Life-Science Ethics Minor

1. Introduction

The most pressing and most vexing ethical questions confronting humanity are tied to recent scientific and technological advances. Many of these questions emerge from developments connected with the life sciences, developments such as stem cell research, mapping the human genome, biological warfare, and genetically modified organisms. Others derive from achievements in computer technology and software: issues of copyright, free speech, and privacy to name just three. The academic and corporate scientists who engage in groundbreaking research are among the first to grapple with these issues. Their actions and opinions help to shape the reactions of the general public.

The societal value of instituting active graduate programs in ethics is manifest. But, there are also more pragmatic reasons. National Institutes of Health (NIH) training grants now require an ethics component and it is expected that in the very near future ethics requirements will be tied to other NIH grants and to grants from other funding agencies. Important sources of external funding, especially in the life sciences, will be unavailable without the appropriate programs to educate NCSU faculty, students, and staff.

For all these reasons, the department of Philosophy and Religion proposes to offer a graduate minor in life-science ethics, which will include initially the development of three new graduate courses. (Course action forms are attached.) One of the courses is PHI 516 Introduction to Research Ethics, a one-credit responsible conduct of research (RCR) course designed to meet the NIH requirements. The hope is that many students who take this course or other RCR courses offered on campus will want to develop their education in ethics further, both for the sake of learning the ethics and to better prepare them for employment after completing their graduate education at NCSU. To encourage this moral development, a graduate minor seems a good first way of acknowledging these students efforts consistent with their pursuit of a doctorate or masters degree within their own discipline. The choice of a life-science ethics minor, rather than an ethics minor or a research ethics minor, reflects present resource considerations within the Department of Philosophy and Religion. The department’s primary educational role on campus has always been directed at undergraduate education. Teaching expertise and commitment to courses already in the catalogue warrant development of a life-science ethics minor, at least as a first step. Judgments about additional minors or possible graduate degrees will be better informed once the life-science ethics minor is in place.

2. Objectives

The primary objectives of the life-science ethics minor are:

–to expose students to careful normative and empirical discussion of topical issues in the life sciences, especially those faced by life-scientists in their own research and teaching.

–to provide graduate students with the conceptual tools and principles needed to recognize and respond to ethical challenges.
–to provide graduate students in the life-sciences and other related areas with an opportunity to formally supplement their graduate training with a focus on the issues and theory of life-science ethics.

–to increase awareness on campus of the importance of ethical discussions.

–to promote ethics scholarship and teaching in all areas of the university’s research, especially the life-sciences.

3. Academic Requirements

Graduate students participating in the life-science ethics minor must earn at least one-credit in an RCR training course. At the present time, some RCR courses are offered on campus by departments with graduate degree programs. These include:

- PA 510 Ethics & Professional Practice in Public Administration
- GN 820E Professionalism & Ethics
- CBS 662 Professional Ethics and Conduct of Science
- CHE 596D Special Topics: Graduate Research Ethics
- VMC 925 Ethics and Jurisprudence

Students in these degree programs may take an RCR course offered by faculty in their degree-granting department. Students from any graduate degree program may choose instead to fulfill the RCR requirement for the minor with:

- PHI 516 Introduction to Research Ethics (under proposal)

In addition to the RCR requirement, to minor in life-science ethics, students must also complete the following nine graduate credits in philosophy with a grade of B- or better:

- PHI 515 Life-Science Ethics (under proposal)
- PHI 522 Philosophical Issues in Environmental Ethics (under proposal)
- PHI 540 The Scientific Method

RCR training that has been completed at other universities may be accepted in place of an NC State RCR course. Up to three credits of equivalent graduate course work may be accepted in place of one of the three-credit philosophy classes described above. Approval of transfer credits counting to the minor will be handled by the coordinator of the minor in life-science ethics and approved by the head of Philosophy and Religion.
4. Organization

A. Faculty Membership

Initially, life-science ethics faculty will include the associate or full members of the graduate faculty from the Department of Philosophy and Religion who teach the core courses (presently: Auerbach, Comstock, McShane, and Carroll). It will also include faculty from the life-science graduate faculty who have taught RCR training courses and are involved with the development of the ethics program (with their permission, Kelly, Curtis, and Fish). New members will be appointed by the head of Philosophy and Religion at the recommendation of the coordinator of the life-science ethics minor.

B. Coordinator of the Life-Science Ethics minor

1. Appointment

The coordinator will be selected by the head of Philosophy and Religion in consultation with the life-science ethics faculty.

2. Responsibilities
   Approving transfer credits.
   Facilitating communication and correspondence related to the minor.
   Fostering and maintaining communication among the Graduate School, the Department of Philosophy and Religion, and students.
   Assigning life-science faculty to serve on degree committees.
   Signing each minor’s “Plan for Graduate Work” prior to graduation.
   Responsible for the health of the minor (monitoring enrollment, assuring regular course offerings, appropriateness of new courses for the minor).

C. Student Responsibilities

1. Prospective students must apply to and meet all admission requirements of a graduate degree program (and be members in good-standing of that program), and must declare their intention to minor by completing a form available in the Department of Philosophy and Religion.

2. Degree committees of students minoring in life-science ethics shall typically have at least one member from the life-science ethics faculty. Committee membership and exceptions to this rule must be approved by the coordinator.

3. The “Plan of Graduate Work” for each student in the minor must be reviewed and signed by the head or graduate administrator of the degree-granting department and the life-science ethics coordinator.