



Research Article

The Removal of Ethics from Higher Education: A Critical Threat to the Philippine Educational System

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ABSTRACT.

In this paper, I argue that the policy recommendation by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and the Department of Education (DepEd) to remove ethics courses from the higher education curriculum in the Philippine education system poses a serious threat. This policy proposal will only worsen existing problems; it will neither resolve them nor advance the true goals of education, whose fundamental task is to liberate, not to enslave. Using a qualitative approach through content analysis, this paper puts forward two main arguments. First, the policy recommendation to remove ethics courses by CHED, DepEd, and other educational bodies is policy-defective; it fails to address the country's existing educational problems and may even worsen them, such as by further weakening critical thinking. Second, removing ethics courses will reduce education in the country to a purely commercial pursuit, stripping it of its formative and humanistic functions. As part of the general education curriculum in higher education, ethics is the only subject that explicitly teaches students to engage with complex social issues through informed moral decision-making. In support of this view, the paper echoes Aristotle's assertion: "Educating the mind without educating the heart is no education at all."

Keywords: Commission on Higher Education, Curriculum, Education, Ethics, Policy

INTRODUCTION

Recently, on May 28, 2025, the academic community in the country was shocked by the policy proposal, supported by Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and the Department of Education (DepEd), to remove three (3) general education (GE) subjects from the college curriculum (Panti, 2025). What is more striking about the news is that, among the general education (GE) courses, Ethics was included in the subjects proposed for removal and transfer to basic education. Most of those who reacted to this are philosophers and other individuals who teach Ethics in higher education institutions in the country. However, according to DepEd Assistant Secretary Janir Datukan, who spoke during a hearing of the House Committee on Basic Education and Culture on the revised Senior High School (SHS) curriculum, the reason DepEd endorsed such a policy is due to the perceived redundancy of the subject. "We have five [subjects]...meaning 15 units out of the 50 existing units of General Education, which are already integrated in senior high school [curriculum]. That 15 units will increase with these three courses [which is three units each]: art appreciation, contemporary world and ethics" (Panti, 2025).

DepEd also claimed that Ethics can be placed in the same category as the basic-education subject *Good Manners and Right Conduct and Values Education* (GMRC-VE). This claim, however, has been debunked by a group of philosophy scholars, who argue that Ethics and GMRC-VE are not, and will never be, the same (UPLB Official Statement, 2025). Ethics is a field that investigates the philosophical foundations of moral judgment, making it fundamentally distinct from GMRC-VE's prescriptive approach to morality. GMRC-VE, established under Republic Act 11476 (the GMRC and Values Education Act), rests on the premise that society already shares a set of basic moral values and etiquette. Because the law starts from this assumption, GMRC-VE is not designed to promote critical discourse on why and how we hold particular moral beliefs. Only through the study of Ethics are students exposed to diverse frameworks for critically analyzing and evaluating what is good and right, and thus challenged to examine the grounds and scope of their own moral agency. These concerns are philosophical in nature and therefore belong within a philosophy course (UPLB Official Statement, 2025).

As a matter of perspective, Imbong (2025) argued that DepEd's policy proposal to remove Ethics and other General Education (GE) courses from higher education is intellectually flawed, constitutionally unsound, and democratically dangerous. He defends Ethics as essential

not only for personal moral development but also for sustaining a critically engaged, democratic society.

Maboloc (2025) argues that the proposal to remove the Ethics course from the General Education curriculum in college is a clear manifestation of the commercial and neoliberal direction of Philippine education. He describes this move as "existential suicide," not only because it disregards the intellectual and civic importance of Ethics, but also because it reflects the growing commodification of education where labor, particularly that of teachers, is sacrificed for administrative efficiency and cost-saving. More critically, Maboloc (2025), asserts that transferring Ethics to Senior High School undermines its role as a professional and formative discipline suited for cognitively mature college students. Ethics, for Maboloc, is essential in cultivating civic responsibility, critical thinking, and the moral discernment necessary in a democratic society. Maboloc (2025) warns that without Ethics, students are deprived of the ability to understand the value of human freedom and moral autonomy.

Building on the arguments presented above, this paper argues, without bias, that the policy recommendation by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and the Department of Education (DepEd) to remove Ethics courses from the higher education curriculum in the Philippine education system poses a serious threat. To advance this claim, the paper presents two central arguments regarding the removal of the Ethics course from college education. First, the recommendation by CHED and other educational policy-making bodies is policy-defective; it fails to address the country's pressing educational challenges and may exacerbate existing problems, such as the lack of critical thinking skills. Second, removing the Ethics courses will reduce education in the country to a purely commercial pursuit, stripping it of its formative and humanistic values.

To support this argument, the paper is organized into the following sections. First, it presents the background of the college curriculum, specifically the role and relevance of general education courses in contemporary society. Second, it examines the challenges faced by Philippine education, particularly concerning the development of critical thinking and the influence of market-driven tendencies. Finally, the paper argues that the proposed removal of the Ethics course from the college curriculum is policy-defective, as it undermines critical thinking and reduces education to a mere commercial pursuit.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Education is not just about acquiring information and technical skills. Technical skills or 'hard skills' is often associated with the use of tools, equipment related to work properly and efficiently (Medina, 2010). For Verma (2024), education is also empowering individuals, shaping the character, and civic responsibility of individuals within a society. Ethics, as a subject, embodies this formative function.

Since then, Greek philosopher Aristotle (384-322 BC) provides one of the earliest philosophical arguments of education as moral cultivation. In his seminal work *Nicomachean Ethics*, he argues that the ultimate goal of education is not simply intellectual achievement but the development of virtue (*aretê*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) (Harðarson, 2019). For Aristotle, human flourishing (*eudaimonia*) is attainable only through the habitual practice of moral reasoning guided by ethical principles (Symons & VanderWeele, 2024). As a matter of perspective, American philosopher John Dewey (1859 - 1952), writing in the early 20th century, opined a similar argument within the context of democratic societies. In his work *Democracy and Education* (1916), Dewey argues that education should not be an instrument of passive social reproduction but a dynamic, participatory process through which learners engage with real-world problems. Ethical inquiry, for Dewey, is not a peripheral activity; it is central to promoting the kind of critical thinking and public deliberation that democratic life demands (Williams, 2017).

On a more radical side, Brazilian philosopher Paulo Freire (1921-1997) in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), offers a more radical critique. For Freire, education is either a practice of freedom or a practice of domination. In other words, education empowers learners toward liberation and critical consciousness, or enforces conformity, sustaining oppressive systems and limiting human potential. Further, American philosopher Nel Noddings (1929-2022), with her *ethics of care*, adds a relational and affective dimension to moral education. For Noddings (1984), ethical learning must be grounded in empathy, responsibility, and attentiveness to the needs of others. In an educational system increasingly dominated by metrics and market logic, Noddings reminds us that ethical life is lived in connection with others (Tan, 2022).

However, in contemporary society, education is gradually being challenged by the rise of neoliberalism. At its core, neoliberalism emphasizes the efficiency of markets in allocating resources, individual responsibility,

entrepreneurial freedom, and competition as the primary mechanisms for human progress (Saad-Filho&Johnston, 2005). It argues that the role of the state should be reduced to maintaining the rule of law, enforcing private property rights, and ensuring the functioning of free markets (Friedman, 1962). In other words, public goods and services, such as education, health care, and social welfare, are increasingly treated as commodities subject to market logic. Under neoliberalism, the primary purpose of education is redefined: rather than being a means for holistic human development and civic empowerment, it becomes narrowly focused on producing individuals with market-relevant skills (Giroux, 2014). This ideological shift reshapes the curriculum to emphasize technical competencies, job readiness, and productivity, often at the expense of critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and democratic engagement (Balan, 2023; Edeji, 2024).

It can be argued that neoliberalism really poses a threat to critical thinking and the preservation of shared human values by transforming education into a market-driven enterprise focused on economic utility. Harvey (2005) argued this framework marginalizes essential aspects of learning, particularly the development of critical, ethical, and civic reasoning, which are difficult to measure, commodify, or monetize. Moreover, the neoliberal emphasis on individual success undermines the collective pursuit of the common good. Giroux (2014) argues that neoliberal education promotes a consumerist mindset that detaches individuals from a sense of social responsibility and empathy. In such a phenomenon, students are conditioned to prioritize personal gain and employability over justice, equity, and civic engagement. As a result, democratic participation weakens, and the space for moral deliberation contracts, making societies more vulnerable to authoritarianism, misinformation, and moral apathy (Desierto & de Maio, 2020; Mutuota, 2024).

Being silent on this matter will silence the very voice that defends the voiceless, what Maboloc (2025) calls an "existential suicide." This silence undermines the essence of a democratic society. As Freire (1970) argued, education must be a practice of freedom, not conformity. By surrendering education to market imperatives, we risk raising generations who are technically skilled but morally directionless. This paper aims to argue that the policy proposal by the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) and the Department of Education (DepEd) to remove Ethics courses from the higher education curriculum in the Philippine education system poses a serious threat.

METHODOLOGY

This paper used qualitative content analysis to critically examine relevant text and official memoranda related to the proposed removal of the Ethics course from the higher education curriculum in the Philippines. Content analysis, as defined by Krippendorff (2018), is a systematic method for interpreting textual material by identifying patterns, themes, and meanings embedded within documents. This approach allows the researcher to assess not only the surface-level content but also the underlying ideologies, assumptions, and implications of policy discourse (McLeod, 2024).

No human participants were involved, and all data are publicly accessible documents and publications. Thus, the paper did not require ethical clearance. However, the research followed academic integrity protocols, including proper citation, interpretive rigor, and critical engagement with sources. By using content analysis, the paper aims to reveal how the removal of Ethics courses reflects broader ideological shifts, particularly the rise of neoliberal and market-driven priorities in higher education, which risk reducing education to mere commercial pursuit at the expense of humanistic and civic formation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General Education Courses in Higher Education Curriculum Role and Relevance

Technically speaking, General Education (GE) courses are a component of the higher education curriculum that is shared by all undergraduate students, regardless of their chosen field of study. This is in accordance with the Commission on Higher Education's (CHED) reform efforts and paradigm shift to strengthen the Philippine educational system, as outlined in CHED Memorandum Order No. __, Series of 2013. As mandated by the 1987 Philippine Constitution, the State "shall protect and promote the right of all citizens to quality education at all levels" (Article XIV, Section 1); "establish, maintain, and support a complete, adequate, and integrated system of education relevant to the needs of the people and society" (Article XIV, Section 2); and "exercise reasonable supervision and regulation of all educational institutions." These constitutional mandates are further reinforced by Republic Act No. 7722, otherwise known as the "Higher Education Act of 1994," which empowers CHED to "set minimum standards for programs and institutions of higher learning" (Section 8d).

General Education courses introduce learners to diverse areas of knowledge and approaches to understanding both social and natural realities (Laird,

Niskodé-Dossett, & Kuh, 2009). Through these GE courses, students are expected to develop key intellectual skills: such as critical, analytical, and creative thinking as well as various modes of communication. Moreover, it aims to cultivate civic abilities essential for active participation in the local, national, and global community (CHED Memo., 2013).

The debate over the role of General Education (GE) in higher education is not limited to the Philippines, it reflects a global tension between two competing educational paradigms: the humanistic approach and the neoliberal approach. According to Lei (2007), the humanistic approach argues for the development of the whole person, recognizing that effective learning must consider not just intellectual growth, but emotional and psychological well-being. On the other hand, neoliberal approach in education refers to the application of market-based principles to the organization and goals of educational systems. Rooted in economic theories, this philosophy transforms schools and universities into service providers and students into consumers (Davies & Bansel, 2007).

In the United States, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) champions a liberal education framework, arguing that GE courses are essential for cultivating analytical reasoning, ethical judgment, and intercultural competence (AAC&U, 2015). Prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Stanford uphold this philosophy by requiring students to complete core subjects in the humanities, natural sciences, and ethics. These are not peripheral subjects, they serve to anchor specialized knowledge in broader societal, moral, and civic contexts (Delbanco, 2012). In contrast, Finland offers a more integrated and value-driven alternative. Its globally admired system blends academic rigor with ethical and civic formation, embedding GE principles such as democratic participation and well-being throughout all educational levels (Sahlberg, 2015). This approach proves that a strong GE curriculum is not only compatible with excellence but essential to producing reflective and socially responsible citizens.

It is clear that General Education (GE) occupies a foundational role in the architecture of higher education. It serves as the formative core of college learning, equipping students not just with discipline-specific knowledge but with broader intellectual and civic capacities. In the Philippine context, this educational vision was concretely institutionalized through CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 20, Series of 2013, which outlines the revised General Education Curriculum (GEC). The CMO frames GE as "holistic education that empowers

learners as active participants in the development of society" (CHED, 2013, p. 2). The GE program is meant to develop the Filipino learner into a "makatao, makabayan, makakalikasan, and makadiyos" citizen, anchored in humanistic, ethical, and democratic values.

This vision reflects global best practices where general education is tasked not only with the transmission of knowledge but with the cultivation of skills and dispositions necessary for ethical reasoning, critical thinking, intercultural understanding, and responsible citizenship (Delbanco, 2012). GE courses such as Ethics, Contemporary World, and other Social Sciences are indispensable in enabling students to reflect on fundamental human concerns, justice, truth, dignity, freedom, and how these values manifest in contemporary social and political contexts. These courses resist the narrowing of education into technocratic aspects, arguing instead that education must aim for human formation and social transformation (Nussbaum, 2010). It can be argued then, that the implementation of CMO No. 20, s. 2013 signaled a deliberate shift away from an overloaded, discipline-heavy curriculum toward a leaner but deeper general education framework. The revised GEC consists of 36 units of core and elective courses designed to promote interdisciplinary thinking, moral integrity, and intellectual autonomy. Among these, Ethics is listed as one of the core courses, emphasizing its role in forming the student's capacity for moral discernment and civic responsibility. The inclusion of Ethics is neither accidental nor optional, it is based on the premise that Filipino students must not only learn how to work, but how to live well and relate ethically with others in a rapidly changing society (CHED Memo., 2013).

In that regard, general education is the moral and intellectual heart of higher education. It enables students to go beyond specialization and see the bigger picture of human life and society. The Ethics course, in particular, plays a vital role in shaping future leaders, professionals, and citizens who are capable not just of competence, but of conscience. CHED's commitment to GE through CMO No. 20, s. 2013 must be reaffirmed, not reversed. The removal of GE courses from higher education would be a tragic step backward, undermining the very goals of education in a democratic society.

Critical Thinking and the Influence of Market-Driven Tendencies

The problem of critical thinking skills in the country is apparent although a recent report says that 97.95 percent of the Philippines is literate but have serious deficiencies in terms of reading comprehension and even

critical thinking skills (Brazel, 2020). Some of the problems seen as a contributing factor is the curriculum design which some of the pedagogy are reductive and lacking in terms of developing critical thinking in students (Marquez, 2017). Education curriculum with the influence and rapid growth of globalization where its competencies are designed to fit the market demand which requires more skilled workers. Marquez (2017) argued that is true in the Philippines and opined that Filipino children and youth should not only be sent to schools to be taught skills that would make them competent laborers for capitalist markets, but more importantly, they should be trained to become critical thinkers so as to be open, sensitive, and understanding of the beliefs and values of others as well as not to be enslaved by their respective belief and value systems.

In this fast-paced society, where information is readily available with just one click, the country is facing serious problems related to disinformation (Aimeur et al., 2023). Many Filipinos are unable to identify what to believe due to a weakened ability to think critically and analyze such information (Lopez, 2024). This has become a challenge for learning institutions. Lansangan & Orleans (2024) argue that learners need to develop skills in selecting appropriate information, assessing its integrity, and making sound decisions. Creating learning spaces that stimulate critical thinking is essential. Brazel (2020) supports this view, stating that to address this problem, educational institutions must shift toward instruction that empowers students to analyze, read between the lines, and identify credible sources for their own work.

In that regard, it is now high time to strengthen our learning institutions as venues for cultivating critical thinking, rather than merely serving as factories that churn out laborers tailored for market demands. While economic preparedness and technical proficiency are essential, education must not lose sight of its deeper, humanistic mission, to shape individuals who can think, discern, and act with integrity. When education is reduced to a market-driven pursuit, students are taught to focus solely on profit, productivity, and performance, often at the cost of moral reasoning, civic consciousness, and self-awareness. The danger here lies not only in what is being taught but also in what is being left out, values, reflection, and the ability to question and reshape society.

This call to reclaim critical thinking aligns with the humanistic tradition in education, which views learners not as passive recipients of information but as thinking, feeling beings with innate worth. Humanistic thinkers such as Carl Rogers (1969), Abraham Maslow (1943), and Erik Erikson (1968) emphasize the importance of self-

actualization, emotional well-being, and moral development. According to Lei (2007), humanistic education brings the learner's inner world, thoughts, emotions, and values, into the center of the educational process. It is an approach that affirms the learner's humanity, and by doing so, opens space for authentic inquiry and critical engagement with the world.

The philosopher Paulo Freire (1970), in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, argues that true education must liberate, not domesticate. It must engage learners in the process of conscientization, becoming critically aware of their social reality in order to transform it. A society that trains its youth merely to comply with economic demands, without equipping them with the ability to question unjust systems or challenge misleading ideologies, robs itself of democratic vitality. Critical thinking is not a luxury; it is a safeguard of freedom. As Nussbaum (2010) reminds us, democracy requires citizens who can think for themselves, deliberate on what is just, and empathize with others, qualities nurtured not by market-centered education but by a holistic, reflective pedagogy.

Moreover, when education neglects this human capacity to think and align one's actions with personal values and social good, it betrays the very essence of what it means to be human. The ability to reason, to act in accordance with one's conscience, and to seek a meaningful life, these are the marks of a truly educated person. By empowering critical thinking in schools and universities, it affirms this human essence and prepares individuals not only for the workplace, but for life.

Removal of the Ethics Course is Policy-defective and Reduces Education to a Mere Commercial Endeavor

The removal of the Ethics course from the higher education curriculum is not only policy-defective but philosophically irresponsible. This decision disregards the foundational goals of education as enshrined in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which asserts that education must "foster patriotism and nationalism, accelerate social progress, and promote total human liberation and development" (Philippine Constitution, 1987, Art. II, Sec. 17). Ethics plays a pivotal role in this national vision. Stripping it from higher education is tantamount to stripping education of its moral soul.

The rationale that Ethics is already addressed at the basic education level, through subjects like GMRC and Values Education, is dangerously misguided. As the Union of Societies and Associations of Philosophy in the Philippines (USAPP) pointed out, the function of Ethics in

college is not mere obedience to rules but the cultivation of moral reasoning, ethical discernment, and critical engagement with real-world dilemmas. These skills demand a level of cognitive and emotional maturity that is typically present only at the tertiary level. To claim redundancy between high school values subjects and university-level Ethics is to blur the line between moral instruction and philosophical education (USAPP, 2024).

What is more concerning is that this move reflects the growing neoliberal influence in Philippine education, a model that views education primarily as a means to economic productivity rather than human development. Under this framework, courses are assessed based on their "employability value," often at the expense of their formative, ethical, and civic roles (Giroux, 2014; Brown, 2015). Ethics, therefore, becomes expendable in a system that no longer sees students as future citizens but merely as labor-market products. This commodification of education corrodes its deeper purpose.

Furthermore, in our time of moral confusion, marked by political disinformation, normalized corruption, and increasing social apathy, the need for Ethics is more urgent than ever. Ethics provides a space for young people to grapple with questions of justice, truth, and responsibility. It teaches not what to think, but how to think morally and critically. In doing so, it supports the development of responsible, active citizens, a foundation of any democracy. As Imbong (2025) rightly asserts, democracy without ethics is dangerously hollow. A misinformed or morally indifferent majority is a breeding ground for populism, historical distortion, and authoritarian rule. Removing Ethics is not just a curricular adjustment; it is a betrayal of our educational mandate. It undermines the transdisciplinary and humanistic goals that Philippine higher education was meant to uphold. Rather than moving backwards under the pretense of modernization, we must reaffirm the centrality of Ethics in shaping both the moral compass and democratic sensibilities of future generations.

Moreover, the removal of Ethics from the general education curriculum in Philippine higher education. This move is not only policy-defective; it is ethically reckless. Ethics, as a discipline, goes beyond instructing students on what is right or wrong, it cultivates critical thinking, moral discernment, and civic responsibility. To disregard its significance is to deprive future professionals of one of the most essential tools they need to find meaning in this world fraught with ethical complexities.

Removing Ethics, as Maboloc (2025) pointedly argues, is part of a broader neoliberal restructuring of education, one that reduces learning into mechanical skill

acquisition for market ends. When education is treated merely as a means to economic productivity, we betray the vision of education inscribed in the 1987 Philippine Constitution, which mandates education to promote “total human liberation and development” (Art. II, Sec. 17). Ethics is precisely what nurtures this ideal by encouraging students to reflect on human dignity, justice, and the good life.

Some proponents of the removal argue that Ethics is redundant because values education is already present in senior high school. However, this conflates prescriptive instruction in good behavior (as seen in GMRC) with the reflective inquiry that defines college-level moral philosophy. As the UPLB Philosophy Division (2025) clarified, Ethics at the tertiary level deals with complex moral reasoning and philosophical inquiry, skills that require maturity and critical engagement beyond what is feasible in basic education.

Moreover, the suggestion that Ethics is ineffective because it has failed to improve societal morality overlooks the broader socio-political realities at play. Ethics is not a panacea for corruption or moral decay, but rather a formative space where students learn to think critically about ethical dilemmas. It is not about immediate moral transformation, but about building habits of thought and reflection that influence lifelong moral conduct (Newman, 2008).

In a time when misinformation spreads rapidly and moral relativism prevails, Ethics becomes even more indispensable. Students must not merely absorb knowledge; they must be taught how to evaluate, question, and reason through complex moral and social issues. As the Ateneo Philosophy Club (2025) aptly states, Ethics is not just about forming good professionals, it is about forming just citizens.

What is at stake here is not just a single subject in the curriculum, but the very soul of education. By removing Ethics, we risk producing graduates who may be technically competent but morally disoriented, individuals who can perform tasks but lack the discernment to judge whether those tasks are ethical. As Maboloc (2025) warns, no critical thinking means no democracy. Without ethics, we are not educating citizens; we are manufacturing tools. Thus, CHED and all stakeholders reconsider the reform of the curriculum if needed, yes, but never at the cost of moral formation. Education must form both the mind and the conscience. Ethics must stay.

CONCLUSION

Thus, removing the Ethics course from college programs in the Philippines is not just a simple policy defective, it is a serious blow to the heart of what education is meant to be. This paper has shown that Ethics is not just a “nice-to-have” subject. It is a core part of shaping thoughtful, responsible, and engaged citizens in a democracy. Framing its removal as part of educational reform actually reveals something much deeper and more troubling: our education system is drifting toward a market-first mindset that values job skills and economic productivity more than character, critical thinking, and social responsibility. At a time when the world is facing serious ethical challenges, corruption, injustice, division, this shift could not be more dangerous.

Looking at government policies, official memos, and expert opinions, it is clear that the reasoning behind dropping Ethics does not hold up. The idea that students get enough moral training earlier in life, or that it can be casually sprinkled into other subjects, misses the point. College is exactly when students are deciding who they are, what they stand for, and how they want to live and contribute to society. Ethics helps them do that. It is not just about right and wrong, it is about learning how to think through complex issues, listen to others, and grow in empathy and civic responsibility.

Both data and philosophical tradition, from Aristotle to Paulo Freire, support keeping Ethics in higher education. Without it, students may graduate with technical know-how but no real sense of purpose or direction. Other countries, like Finland and the U.S., still prioritize Ethics and the liberal arts because they understand that democracy needs more than just workers, it needs thinkers, leaders, and people with conscience. If we take Ethics out, we risk turning education into a training ground for economic functionaries instead of a place that shapes whole persons.

And the public is noticing. Teachers, philosophers, church leaders, and advocacy groups are pushing back hard, warning that a curriculum without Ethics is a curriculum without soul. In a time when we face misinformation, climate crisis, and institutional failure, we need leaders with moral grounding more than ever. So, taking out Ethics is not just a technical decision, it is a moral mistake. It betrays education’s true purpose: to develop people who can think critically, act fairly, and serve the common good. That is why we must urgently rethink this move and recommit to an education that forms not just workers, but wise and compassionate citizens.

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