) “When I arrived here, I was alone,” Thompson says. “I was sitting in a makeshift office with a staff of two people. Basically, it was a barren landscape, ethically speaking.” His biggest challenge was gaining the trust of leaders in the programs where he hoped ethics education would take hold. In the center’s first annual report, Thompson wrote that his job “called more for the skills of an anthropologist (as I tried to understand the exotic cultures of the various schools into which I ventured) and for the temperament of a politician (as I tried to mobilize support and implement policies).”

Much has changed since. The Medical School, Law School, Kennedy School, and Business School all have full-fledged ethics programs, and the center has assisted in the creation of dozens of ethics-themed courses at the College through the years. Nearly every degree-granting program now has some ethics requirement. At Harvard and beyond, Thompson likens the spread of ethics education and applied ethics to a virus—one with only salutary effects, of course. The discipline has

HARVARD BY THE NUMBERS

Ungraded freshmen seminars, introduced in 1959, were intended to introduce new College students to faculty members and to a subject of their choice—an opportunity for real intellectual exploration. But the number of courses offered peaked at about five dozen in the late 1970s and declined to just 33, accommodating barely a quarter of each class, in the 2000-2001 academic year, when Faculty of Arts and Sciences dean Jeremy R. Knowles proposed reinvigorating the program and then-dean for undergraduate education Susan G. Pedersen accelerated recruiting of faculty members to teach the seminars. Harvard College dean Benedict H. Gross reported on the current state of affairs in March: 133 seminars offered last academic year and this—enough to accommodate nearly every first-year student, if they are all interested—and with dramatic gains in teaching participation by faculty members, both tenured professors and those in the junior (“ladder”) ranks.



gained such currency that Thompson says he has trouble keeping track of everything that’s happening, even within Harvard. “It’s really quite exciting,” he says.

The center “created academic legitimacy for those of us interested in ethics,” professor of medical ethics Robert D. Truog wrote in a letter to Thompson after learning of Thompson’s decision to retire. When Truog spent a year at the center on a fellowship in 1990-91, he wrote, “The opportunity to associate myself with some of the most respected scholars at Harvard made it impossible for my physician colleagues to ignore the validity of my interests.” Truog now serves on the faculty committee that selects the center’s fellows each year.

As to whether professionals behave more virtuously than they did before the center existed, Bok says he can’t attest to that. But, he says, “At least we can be sure that many more people are aware of ethical issues that arise, and are able to think about them more clearly and more carefully.”

Two decades after Bok chose the center’s first director, he is heading the committee to choose the second, expected to be announced soon. Bok says he has sought someone with dedication and diplomatic skills on a par with Thompson’s, noting, “He’s gotten more faculty involved and interested in the program than I would have thought possible.”

Thompson will continue to teach in the government department and at the Kennedy School. His own hopes for his successor are simple: Someone who will focus on the center’s core objective of “training and educating the best teachers and scholars in this field for the future.”

Many of the center’s significant accomplishments have come recently. It was only this year that the medical school began requiring first-year students to take an ethics course; the business school imposed a similar requirement only in 2004 (see “An Education in Ethics,” September-October 2006, page 42). This year also saw the first class of undergraduate