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FREQUENCY, RECALL AND USEFULNESS OF UNDERGRADUATE ETHICS EDUCATION*

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ABSTRACT. Prior research on the effectiveness of ethics education has yielded mixed results. In this sample of 686 employed adults, we found the majority felt there was little or no emphasis on ethics in their undergraduate program, and they felt poorly prepared to deal with ethical dilemmas at work. Among business, sciences, and liberal arts majors, those who majored in the sciences reported the lowest level of preparation for dealing with ethics issues. Management and law classes were the ones most frequently recalled by respondents as emphasizing ethics. Respondents made suggestions for improving undergraduate ethics preparation.

The relevance and rigor of ethics education and training are widely discussed topics among business academicians, consultants and practitioners in the 1990s (Lane, 1995). In 1995 more than half of the largest American corporations offered ethics training to their employees, in contrast to only seven companies that reported doing so in 1980. A number of forces are driving the corporate focus on ethics, including consumer expectations, the need for committed employees to engage in teamwork, and a desire to improve customer service. More cynical observers, however, have pointed out the advantage of lesser sanctions under federal sentencing guidelines for companies that have implemented ethics training programs, yet still find themselves in legal trouble over unethical or illegal behavior of their employees (Boroughs, 1995).

"The study of business ethics is one of more enduring management fads of the past decade" (*The Economist*, 1993). Cordtz (1994) reports that 90 percent of the largest American corporations have written ethics codes, almost one-third have an ethics officer, and twenty percent have ethics departments charged with monitoring performance and providing training in ethics. Consultants have been quick to recognize a new growth area for their services. Twenty-four consulting firms, for example, account for a large part of their billings from giving advice in developing ethics codes and control systems. Approximately one hundred solo practitioner

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consultants devote their full-time practices to ethics consulting (Cordtz, 1994).

From 1973 through 1986 colleges and universities responded to the business community's concerns by increasing their offerings in ethics instruction as components of existing courses as well as in separate courses in business ethics and/or business and society, although such course offerings declined between 1986 and 1990. Currently two out of three undergraduate and graduate schools of business have ethics courses and/or courses in business and society, with almost half of these being required courses (Collins and Wartick, 1995). Nevertheless, the evidence is mounting that business schools are not being particularly effective in preparing their graduates to deal with the kinds of ethical issues they face at work. Increasing publicity about business scandals such as insider trading, environmental pollution and money laundering have created a heightened public concern about ethics (Andrews, 1989).

There is little evidence available from those who have been through undergraduate programs as to whether their undergraduate training has been useful to them in actual work situations involving ethical dilemmas. The present study, therefore, was undertaken to assess the utility of undergraduate ethics education in dealing with actual work dilemmas. We will briefly review the debate over whether ethics can be taught at the undergraduate level and then examine the evidence of the effectiveness of existing approaches to ethics education.

CAN ETHICS BE TAUGHT?

Some assert that college-age students' values are set, and thus university courses can have no impact on students' propensity to behave ethically (Baxter and Rarick, 1987). Others are just as adamant that "there is no time in the human life cycle more strategic for shaping the norms and potential of the moral vision that will ground the ethical choices embedded in the daily decisions and actions of a professional manager" (Parks, 1993, p. 13). Boroughs (1996, p. 66) concluded that business schools must provide some ethics study "to counteract the effects of other business school coursework." Kumar, Borycki, Nonis and Yauger (1991) found that exposure to the strategic decision model, frequently used in business school capstone courses, resulted in students being *less* likely to take ethical concerns into consideration in making business decisions at the end of their policy courses than they were when the course began. Those studies suggest a need for increased business ethics education, and a need to incorporate ethical analysis overtly into strategic management courses.

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To comply with American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business standards, business schools are directing an increasing amount of attention to ethics education (AACSB Procedures and Standards, 1990–1992). For example, in 1987 S.R. Shad endowed the Harvard Business School with $30 million for development of an ethics program, and less richly funded ethics programs soon followed at many other schools (McDonald and Donleavy, 1995). Although not all institutions have increased allocations to ethics programs, the AACSB standard has resulted in at least some lip service being given to the addition or integration of business ethics into the curricula of accredited schools.

Andrews (1989) indicted business ethics instructors and courses for being too theoretical and failing to provide students with information that is useable in actual business situations. Hosmer (1988) contended that the curriculum should not attempt to change students' values and beliefs but should teach systems of analysis to help students use their own values to weigh the potential benefits and harms of their actions on society, the organizations and individuals. This analytical emphasis is reiterated by others (e.g., Wynd and Mager, 1989; Gandz and Hayes, 1988), and the integration of ethical concerns into business decisions making is the stated goal of many ethics programs (Piper, Gentile and Parks, 1993). Hanson (1987) contends that ethics education will do nothing to prevent the most egregious violators but, rather, can help the fundamentally decent students to incorporate the ethical dimension into business decisions. While the debate continues regarding whether or not students' ethics are affected by their education, universities nonetheless have responded to moral concerns by including ethics in the curriculum as a separate course or integrating ethics throughout the functional areas of business coursework (Bishop, 1992).

HOW EFFECTIVE IS ETHICS EDUCATION AND TRAINING?

The incidence of white-collar crime frequently is cited as evidence that business schools fail to provide adequate preparation for dealing with ethical dilemmas. *The Wall Street Journal Index* for 1989 included approximately 800 articles that dealt with white-collar crime (Stanga and Turpen, 1991). These highly publicized violations of societal expectations led to calls for schools of business to better train future business people, even though we see no evidence that such crimes can be linked to the education of the offenders. Further, attempts to measure the effects of particular ethics courses and training programs have had mixed outcomes. Lane (1995) found that most business students said they would act unethically

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in situations that offered competitive gain to themselves or their organizations, and claimed they would respond more ethically in situations affecting the environment and society in general.

Brown (1994, p. 105) suggests that "new graduates, especially, suffer from 'ethical naivete' – a generally low level of appreciation for the complex moral questions that often underlie business decisions." A number of studies have found positive effects of ethics education and training on ethical awareness and reasoning (Boyd, 1981, 1982; Cohen and Cornwell, 1989; Stead and Miller, 1988). Yet Kavathatzopoulos (1991) found that although corporate ethics training was carried over into actual situations, business ethics courses from undergraduate business courses did not show this effect. Another study of the effectiveness of corporate ethics training found that such programs were effective but offered by very few firms (Delany and Sockell, 1992). Glenn (1992) reported that a university Business and Society course had a positive effect on the ethical judgement of students. He summarized studies that found a positive impact of ethics courses on ethical reasoning, ethical awareness, social awareness, values system changes, moral reasoning, and ethical judgement. One earlier study of business school graduates focused on the perception of their preparation for dealing with the ethical issues they faced one to five years after graduation; this study found that about one-half reported feeling adequately prepared by their undergraduate education to deal with the issues. Business courses perceived as emphasizing ethics included law and management, while statistics, economics, finances and information systems were perceived as not emphasizing ethics training (Carley and Adams, 1990).

McCabe, Dukerich and Dutton (1994) compared the impact of graduate law and business students' school professional training on ethical choices made by students. Both programs provided courses in ethics. Entering law and business students emphasized different values, and business students made more unethical decisions than did law school students. When students were tested on ethical choices at the end of their programs, the MBA students showed no improvement, whether they had taken the elective ethics course or not. Male business students showed a decline in ethical choices, while male and female law students and female business students showed some improvement.

Whether ethics courses or ethics units are effective depends on the objective being considered. Wynd and Mager (1989) suggested the goal of ethics courses should be to make students aware of ethical and social dimensions of business decisions. Similarly, Powers and Vogel (1980) suggested such courses should enable the student to integrate moral and

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managerial competence, and Hosmer's (1988) stated goal was to teach a method of moral reasoning in business decisions that would enable students to apply the moral standards they already have developed. There is little evidence available from those who have been through undergraduate programs as to whether their undergraduate training has been useful to them in actual work situations involving ethical dilemmas. Thus, our objective in this study was to determine whether individuals who have confronted ethical dilemmas in their work believe their undergraduate education was helpful to them. In other words, does undergraduate ethics training transfer to actual business decision making?

METHODS

Data were collected through structured interviews with 771 subjects over a two-year period. Interviewers were graduate students, the majority of whom worked during the day while attending an evening MBA program. As part of the group projects investigating ethical issues at work, graduate organizational behavior course students were assigned readings on effective interviewing, provided instruction in interviewing techniques, and engaged in supervised practice interviews. The structured interview guide, composed of forty closed-ended questions and eleven open-ended questions, was pretested in 89 interviews.

This method of data collection has a number of strengths. First, this approach resulted in a larger sample size than would be feasible using a small number of interviewers, and increased the population from which the sample was drawn. Second, interviewers were able to select subjects who were willing to talk with them about sensitive issues they might be hesitant to discuss with a stranger. The use of interviews rather than questionnaires allowed for probes and clarification of ambiguous or incomplete responses to open-ended questions. Finally, the use of actual incidents provided by the respondents rather than individual responses to hypothetical scenarios addresses an ongoing problem in business ethics research. Respondents were discussing their actual experiences with ethical dilemmas at work and reflecting on how well they felt their undergraduate education had prepared them for the kinds of issues they had actually faced in their work lives.

Subjects

Interviewers selected subjects for interviews by identifying employed individuals who acknowledged that they had experienced an ethical dilemma at work and were willing to discuss their experiences. Subjects were asked to

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recall the most serious or troubling ethical dilemma they had faced in their work life, to describe the situation in detail, to provide information about the company in which the incident occurred, and demographic information about themselves. For this analysis on perceived effects of undergraduate education for dealing with ethical dilemmas at work, we eliminated the 85 individuals who had not attended college, leaving a sample of 686. Respondents were employed in a variety of industries in companies with a median size of 300 employees.

Measures

Respondents were asked to identify all the college courses they could recall in which the topic of ethics was covered. Up to three responses to this question were coded, and no respondent reported more than three courses that stressed ethics. Responses to the question of how well they felt their undergraduate program prepared them to deal with ethical issues in their work were recorded on a four-point Likert-type scale anchored by 1 = little or no preparation and 4 = excellent preparation. Responses to the request to rate the amount of emphasis placed on ethics in their undergraduate program were recorded on a 1 (no emphasis) to 4 (a great deal of emphasis) Likert-type scale. Up to three responses were recorded to the question, "What could have been done in your undergraduate education to better prepare you for dealing with ethical issues in the workplace?"

RESULTS

The respondents reported an average of nine years work experience and company tenure of 4.8 years. The sample was 53 percent male, and the average age was 30.8. Approximately one-half the sample held non-management positions. Business was the undergraduate concentration of 60 percent of the respondents, and 132 (26 percent) majored in the sciences and 71 (14 percent) in liberal arts. Twenty-three percent (157) had some college education but no degree, 368 (54 percent) had earned a baccalaureate degree, and the remaining 23 percent (161) had some graduate study or had completed a graduate degree. Although the sample is non-random, the large sample size and representative demographics increase our confidence in generalizing from this sample (see Table I).

More than 40 percent of the sample reported that they had no courses in which ethics was covered. Courses cited as including ethics were management courses, mentioned by 20 percent; law courses, by 18 percent; ethics and religion courses cited by 12 percent; and psychology or sociology

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TABLE I

Demographics of the sample

Respondent gender	
Male	53.0%
Female	47.0%
Average respondent age	30.8 years
Years of work experience	4.8 years
Undergraduate major	
Business	60.0%
Sciences	26.0%
Liberal arts	14.0%
Level in the company	
Non-management	48.4%
Middle management	25.3%
Front-line supervisor	17.1%
Top management	9.2%
Functional area of employment	
Accounting	13.1%
Engineering	9.6%
Finance	11.6%
General management	16.8%
Marketing/Sales/Sales management	38.7%
Personnel	10.1%

courses (7 percent), followed by general business courses. Other courses received infrequent mention (see Table II).

More than two-thirds of respondents reported there was no or very little emphasis on ethics in their undergraduate program, and approximately seven percent stated there was a great deal of emphasis on ethics. Fifty-four percent of those who stated they had no courses in which ethics was covered reported there was no emphasis on ethics in their education, while only 8 percent of those who reported studying ethics in some courses said there was no emphasis on ethics.

When asked how well prepared they were by their undergraduate program to deal with ethical dilemmas in the workplace, almost 60 percent reported little or not preparation, and only 3 percent claimed excellent preparation (see Table III). Of those students who had not had a course

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TABLE II

Courses covering ethics*

	Number	Percent
None	266	40.7
Management	133	20.3
Law	120	18.3
Ethics/Religion	69	12.0
Psychology/Sociology	48	7.3
Business	40	6.1
Accounting	37	5.7
Philosophy	30	3.7
Marketing	20	3.1
Nursing/Medical	19	2.9
Communications/PR/Journalism	17	2.6
Education	12	1.8
Finance/Economics	9	1.4
Engineering	9	1.4
Math/Sciences	4	0.6
Literature	4	0.6
Computers/Information systems	2	0.3

* Total number of respondents = 654. Percentages can add to higher than 100 percent due to multiple responses.

covering ethics, 81 percent said they had little or no preparation, compared with 45 percent of those who had had some course coverage of ethics.

In response to a request for suggestions to better prepare students to deal with ethical dilemmas, more than 38 percent had no suggestions. Almost as many (36 percent) suggested the use of cases studies and scenarios. Twenty-one percent recommended the use of real incidents. Approximately the same percent suggested including ethics in existing classes (17.6 percent) or adding an ethics course (17.1 percent) to the curriculum. Others suggested that ethics instruction could be made more concrete by using examples (16.4 percent). Other recommendations included using role-playing of ethical dilemmas and covering legal aspects of ethical behavior (see Table IV).

A post hoc comparison of responses by business, science and liberal arts majors revealed some differences among groups. Students with degrees in the sciences reported the least amount of preparation for dealing with ethical issues at work ($n = 102$, 77 percent). Forty-six percent of liberal arts graduates reported little or no preparation, compared to 55

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TABLE III

Amount of emphasis and preparation in the undergraduate program to deal with ethical issues

	Number	Percent
Amount of emphasis		
No emphasis	181	26.8
Very little emphasis	274	40.5
Some emphasis	175	25.9
A great deal of emphasis	46	6.8
Amount of preparation		
Little or no preparation	396	58.8
Some preparation	217	32.2
A good bit of preparation	44	6.5
Excellent preparation	16	2.4

TABLE IV

What could have been done to better prepare students in ethics

	Number	Percent
Nothing	256	38.2
Use case studies/scenarios	240	35.8
Use real incidents	140	21.4
Include ethics in existing classes	118	17.6
Add ethics course	115	17.1
Use examples	110	16.4
Role play ethical dilemmas	49	7.3
Cover law re: ethics	44	6.6

* Total number of respondents = 654. Percentages can add to be higher than 100 percent due to multiple responses.

percent of the business majors ($\chi 2 = 31.4$, df = 6, $p < 0.001$). Similarly, those majoring in the sciences were more likely to report no emphasis or very little emphasis on ethics in their undergraduate program (82 percent), compared with 65 percent of the liberal arts majors and 66 percent of the business graduates ($\chi 2 = 24.1$, df = 6, $p < 0.001$).

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DISCUSSION

This research contributes to the growing empirical evidence that the ethics education provided to undergraduates fails to prepare them adequately to deal with ethical issues at work. Of 686 respondents, almost 60 percent believe that they had little or no preparation for dealing with ethical dilemmas they have actually faced, and only 3 percent describe their preparation as "excellent." When the sample is divided into business, sciences and liberal arts majors, those who had little or no preparation made up 66 percent of the business students, 82 percent of those majoring in the sciences, and 65 percent of those with concentrations in liberal arts. Thus, business students are closer to the liberal arts graduates than the poorly prepared science majors. However, neither business, sciences, nor liberal arts are perceived as doing a very effective job in preparing students for this aspect of work. Less than seven percent of the respondents report a great deal of emphasis on ethics in college courses, and those reporting no emphasis or very little emphasis account for more than 67 percent of the total sample. However, those students who reported they had at least one course which included ethics were far more likely to state they felt prepared to deal with the ethical dilemmas they faced at work than were those students who had not had a course the included an ethics component.

Although the most frequent response to the question of which undergraduate courses covered ethics was "none," management courses were cited most frequently, followed by law and ethics, then psychology and sociology courses. All other courses mentioned accounted for negligible percentages. In response to the question of what could have been done to better prepare the respondents for dealing with ethical dilemmas, again the most frequent response was "nothing." Use of case studies and scenarios, using real incidents, incorporating ethics issues into other courses, and providing examples of ethical components of decisions in different areas accounted for the remaining suggestions.

The data from this study are troubling for undergraduate educators in business, the sciences and liberal arts. Our students leave their undergraduate programs, enter the workforce, face ethical dilemmas, and conclude that little or nothing was done in their university years to prepare them for such moral issues. McCabe, Dukerich and Dutton (1994, p. 699), however, suggested that measuring the impact of ethics courses immediately after their completion tells us little about their effect; "the ability of students to fulfill course expectations in the short run may be of little real value when they become practitioners and must perform outside of the classroom." The present study, which asked for an assessment of undergraduate preparation to deal with actual workplace ethical dilemmas,

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indicates that what educators currently are providing is of limited usefulness to our graduates. However, those students who had some course or courses that included ethics reported they were much better prepared to deal with their ethical dilemmas. It thus appears that increasing the number of courses that include an ethics component or ensuring that all business school graduates take an ethics course would go far in helping our students prepare to deal with ethical problems at work. We also must accelerate our efforts to develop effective materials and pedagogies for ethics classes as well as to encourage efforts to incorporate the ethical dimension into decision-making processes, especially in classes that are not designed specifically to teach ethics.

More attention is needed to ascertain the most effective means by which transfer of training in ethical theory to practice occurs and how this transfer can be reinforced. Less use of the conventional case study approach and more role-playing might help students transfer their ability to reason ethically into the business context (McDonald and Donleavy, 1995). More focus should be placed on the conflicting moral demands individuals are likely to face in actual decisions and how these issues can be resolved appropriately. Professors should confront and discuss the difficulties involved in the transfer of ethical teaching and training into ethical practice (Furman, 1990).

Suggestions for improving undergraduate ethics instruction provided by the respondents in this study were limited to methods they had been exposed to in other courses. In addition, ethics educators have suggested the use of role-playing (Brown, 1994), fiction (Harris and Brown, 1989; Kennedy and Lawton, 1992; Marini, 1992), role set analysis (Adams, Harris and Carley, 1995), the creation of "honorable business school communities" (Trevino and McCabe, 1994), use of local newspaper articles for ethical dilemmas to analyze (Schaupp and Lane, 1992), having students report and analyze their own ethical dilemmas (Pizzolatto, 1993), and the use of an interdisciplinary approach (McDonald, 1992; Kennedy and Lawton, 1992).

We who teach ethics to future business people might argue that we cannot be held responsible for the immoral actions of the Milkins and Boeskys of the world Yet evidence that our students do not believe we are doing a very good job of helping them prepare for the important ethical aspect of their work lives should cause us serious concern.

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