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A Depiction of Workplace Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Lasallian Graduate Students

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Introduction and Methodology

It is difficult today to find an undergraduate or graduate curriculum in almost any field that does not include at least one course that addresses the topic of ethics. This emphasis is understandable, given the importance of ethical behavior to the ongoing vitality and success of any organization and society in general. As Lasallian educators, working in association with the Brothers of the Christian Schools, we view ethical behavior as integral to five core principles: Concern for the Poor and Social Justice; Faith in the Presence of God; Quality Education; Respect for all Persons; and Inclusive Community. Many of our Lasallian Universities specifically refer to ethics in mission and vision statements, highlighting its importance in the transformation of our students.

Despite the attention paid to the subject, unethical behavior persists across all professions. An integrity survey conducted by KPMG, one of the Big Four accounting auditors, found that the incidence of workplace misconduct changed little from 2005 to 2013². The survey asked respondents if they had "personally seen" or had "first-hand knowledge" of misconduct in the workplace over the prior 12-month period. The percentage of respondents indicating they had witnessed such behavior fell only slightly from 74% in 2005 to 73% in 2013. Even more significant and less encouraging was the percentage of respondents who indicated they had observed conduct that "could lead to a significant loss of trust" rose from 50% in 2005 to 56% in 2013.

The purpose of this research was to examine the experiences of graduate students when confronted with a wide cadre of workplace ethical dilemmas, in light of the ethics education received through their curriculums. The research attempted to answer two questions:

- What were the nature and level of workplace ethical issues being faced by these graduate students?
- How adequately has the curriculum prepared students to deal with ethical issues?

The research employed a mixed methods approach applied to a population base of graduate students at a Lasallian university in the United States. Most students were employed on a full-time basis in professional occupations while attending graduate level classes on a part-time basis, making them an appropriate group to comment on workplace behavior.

The data were gathered quantitatively through surveys and qualitatively through focus groups that utilized a semi-structured interview format in addition to an attribute-descriptor attitude mapping measurement protocol. This attribute-descriptor protocol is described later in this paper.

Survey Results

Over 3,500 graduate students in three graduate schools; Business, Education, and Health and Human Services, were given an opportunity to participate in a 19 question electronic survey. Responses were received from 348 students, with 311 of those responses being deemed “complete” in that the respondent answered all required questions. The respondents were anonymous with respect to their personal identities. Demographic information was requested from the respondents regarding the graduate program enrolled, gender, and country of origin.

The percentage of responses received from students in each school closely matched the demographic enrollments representative for each school. Specifically, 24% of the responses were from students in the School of Business, which enrolls 25% of the graduate students. Thirty-five percent of the population is enrolled in the School of Health and Human Services, and 39% of the responses came from this group. The School of Education enrolls 40% of the population and 38% of the responses came from education students. Female students responded at a slightly higher rate than did male students, with 76% of the respondents being female, while 70% of the graduate students at the University are female. The survey results can reasonably be generalized to the population.

It is generally believed that a key leverage point to impacting ethical behavior in the workplace is establishing group expectations for high ethical behavior³. Twenty-four percent of the survey respondents indicated that their colleagues behave ethically all of the time and 73% percent reported their colleagues behaved ethically most of the time. Generally students had a higher opinion of their own ethical behavior, with 54% stating that they behaved ethically at all times with the remaining 46% indicating they behaved ethically most of the time. Sixty-eight percent of the males indicated they behaved ethically all the time, while only 50% of the females made the same claim. Men appeared more to place more confidence in their ethicality than women.

The availability of some form of ongoing workplace ethics education and social pressure was seen to improve significantly the level of ethical behavior⁴. The students were asked about the emphasis on ethics in their workplaces. For employer sponsored ethics education to achieve lasting results, the employer will need to embrace a commitment to ethics education and training practices as a continuous process⁵. Seventy-three percent of the students reported that they were provided education that clearly outlined expected ethical workplace practices and behaviors. Seventy-one percent of the students indicated it was clear what constituted specific unethical behavior in their workplace. However, these results further reinforced the need for a commitment to ethics education at the graduate level, as 29% of students indicated that they were not clear as to what constituted unethical behavior in the workplace. Twenty-three percent of respondents to the KPMG survey indicated they did not understand their organization’s code of conduct and overall values, which was consistent with the above results.

Generally, the healthcare and human services sectors face a significant and complex level of ethical dilemmas on a daily basis⁶. Further insights into the survey findings can be gained through the comments from the focus group participants. A health and human services student in a focus group dialogue exchange shared this experience about how his/her organization handled ethics education: “Well, they just give you a handbook and say you have it now, therefore, if you break any of the rules it’s your fault...that’s the only thing I would say is, they give it to you and they rely on—basically, they rely on you reading it and if you don’t read it, then it’s your own fault ...”

The effectiveness for the results of onsite employer ethics education is supported in the notion that one cannot practice what is not known or valued⁷. A business and technology student commented on his/her organization: “I’m not aware of one (formal ethics policy), either. This is all luxury. Having anything like that would be such a luxury, if you had any sort of training, period, it’s just not—you’re scrapping for survival. You don’t have that kind of luxury.”

Students were then asked about the behavior of others in the workplace. Forty-four percent of the respondents indicated that they had observed an individual behaving unethically at work. When asked who was observed behaving unethically, students indicated that it was most often their peers (chosen by 46% of the respondents), and closely followed by their superiors (41%). Subordinates were identified as behaving unethically by 10% of the students, while 17% of the students indicated the unethical individual as someone not directly related to the respondent’s position. Please note that the percentages for this and the next question sum to more than 100% since respondents were permitted to identify more than one individual and behavior within the question protocol. This question showed significant differences in male and female responses at the one percent level using a chi-square goodness of fit test. Males were more likely than females to identify a superior or someone not related to their position, while females were more likely to identify peers and subordinates. This result was consistent with the previous result that more men saw their behavior as always ethical, allowing them to judge the behavior of superiors and those working in other positions.

Again, the comments from the focus group participants provide additional context to the survey results. A health and human services student offered this thought:

Our ethical standards can be so different in different places of work, you know. And I think a lot of it stems from, I mean, a lot of that comes from the administration, management. Sometimes the ethics of my organization and the ethics of, you know, professional ethics are different.

The most common unethical behavior identified among the survey respondents were co-workers doing personal business on company time, with 60% of the students indicating this response. The next most common unethical behaviors indicated by the survey results was in the falsifying of data which was identified by 28% of the respondents, misuse of confidential information by 26%, stealing company property by 15%, stealing the ideas of others by 14%, and sexual harassment by 12%.

An education student provided this example in one of the focus group sessions: “Well, data privacy comes to mind, and there are laws for a reason, and I think data privacy laws are good when they involve students and children, but I witnessed real neglect of data privacy like in my face. And I was like, wow! You can’t share that, you know?”

The key to creating a proactive environment where ethical behavior is the cultural norm appears to be rooted in establishing clearly defined ethical behaviors that are encouraged by the leadership of the organization and informally policed by the establishment of group expectations⁸. Given that a large percentage of students observed unethical behavior, these students were asked about the reporting of such behavior. Seventy-two percent indicated that the reporting of unethical practices was encouraged in their workplace. However a significant deficiency does seem to exist as 28% of students don’t feel that their organization encourages the reporting of unethical behavior. This thought was also echoed in the KPMG survey in which 23% of respondents indicated they would look the other way or do nothing if they observed workplace misconduct.

The survey indicated that 70% of the student respondents were disappointed in the response and outcome by the organization to the reporting of unethical behavior with 43% of the students indicating that nothing had been done or that they were unsure of the outcome. In addition 27% of the students indicated that an unsatisfactory outcome had occurred while only 30% indicated that a satisfactory resolution to the ethical issue had been achieved. These results provided support for those students who felt that the reporting of unethical practices in reality was espoused as part of many organization’s core values, but in not valued in reality. This was somewhat validated by the KPMG (2013) survey that stated that less than half of the respondents in that study felt that reporting misconduct would result in a satisfactory outcome.

Student survey respondents were asked about their personal struggle with ethics in the workplace. Seventy-nine percent of the students indicated that they had experienced at least one personal ethical dilemma at work in the previous twelve months. However 36% experienced three or more dilemmas, and 11% experienced ten or more ethical dilemmas in the previous year. The frequency of ethical dilemmas was not significantly different between females and males.

Ethical dilemmas faced by individuals in their respective workplaces and the realities resulting from these situations can have far-reaching mental and physical health impacts⁹. When asked about the personal impact of ethical dilemmas in the workplace, 41% indicated they had lost sleep or become anxious over how to resolve the dilemma. In this situation gender appears to play a role with 45% of females indicating they had lost sleep or become anxious, while only 27% of the males indicated this level of stress. Eighty-four percent of these respondents felt that they had made the correct decision in resolving the dilemma, with females slightly more confident at 85% versus 80% for males. While most students personally encounter ethical dilemmas at work, and a significant number of students struggle with them, the vast majority feel they can ultimately work through these ethical dilemmas to achieve the proper solution.

It is then important to examine how instruction in business ethics could contribute to the development of higher levels of moral judgment competence for students¹⁰. The role of graduate training in helping students address these dilemmas was explored next. Students were asked how well prepared they felt to meet ethical challenges before and after entering the University. Fifty-

six percent felt prepared or very prepared to meet ethical challenges before entering the University, with 33% feeling somewhat prepared. The percentage of students feeling prepared or very prepared jumped to 83% after enrolling in the University. More importantly, the percentage of students who felt unprepared or poorly prepared fell from 11% to 1% percent. A chi-square goodness-of-fit test shows the distribution of preparedness after enrolling to be significantly different ($p < .0001$) from the distribution of preparedness before enrolling.

Research done by Schminke¹¹ indicated that men and women do not differ in their underlying ethical models, but that they do differ in the way in which they evaluate others in ethical situations and that ethical predispositions play an important role in those evaluations. These female ethical predispositions were often based on three constructs: catering for the view of different parties; not harming the relationship between parties; and minding the feelings of different¹². While there was no significant difference between females and males in terms of the frequency of facing ethical dilemmas, males viewed themselves as better prepared to face these dilemmas, while females were more confident in their decisions regarding rectifying these dilemmas. Again gender appeared to be important as 92% of the male survey respondents felt prepared or very prepared to deal with workplace ethical dilemmas after enrolling in their respective graduate program versus 81% of female respondents. When asked to evaluate their ability to deal with their workplace ethical dilemmas before enrolling in their respective graduate programs, 62% of males felt that they were prepared or very prepared versus 54% of female respondents.

Overall, respondents responded that when asked how well their graduate program emphasized ethical decision making skills, 67% thought their program did well or extremely well in emphasizing these skills, with only four percent indicating that they thought the practical ethical emphasis was less than adequate. It was clear from this data that students perceived a tangible benefit from the ethics education received from their respective graduate programs that they can use to help them deal with workplace ethical dilemmas.

A Synopsis of the Qualitative Research Focus Group Results

The qualitative phase of the research was comprised of four separate focus groups with participants segregated by their respective graduate school; Business and Technology, Health and Human Services, and Education. The research objective for this phase was to explore student perceptions of what an ideal ethics-based education should look like. Total focus group participants totaled 33 students. Each focus group was conducted by an independent moderator who audio-recorded the discussions to insure exact word-for-word transcription accuracy. Initially all focus group participants were provided a list of 33 attribute-descriptors that were possible adjectives-attributes of that might be descriptive of an ideal ethics-driven curriculum. Then participants were subsequently each asked to select their top 10 attribute-descriptor choices. Participants were also given the option of choosing their own attribute-descriptors if they desired. These 33 attribute-descriptors were generated from the literature and are listed in the Appendix. The next step was to ask participants to grade how well their graduate program did in meeting their expectations based on the criteria of each of these 10 selected attribute-descriptors by using a traditional academic scale of A, B, C, D and F. The final step in this process was then to ask participants to grade the quality of the ethics instruction received while attending another academic institution, using these identical 10 attribute-descriptors.

The following are the ten most commonly selected attribute-descriptors identified by the focus group participants when describing their expectations of an ideal ethics-based education, along with the percentage of students choosing each of these respective attribute-descriptors.

- Knowledgeable Instructors (69%)
- Real world ethical issues discussed (66%)
- Respect for other’s viewpoints (63%)
- Ethics infused throughout the curriculum (59%)
- Practical training in resolving ethical issues in the workplace (56%)
- Open discussion encouraged (53%)
- Effective decision-making techniques are presented (53%)
- Ethical behavior treated as a core value of the institution (50%)
- Wide range of ethical dilemmas discussed (47%)
- Enhances leadership skills (41%)
-

The results indicated a strong desire for practical ethics training (descriptor-attributes 2, 5, 7, 9) illustrated in Table 1; as well as the need for an environment that fosters honest dialogue (descriptive-attributes 1, 3, 6) illustrated in Table 2; as well as an institutional commitment to ethics education (descriptive-attributes 4, 8) illustrated in Table 3.

The grades regarding the “practical training attributes” are presented below, where 4.0 represents a grade of “A”, 3.0 represents a grade of “B”, and a 2.0 represents a grade of “C”.

Table 1: Practical Ethics Training Attribute-Descriptors	Current Program Grade	Previous Institution Grade
2. Real world ethical issues discussed	3.10/4.00	2.81/4.00
5. Practical training in resolving ethical issues in the workplace	2.22/4.00	2.06/4.00
7. Effective decision-making techniques are presented	2.29/4.00	2.31/4.00
9. Wide range of ethical dilemmas discussed	2.87/4.00	2.60/4.00

The results indicate that the students felt their current programs performed better in addressing the desired attribute-descriptors than did their former academic programs, showing an improvement in all but one attribute. However, the improvement is not large as all the grades with these attribute-descriptors are Bs and Cs. Both the current and former programs perform better when discussing ethical issues than training students to resolve real world ethical dilemmas.

A student in the business and technology focus group expressed this sentiment; “I would like some examples on how to deal with if it happens in our work life and our daily life. I just didn’t get much of that in many of the classes that I took.”

An education student had this comment; “Ethics, unfortunately the way it’s taught under most graduate curriculums is taught in a way that makes it very abstract.”

The results regarding the attribute-descriptors related to a “learning environment conducive to an honest dialogue” regarding ethics show both the current and former programs that created a fertile environment for discussion.

Table 2: Environment That Fosters Honest Dialogue Attribute-Descriptors	Current Program Grade	Previous Institution Grade
1. Knowledgeable Instructors	3.05/4.00	3.13/4.00
3. Respect for other’s viewpoints	3.30/4.00	2.87/4.00
6. Open discussion encouraged	3.47/4.00	3.09/4.00

A business student made this observation; “I enjoyed how it opened my eyes to the many different ways that people come to their ethical standing and while I was invited to explore my own core values and ethics, and why I believe what I believe, it helped me to be more respectful and seek to understanding other people’s reasons for what they’re doing before I draw a conclusion, so that was really helpful to me.”

Another business student commented; “ I can think of five or six things that I’ve done in the last two days at work where I’ve had to make an ethical decision, and these teachers that have been in human resources for 10, 15 years, I’m sure they have hundreds of experiences where they had to make an ethical decision”

The following results show students regard ethics as a core value of their current program, but there is room for improvement in incorporating ethics throughout the curriculum.

Table 3: Institutional Commitment to Ethics Education Attribute-Descriptors	Current Program Grade	Previous Institution Grade
4. Ethics infused throughout the curriculum	2.58/4.00	2.27/4.00
8. Practical training in resolving ethical workplace dilemmas	2.22/4.00	2.83/4.00

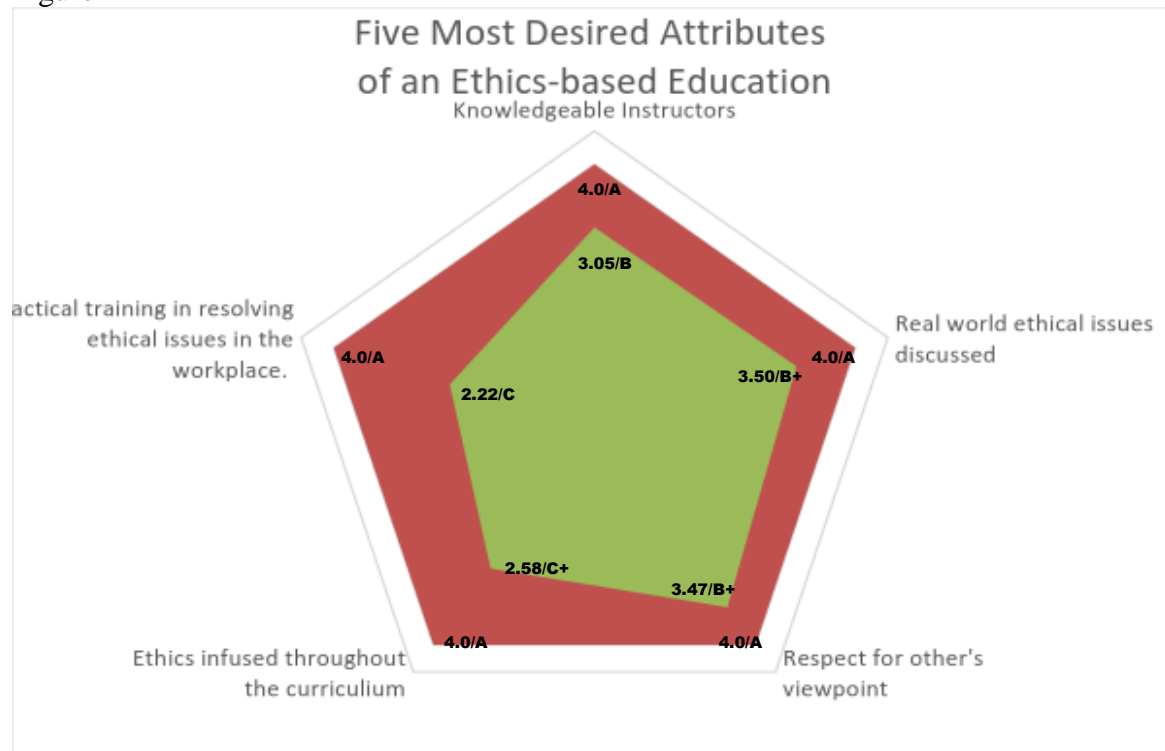
A business student felt that ethics was most effectively taught throughout the program rather than as a single course: “But, I don’t look at it as an 8-week course; I look at it as your complete curriculum.”

An education student commented on culture: “I think a lot of people (at the University) take pride in the Lasallian tradition... working actively towards creating more equitable outcomes for everyone. “

Overall focus group participants rated the performance of their current program higher than their previous program on for 8 of the 10 attribute-descriptors, reinforcing the quantitative survey results that indicated the students feel better prepared to address ethical dilemmas after enrolling in the University. Especially encouraging were the large gains in “ethical behavior treated as a core value”, “respect for other’s viewpoints” and “open discussion encouraged”, reflecting well on the Lasallian principles of social justice, respect and inclusion.

Less encouraging were the low scores received for “practical training in resolving ethical issues in the workplace” and “effective decision-making techniques are presented.” As Lasallian educators we strive to provide a practical education, but in these two areas the current programs did not show significant improvement from the students’ previous academic programs. Scores for these attributes were the lowest of the ten attribute-descriptors addressed. These results point out the difficulty in teaching courses in ethical behavior and why educators often acquiesce to the abstract; the real world dilemmas that many of our students face do not fit into simple and tidy academic models.

When focusing on the top five attribute-descriptors, we constructed a radar diagram displayed in Figure 1 to illustrate the divergence between the “ideal” ethics education and the observed. The outer ring represents the ideal score of a maximum of 4.0 or a letter grade of an “A”, while the inner ring is represented by the grade that the University collectively received from the focus group participants. The gap represented by the geometric area between the larger polygon (the ideal) with that of the smaller polygon (the perceived University performance) indicates the deficiency between the “ideal” and the “performance” that was ethics education experienced by the students.



The diagram shows that students:

- value knowledgeable instructors earning a grade of 3.05/4.0
- value who will discuss real-world ethical issues earning a grade of 3.50/4.0
- atmosphere that respects the students' opinions earning a grade of 3.47/4.0

However, two areas for significant improvement in the ethics curriculum were identified as:

- the need for an improved methodology for ethics to be infused throughout the curriculum earning a grade of 2.58/4.0.
- receive actual training in resolving ethical issues in the workplace earning a grade of 2.22/4.0

Students continue to want practical training in resolving ethical issues and they want this training infused more seamlessly throughout the curriculum. In this area there is much work to be done.

Summary and Conclusions

Students are facing an increasing number of complex ethical dilemmas as managers and professionals within their workplaces. Many feel that their respective employer does not provide clear guidelines in on how to respond to these behaviors in order to effectively resolve these ethical dilemmas. There is an excellent opportunity for Lasallian educators to help our students become well-educated in ethical decision making in order to develop the necessary skills to deal with these behaviors.

Both the quantitative-driven survey and qualitative-based focus group results have indicated that students feel that the ethics education received within their current graduate programs has improved their ability to handle ethical dilemmas in the workplace. Clearly the research has indicated that these students have benefited from a Lasallian educational experience. Regardless of whether they selected the University for its Lasallian heritage, realizing what the education would entail, or if they chose the University for the affordable and practical training they perceived as necessary for their careers, the students have found value in the ethics training delivered by Lasallian educators.

However there is a significant performance gap between what students desire and what is being delivered with respect to providing practical training for them to more effectively deal with workplace ethical dilemmas as well as how to more effectively deliver content and infuse ethics throughout the graduate school curriculum. These areas would provide an excellent opportunity to be a good first step as students could be exposed to ethical dilemmas across a variety of subject areas as well as a variety of instructor viewpoints and experiences.

This would require a commitment from instructors to meaningfully address current topics in ethics, which some may not feel qualified to do. Instructors would also have to give up some subject matter instructional time in order to address ethics, which some may be reluctant to do. Leadership will need to be provided to coordinate the discussion of ethics throughout the curriculum.

Despite these obstacles, the results indicated that an ethics infused curriculum that is focused on practical training is something students desire and a practical outcome that can only be achieved together and by association.

Appendix: Ethics Curriculum Attribute-Descriptors Choices

If you were receiving ethics training in an educational setting, which 10 attributes would you find most important?

- Knowledgeable instructors
- Friendly instructors
- Instructors know me
- Classmates know me
- Enjoyable experience
- I am made to feel important
- My needs are met
- My opinions are respected by faculty
- My opinions are respected by classmates
- Open discussion
- Respect for others' viewpoints
- Disagreements encouraged
- Non-judgmental environment
- Sharing environment

- Enhances leadership skills
- Reliable information
- Privacy policies are respected
- Ethics infused throughout the curriculum
- Real-world ethical issues discussed
- Ethical behavior treated as a core value of the institution
- Practical training in resolving ethical dilemmas in the workplace
- Practical training in resolving ethical dilemmas in my personal life
- Sensitive ethical topics treated professionally
- Effective decision-making techniques are presented
- Ethical dilemmas approached in a consistent manner
- Wide range of ethical dilemmas discussed
- Innovative solutions encouraged
- Broad coverage of ethics theories
- Use of team building exercises
- Use of guest presentations
- Use of on-line resources
- Use of case studies
- Use of role play

Endnotes

1. Richard Callaway, MBA, PhD, is Director of the Doctor of Business Administration Program at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota. Robert McElrath, MBA, EdD, is an Associate Professor of Business at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota.

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