This fall, at the behest of UM President Royce Engstrom, the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center launched the Mansfield Program in Ethics and Public Affairs, incorporating UM’s Center for Ethics under a new name. Ethics and public affairs was at the heart of the Mansfield Center’s original mission and this new program returns this essential aspect of the Mansfield legacy. The current director of the Mansfield Center, Terry Weidner, commented on this new program: “I think we all felt that ethics in public affairs—which we take to include not just honorable public service but concepts like non-partisanship and compromise—was such a vital part of the Mansfield legacy that it made sense to formalize that in organizational terms.” The mission of the Mansfield Ethics and Public Affairs Program is to provide a focus on the relationship of values to institutions and public affairs. Its function are to offer courses, lectures, and conferences that examine the role that ethical values can and should play in public life, moral quandaries faced by those who govern, and issues of leadership and character in public service. In my new role as the director of the Mansfield Program in Ethics and Public Affairs I am humbled to direct a program in ethics bearing the Mansfield name. The Mansfield legacy provides our efforts with concrete direction and inspiring role model.

Mike Mansfield was the model of ethical character in a life devoted to public affairs. Shortly after Mansfield’s death in October of 2001, Paul Lauren, the founding director of the Mansfield Center, wrote a tribute to Mike Mansfield. In that tribute, Lauren recalled having dinner with the Mike and
Maureen Mansfield. At the end of the meal he had a private conversation with Maureen Mansfield and asked her what she thought her husband’s greatest legacy was; she answered without hesitation, “His character. What will make him a great person is the person that he is and his contributions to ethics in the conduct of public affairs.” Lauren goes on to list the character traits of humility, loyalty, honesty and compassion that made Mansfield great. For each of these virtues, Lauren provides examples from Mansfield’s conduct of public affairs. One example came from the negotiations in the Senate surrounding the civil rights movement. In the daily press conferences Mansfield allowed the Republican Minority Leader, Senator Everett Dirksen, who had been unsupportive of the process, to take the lead. Mansfield was willing to step out of the spotlight, Lauren notes, “because he believed it would be good for the country as a whole.” This kind of humility allowed him to become an effective legislator who earned the respect of his colleagues. Lauren points out that Mansfield’s colleagues in the senate “described him as ‘the conscience’ of the Senate, and praised him for setting ‘an inspiring example of the very highest standards of principled public service’ and as demonstrating ‘a moral leadership which reflects the ideas and finest traditions in our country.’”

Universities have an obligation to students and society to promote discussion and reflection on the ethical issues of our day. The Mansfield Program in Ethics and Public Affairs helps UM fulfill that obligation. I would argue that all of the important and continuous issues Americans face today—from how we address the economic crisis and deficit, to the kinds of health care and energy policies we implement—are at their core ethical issues. In each of these issues policymakers and citizens must answer the ethical question: “What is the right thing to do?” In each case, the way we answer has real
consequences for people lives and the environment. Yet we all too often hear glib responses to difficult moral dilemmas.

Perhaps one of the reason we hear strident, but unreflective answers is many Americans lack the moral concepts and vocabularies to discuss them in a reasonable manner. Commenting on a recent study on students responses to moral dilemmas, David Brooks writes that it is “disheartening [to see] how bad [students] are at thinking and talking about moral issues…..[When faced with moral dilemmas] what you see are young people groping to say anything sensible on these matters. But they just don’t have the categories or vocabulary to do so.” Brooks faults society for not providing young people with the adequate resources “to cultivate their moral intuitions, [and to help them] think more broadly about moral obligations.” The purpose of the Mansfield Program in Ethics and Public Affairs is to contribute to providing the needed resources for UM’s students and the local community. This would include looking to Mansfield’s legacy of moral leadership, which demonstrated that acrimony and partisanship need not be a fundamental trait of the American political system. We are fortunate that the Mansfield legacy provides concrete direction and an inspiring model our efforts.