One of the [Guiding Principles of the University of Colorado](#) is to "[p]romote and uphold the principles of ethics,…" But what are these principles?

Is the university trying to promote principles along the lines of "act so as to maximize the net balance of good over bad, taking all into account" or "always treat others as an end in themselves, never as a mere means"? Or is it concerned with principles along the lines of "ethical reasoning requires rational reasoning" or "ethical considerations must take all interested parties into account"?

My point here is not to point out that the "Guiding Principles" are unclear and ought to be changed, but rather that we ought to promote the ability to reason about such questions. That is, I propose that CU make sure that all students are trained in how to reason critically and ethically.

In many ways, the university gives mere lip service to critical reasoning skills. There is no overarching requirement that students learn such skills, as is all too evident to many instructors on campus. However, such opportunities certainly exist. The philosophy department (yes, I'm biased towards my discipline) offers courses explicitly in critical reasoning, and uses many other courses largely to that end (e.g. an Introduction to Philosophy course might spend significant time on how one ought to reason). But such optional courses in a handful of disciplines is not sufficient for the university community at large.

Google something along the lines of "college students critical reasoning", and you'll see link after link to articles deriding the lack of these skills in far too many students. It's easy to blame the students, or their high schools, or the culture norms of today. But we can't control what happens before students enroll at CU, so let's control what we can. Let's make sure that we give all our students the necessary guidance to cultivate these critical reasoning skills. It isn't currently our top priority, but it really ought to be.

To start, we must ask: how does one determine what is ethical?

Many seem to think that ethical education belongs at home or at a religious institution, not at a school. But why? A quality education may not need to teach students *what* to believe with regards to ethics, but it certainly needs to teach students *how* to think about ethics (among many other things).

Ethical reasoning is a crucial component of our lives, both personal and interpersonal. And most all of us are not very good at it. Ask someone to give the reasons why they hold some ethical position – and if you reflect for a moment you'll realize how many positions we hold are ethical positions, from policy to personal – and you'll see this first hand. It's far too rare for folks to be able to justify *why* they think something is right or wrong, or how this ethical position doesn't conflict with some of their other ethical views. Sit in on nearly any introductory level discussion section, or heck, any political discussion from Congress to Thanksgiving dinner, and you'll see the faulty reasoning. We ought to do better.

Arguably more worrisome than poor ethical reasoning skills is how so many of us just shut down when it comes to ethical discussions. Not only are students not trained in how to critically engage with different ethical views, they aren't even shown that reasonable disagreements are acceptable, let alone desirable. We have a severe cultural problem with regards to being willing to reasonably argue about important ethical topics, and CU is in a great position to help change this norm.

While I strongly believe that education is incredibly useful in these regards, CU's current system is insufficient. It is far too easy to never take a course that explicitly is intended to teach critical reasoning skills, despite helpful core requirements leading students in that direction. And frankly, solely one course in critical reasoning would almost certainly be insufficient, too.

While I'm biased towards philosophy, there's little doubt that we need more than even we offer. We ought to teach students about how they actually reason, not just how they ought to reason. That is, let the psychologists, sociologists, and neurobiologists (and whomever else!) help us better understand the barriers in our way when we try to reason critically. It's a comfortable, convenient myth that humans are naturally rational, but just because it's not true doesn't mean that we ought not work towards getting close to that ideal. And to do so we need every tool in our arsenal.

Image the skills our students would learn if everyone took multiple critical reasoning courses, taught by trained teachers, where they cultivated logical reasoning skills, media literacy, writing skills, understanding of psychological barriers to learning, etc. If we care about our students' abilities to critically engage with their world, we owe it to them to take training of this sort seriously.

In the language of the day, here's the tl;dr: The University of Colorado ought to make it so that all students are adequately trained in reasoning critically and ethically. These skills go hand in hand, and are crucial to all our lives, from our studies to our politics to our interpersonal relationships. We do a disservice to our students – as well as to the world at large – when we do not help our students cultivate these skills. While sufficient institutional change might seem like a hard and uncomfortable thing to do, if you really think about it, you'll realize it's what we ought to do.