USL professor teaches students that ethics and profit can mix

At first glance, there is wide variance between philosophy and business studies. "The course content was entirely different," says Hamilton. "I certainly learned things in business that were completely foreign to everything I learned [in philosophy], but I was of practical interest in my business," he says.

Hamilton, however, thinks the two subjects mesh quite nicely in the ethical application of business decisions. "There are abstract parts to both, but business is certainly a more concrete study. The area of philosophy I'm interested in is a very concrete area," says Hamilton. "What I'm interested in is ethics as the human aspect of it. I'm interested in how people make up their minds as to what is right and wrong."

Even well-meaning business people may not have the right tools to deal with ethical situations, according to Hamilton. It's his goal to supply future business people with methods of reasoning that help them arrive at moral conclusions.

"It's a skill that you learn. Even being raised in a good religious background, you have to integrate the religious principles to deal with the problems that come up in daily business," he says. "When Jesus said to render unto Caesar, he didn't tell us how to calculate what those things were."

For instance, a principle that could be incorporated might concentrate on what choice will produce the greatest good to the greatest numbers. Another school of thought dictates that the truth should be told in all circumstances, except when no one expects it, such as when playing poker.

"You make your decision in such a way as to give universal kinds of reasons for them," says Hamilton. "It's an area where you have to apply the philosophical principles and apply it to everyday life."

This focus on ethical practices in professional circumstances is gaining increasing acceptance as society moves away from the rampant greed and flagrant materialism that was prevalent in the 1980s. "There is more interest now in morality than there was," says Hamilton. "There just has been a real change." He is anxious to incorporate ethical thinking processes into many different levels at USL. "Students don't take you seriously if you're teaching it as a separate course," says Hamilton. His ideal is to "learn basic fundamentals in ethics courses, but you would keep running into it in other courses."

Toward this end, several USL business professors have added introductory ethics in seminars to help them integrate some of the concepts in their classes. Hamilton is confident that USL will continue to develop a more comprehensive program as additional funds become available.

He finds that his hands-on business experience makes him more believable to students and less of a Pollyanna. "That's been a big benefit," Hamilton says. "I'm not just talking about this on a theoretical level. The practice of it makes me not so adversarial. I can look further into it and see other sides and other possibilities."

ETHICS AND MONETARY SUCCESS are compatible, according to Hamilton. "I think there is evidence that being an ethical business person is good business," he says. "I think what it indicates is that business people are not just interested in money. You need to be a good business person, but also need to be ethical."

Strong religious and family ties in Acadia create a solid background to build upon the principles of ethical business practices. "There already is a climate here that respects basic values," says Hamilton. "Applying ethical principles requires a lot of thought, creativity and soul searching. There are no guarantees that you will get the one right answer. But at least when you arrive at an answer you can give good reasons for your decision."

In its simplest form, the question of ethics can be condensed to include the most basic of human elements. "Always treat people as ends, not as means. Treat people with respect," says Hamilton.