

Should College Education Play a Significant Role in Teaching Students about Ethics?

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A ten question survey was administered to a medium size university in the Midwest. The responses were fashioned in a 5-item Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The results were interpreted by SPSS and relationships, frequencies, and descriptive statistics were drawn from the results of this program. The purpose of this study was to investigate the findings of this survey that indicated that one's education institution should be responsible for ethics training and whether one's sex or race would determine their stand on ethics education.

INTRODUCTION

College students will indicate that ethics training is both important and expected (Wang & Calvano, 2015). Based on survey results, ethics is important in one's college education and therefore should be taught as part of an educational program. However, the source of this education or training is not being questioned by students. Thus, according to the survey administered as part of the Wang & Calvano research, it can be interpreted by the results that students do not care where, or by whom, ethics training is administered. Collins, Weber, & Zambrano (2014), argue that this ethics training could be administered online but precautions must be made. Should students receive ethics training at home, at work, or through faith-based affiliations? Delaney and Sockell (1992) found that employees felt less obligated to behave unethically in order to succeed at the workplace when ethics training programs were in place. A separate study posited that marketing professionals "personal factors" (p. 73) may be used as reliable predictors for potential employee's proclivity to adhere to ethical standards (Rallapalli, Vitell, Jr, & Szeinbach, 2000).

While there is little doubt as whether to teach ethics as part of the college experience, there is debate as to how the topic should be taught. If ethics is taught in post-secondary education should it be integrated in all classes or segregated into a self-contained course on the topic? One case study concluded that students obtain greater exposure to ethical dilemmas specific to their respective disciplines, and just an importantly, potential resolution to such scenarios (McDonald, 2004). Should a student's field of study indicate a greater need for ethics training? According to a 2009 survey conducted by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, 75% of the participants responding expressed the need for post-

secondary education involvement in the instruction of skills necessary to link “personal choices and actions to ethical decisions” (Hart Research Associates, 2010).

METHODOLOGY

A ten-question survey was administered at a medium sized, public university in the Midwest. The response options were fashioned in a 5-item Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The results were interpreted using SPSS by running Chi-Square test for independent samples; significance, frequencies, and descriptive statistics were then drawn from the results of the methods employed. Demographics gathered include a student’s sex, age, and race. The survey resulted in 687 responses; of those results, there are 585 responses that are either agree/strongly agree or disagree/strongly disagree. There were 99 neither agree nor disagree responses and 3 missing responses. The null hypothesis is “no relationship exists between gender [sex] and agreeability” with respect to “college education should play a significant role in teaching students about ethics,” and the alternate hypothesis is that there is a relationship between gender and agreeability.

A second null hypothesis is “no relationship exists between students of a particular college and agreeability” with respect to “college education should play a significant role in teaching students about ethics,” and the alternate hypothesis is that there is a relationship between students of a particular college and agreeability.

RESULTS

Table 1 contains the frequency and percentage of the population sampled by gender, age, race, and the college in which the respondent is most closely aligned.

According the Chi-Square independent samples test, there is significance between male and female *disagree/strongly disagree* responses (.047) which results in the rejection of the null hypothesis. No significance was found for the *agree/strongly agree* response category.

Additionally, Chi-Square tests for independent samples also indicated that students associated with the College of Science & Engineering, disagreed/strongly disagreed with the role of teaching students ethics with significance (.039).

DISCUSSION

Based on available research, it is reasonable to posit that students consider college to be an appropriate venue for ethics education. One might wonder if ethics training is considered outside of college. Of the 687 student included responses to the question, “should college education play a significant role in teaching students about ethics, 547 students or 93.5% agreed and strongly agreed. The difficulties arise on the topic of who will teach these ethics classes.

Geary & Sims (1994) questioned whether the innate characteristics of ethics could even be learned? In other words, could students learn basic “right and wrong” from a college course and, if they could is there room in the college program to teach this often complicated topic (Frank, Ofobike, & Gradisher, 2010)? Accordingly, the instruction of ethics should not be placed solely on an individual instructor, but rather communicated across various courses and professors ensuring a wider perspective (McDonald, 2004). Additional questions also arise concerning methodology, a paradigm for moral reasoning, and basic decision-making tools (Cohen & Bennie, 2006). In what framework does one determine what is right and what is wrong? What moral instrument gets used and does this apply to the class collectively or an individual student? Universities have an international reach where so many ethnicities are represented in a single classroom. Chen, Tang, & Tang (2013), discovered that race matters and American males were tempted to cheat in an open classroom when love of money and temptation was present. This love of money may be construed as a course grade, course completion, or even graduation. Chen, et al, also concluded that Chinese male and female students exhibited higher ethical decision-making standards than

their American counterparts (2013). The results of the survey administered as part of this study indicated no significance between race whether “college education should play a significant role in teaching students about ethics” (see Appendix),

**TABLE 1
DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS**

| | | Frequency | Percent |
|----------------|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Gender | Missing Information | 3 | 0.4% |
| | Male | 219 | 31.9% |
| | Female | 465 | 67.7% |
| Age | Missing Information | 3 | 0.4% |
| | 18-21 | 281 | 40.9% |
| | 22-25 | 175 | 25.5% |
| | 26-29 | 53 | 7.7% |
| | 30-40 | 88 | 12.8% |
| | 40+ | 87 | 12.7% |
| Race | Missing Information | 10 | 1.5% |
| | White | 581 | 84.6% |
| | African American | 33 | 4.8% |
| | Hispanic | 12 | 1.7% |
| | Asian | 25 | 3.6% |
| | Native American | 5 | 0.7% |
| | Pacific Islander | 3 | 0.4% |
| | Other | 18 | 2.6% |
| College | Missing Information | 3 | 0.4% |
| | Business | 123 | 17.9% |
| | Science and Engineering | 140 | 20.4% |
| | Arts and Letters | 140 | 20.4% |
| | Education | 89 | 13% |
| | Health & Human Services | 144 | 21.0% |
| | Other | 48 | 7.0% |

Comer & Vega (2005), developed a tool for assessing moral behavior called the PET (Personal Ethical Threshold) and then later presented the tool to “represent an individual’s susceptibility to situational pressure in his or her organization that makes moral behavior more personally difficult (Comer & Vega, 2008, p. 129). A significant issue is the fact that this assessment is not required in any classroom. Additionally, even if it were feasible to require such an assessment, the time to administer the instrument, perform the analysis, and determine an action plan would be time-consuming and likely rejected by many professors (Frank, Ofobike, & Gradisher, 2010). After all, the scenerios depicted in the survey have to be explained and the interpretation may be dependent upon the perception of the participant.

Does gender (sex) become a deciding factor? It is not a surprise that almost twice as many female students (547 to 386) responded with agreed or strongly agreed as twice as many females responded to this survey as males responded. This could imply that male students do not care much about surveys or that male students consider themselves to be ethical in nature and just disregarded the survey completely. Can ethics education be effective? Darwish (2015), stated that ethics education has been taught throughout the world and some of this teaching is in response to debachels like Enron, WorldCom,

Adelphia, and Tyco. Additionally, Hadley & Alexandre (2015), surveyed 40 current and former graduate students and found that “three themes emerged: (a) ethics as part of business education; (b) approaches to ethical decision making; and (c) balancing the needs of business with stakeholder interest” (p. 388).

Finally, when students from different academic disciplines were asked the same question there were varying results. One might expect students from engineering and health care to demonstrate a higher concern for ethical issues but this was not the case. The second null hypothesis proposed is that “no relationship exists between students of a particular college and agreeability” with respect to “college education should play a significant role in teaching students about ethics.” The surprising results from the respondents aligned with the college of engineering and science is that they do not see college education playing such a strong role in college. The Chi-Square for independent samples indicated significance (.039) between those that disagree/strongly disagree and those that agreed/strongly agreed. This results in rejecting the null hypothesis but the actual rationale for these results are unclear. It may be that these students see the university experience as a skill building time and that their moral values are already established. It may also be posited that they do not share the values of their professors.

Additionally, with today’s business regulations, it would be reasonable to expect the business college to recommend ethics training with nearly the same consideration as engineering and health care, and this was just the case. In fact, given the following colleges as indicated in Figures 1 and 2 in the appendices one can see that, with the exception of science and engineering, over 90% of the respondents consider ethics training to be taught at the college level. One must speculate that this ethics training may not have been introduced at home or at a person’s place of spiritual growth (i.e. church, synagogue, or temple). Lau & Haug (2011) found similar results in that non-science majors placed a greater emphasis on higher education and faculty influence on ethical beliefs than that of those students in science-based disciplines. Business students, e.g. accounting majors, will likely be charged with agreeing to a statement of ethical conduct as they enter their chosen discipline. It is reasonable to conclude that business students would indeed place a higher value on ethics teaching while an undergraduate. Science and engineering students should be encouraged to place more value in such training as collaboration with others is critical to their future success. May and Luth (2013) concluded that there are four specific criteria for demonstrating the need for integrated ethics training with in college.

- 1) “Envision multiple perspectives of ethical issues,
- 2) Develop their confidence in their abilities to handle ethical issues in respective field of study,
- 3) Be willing to raise the issue to management even if entails aversive consequences for themselves, and
- 4) Foster professional integrity in their work places by developing a professional identity that incorporates the importance of acting ethically” (p. 566).

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH

Additional research is required in this topic to discover whether a student’s religious background has any bearing on the origin of ethical education. Several questions could be added to the survey to seek the student’s faith-based background, whether she or he were home-schooled, or even their current understanding of religious principles. One question could even request the religious affiliation (Christian, Judaism, Hinduism, etc...). Pauli, Arthur, & Price (2014), hypothesized that “one’s religious affiliation of an institution should be negatively related to student perceptions of the acceptability of cheating” (p. 100). This hypothesis was supported in their study ($\Delta R^2 = .045$, $F=8.647$, $p=.004$).

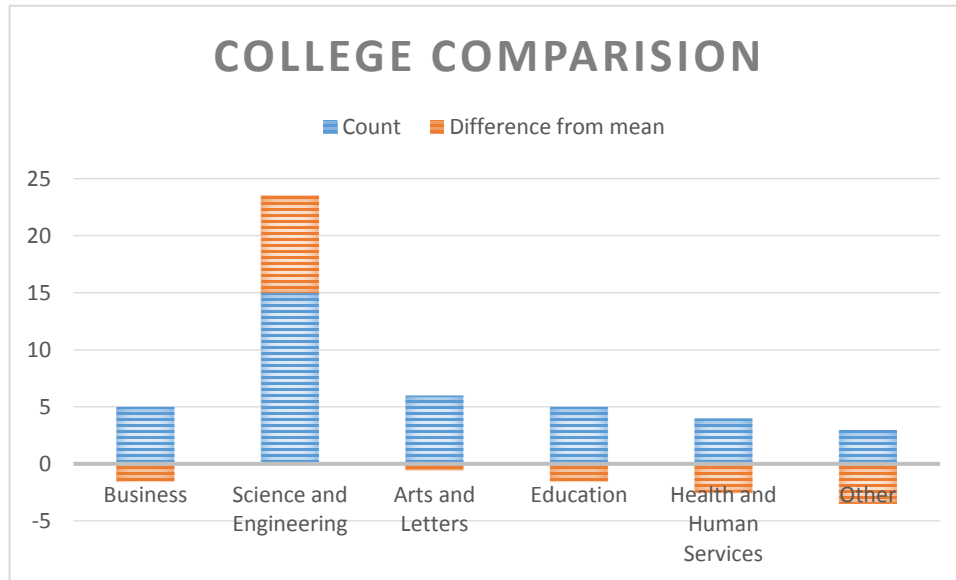
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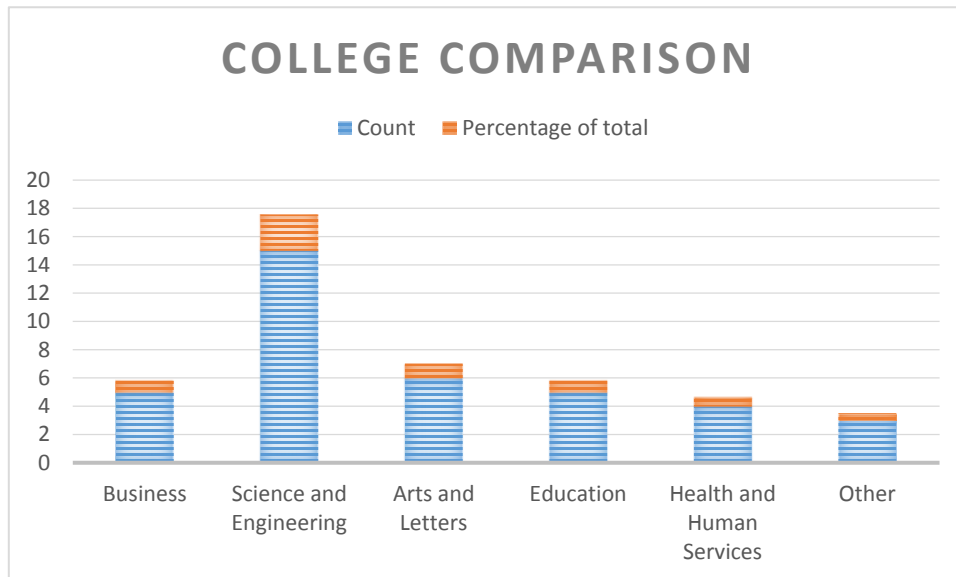
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APPENDIX

**FIGURE 1
COLLEGES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY THAT DISAGREE AND STRONGLY DISAGREE
THAT ETHICS SHOULD BE TAUGHT IN COLLEGE**



**FIGURE 2
COLLEGES WITHIN THE UNIVERSITY AND THEIR PERCENTAGE OF TOTAL**



SURVEY INSTRUMENT

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Questionnaire

➤ Likert-scale responses (Question 1-9)

1. strongly agree
2. Agree
3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
4. Disagree
5. Strongly Disagree

- 1) College education should play significant role in teaching student about ethics.
- 2) Faculty helps students develop values in their classes.
- 3) Faculty incorporate ethics instructions into their classes.
- 4) Faculty should enforce ethical standards with their students.
- 5) Ethics are very important to me.
- 6) I hold myself to the same ethical standard to which I hold others.
- 7) In general, students abide by the University's Honor Code.
- 8) I consider the faculty in my Major to be ethical human beings.
- 9) By the time student reaches college, it is too late to teach them about ethics.
- 10) Yes or No responses (Question 10_1 to 10_5)
 - 10_1) Personally, I consider plagiarism to be a form of academic dishonesty.
 - 10_2) Personally, I consider submitting another person's work as my own to be a form of academic dishonesty.
 - 10_3) Personally, I consider copying off of other student's exam papers to be a form of academic dishonesty.
 - 10_4) Personally, I consider texting other students' exam questions while testing to be a form of academic dishonesty
 - 10_5) Personally, I consider failing to report others observed cheating to be a form of academic dishonesty.