

# Ethics in Higher Education

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## Abstract

*The most difficult questions that educators and institutions of higher learning often face have nothing to do with the content of the course or the way it is presented. They focus instead is on the ethical issues related to teaching, students, institution, discipline, and society. As an institution of higher learning is the microcosm of a culture and society, higher education is the bastion of ethical behavior and the training ground for students to determine, develop, and practice their personal ethics code, which will guide them for the remainder of their lives. It is with this premise, the institutions of higher learning and in turn higher education have the responsibility to provide students with education in ethical values, including the underlying concepts, critical thinking skills to help in decision making, a broad view of universal ethical codes, and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choices. Higher education can play an important role in assisting students to view ethical choices as a vital part of their future lives, both as professionals and in their daily living.*

## Introduction

The later years of the 20th century and the early years of the 21st century witnessed business and ethics scandals of unprecedented proportions. In late 2001, Enron, the 6th largest firm in the United States of America, collapsed under the weight of a host of ethical infringements and violations, including but not limited to pervasive hypercompetitiveness that may have forced unethical business practices. To name a few, Arthur Anderson, Adelphia,

Merrill Lynch, Tyco, and WorldCom quickly and successively followed Enron's demise. While the demise of these organizations linked in most part to individual and organizational improper or dishonest accounting practices, financial irregularities and misdeeds, higher education deserve equally stern reprimands for these problems for not preparing these individuals with critical thinking skills to help in ethical decision making and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choices. In that, higher education is culpable in its failure to provide students with education in ethical values, including the underlying concepts, critical thinking skills to help in decision-making, a broad view of universal ethical codes, and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choices.

Robinson and Moulton (2005) in their book entitled Ethical Problems in Higher Education write that the ethicists and are increasingly making their discipline available to various other fields as the practitioners in their own fields including higher education have turned their attention to the ethical dimensions of their own activities. The practitioners realize that many ethical issues arise in their occupational live; they are increasing willing to consider their job related activities and decisions in relations to ethical principles and social goals. Many of these practitioners realize that they are required to conduct themselves at work which may appear to conflict with their own ethical principles. Robinson and Moulton in the preface of Ethical Problems in Higher Education write "Despite the Ivory Tower Myth, academics are not immune from pettiness and immorality (2005, p. xi).

The paper is significant in that it highlights moral difficulties and dilemmas that manifest themselves in special forms with the higher education. This paper briefly highlights various ethical theories followed by a brief discussion regarding the higher education, its relationship to society, whom to teach, and responsibilities to students.

Since it is the responsibility of higher education to present a broad view of universal ethical codes, prepare students in critical thinking skills to help in ethical decision-making, and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choice and discusses that are unique to higher education because of its perceived or real goals. Therefore, with this purpose in mind, this paper discusses our responsibilities as educators, institutions of higher learning, and higher education to each constituency. First, we discuss our responsibilities to our students: for example, the role educators, institutions of higher learning and higher education play in educating students in the practices that foster ethical and socially responsible behavior required of future citizens and leaders. Second, we discuss the need to protect and encourage the free pursuit of learning, the need to model the best scholarly and ethical standards, the need to avoid exploitation, harassment, or discrimination. Lastly, we discuss our responsibilities to colleagues, the institution, and the discipline we represent.

Finally, this paper also contributes to the discussion on how to incorporate and benchmark ethical practices in the curriculum in higher education.

### *Ethics: brief literature review*

Before we set out to prescribe a model of ethical and moral conduct for higher education, we must first attempt to understand what ethics is and how people perceive it applies to educator, institutes of higher learning and higher education.

Ethics, according to John Dewey (as cited in Shapiro and Stefkovich, 2005, p. 10) "Is the science that deals with conduct insofar as this is considered right or wrong, good or bad." Shapiro and Stefkovich further add that ethics emanates from four points of view; justice, critique, care and profession. Ethics of justice focuses on the rights and law, whereas, ethics of critiques deals with the tension between ethic of justice and concept of democracy, or the processes used to determine if the laws are just. Ethics of care deals with moral decision-making and social responsibility. The three combined, according to Starratt (1994) result in ethics that are more complete. Finally, ethics of profession, in particular relating to the profession of higher education, serve as the guidepost for the profession giving statements about its image and character, role of morality and professional judgment. In this writer's opinion, the ethics in educational profession is important in that it "carries with it a restructuring of human life" (Foster, 1986, p. 33).

According to Michalos (1995), ethics is a set of moral principles of conduct that define what is considered good or bad along with the moral duties and obligations of an individual within the business, community or society.

These principles also shape the decisions people or organizations make. In business, Marion and Cengage (2001) posit that practicing ethics means deliberately applying standards of fairness, or moral rights and wrongs, to decision-making, behavior, and practice in the organization. Michalos (1995) argues, "Because community is necessary for business and morality is necessary for community, morality is necessary for business" (p. 55). Societies have stakes in higher education systems; as such, ethical conduct within higher education can be seen as critical to both social order and justice. Yet the challenge is that lately many people think ethics in higher education is an oxymoron. Although, higher education can overcome this stigma and become more socially responsible by providing students with education in ethical values, including the underlying concepts, critical thinking skills to help in decision-making, a broad view of universal ethical codes, and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choices.

Higher education remains a crucial connection to the business and society and is widely perceived as educating the students with ethical values, underlying ethical concepts, presenting a broad view of universal ethical codes; prepare students in critical thinking skills to help in ethical decision-making, and a sense of responsibility for others when making personal choices. Business is widely seen as the creator of wants and needs through producing, distributing, advertising, and finally selling the goods or services to consumers. Therefore, to succeed and profit, each business must make a substantial investment in its

processes and efforts. In doing so business as the process and individuals as the drivers of the process are widely criticized for their broad managerial perspective on profiting without reflecting on the wider ethical and societal implications of the effects of business activities. Kelly (2005) contends, the business concept is concerned with marrying individual customer satisfaction with firms' profitability. This does not mean that the social good is maximized.

Klein and Nason (2000) think that business ethics is an applied field and is the systematic study of practicing ethics in business by deliberately applying standards of fairness, or moral rights and wrongs, to marketing decision-making, behavior, and practice in the organization.

Murphy and Laczniak (2006) suggest three distinctive views on ethics: personal or individual, organizational, and societal, which can often be conflicting and self-defeating. The ethics of the organizations in which the individuals work and that of the society in which the individuals live may not be the same as the values held by the individuals, resulting in a conflict particularly when individual values are significantly higher than those of the organizational values. Beckner (2004) suggests several types of dilemmas that involve conflicting basic values. These conflicts and dilemmas, between individual values and those of the organization can be traced to how the organizational decisions are made. Organizational decisions pertain to a host of specific traditional business process, within which the organization may be interested in marketing socially

unacceptable products or utilize deceptive promotional activities by misrepresenting or misleading claims of the value consumers would likely receive from the products or services. Ethical challenges to business arise during the time when most businesses, face considerable socioeconomic, environmental, geopolitical, and regulatory stresses. Coupled with these strains, there are other challenges that organizations face such as the need to compete and succeed in a hypercompetitive higher education market, adding to great uncertainty and concerns regarding the values and principles by which they operate.

#### *Ethical dilemmas in higher education*

According to Pieniadz Felicio (1999) unlike other professional organizations, higher education has not adopted formal and well-established codes of ethics particularly in light of distance learning models and computer technology that have compelled educators to reassess their working assumptions about teaching and learning.

Scott (2003) contends that higher education not only expresses intellectual and scientific values directly through their teaching and research; it also embodies powerful organizational values, and as it contributes crucially to the formation of wider social and cultural values. Yet higher education, it seems, is increasingly becoming reluctant to acknowledge these essential value structures and embracing the influence of 'business' culture. The effect, instead of presenting themselves as value-laden institutions, higher education now seem to wish to be

regarded as technically contrived 'service' organizations that willingly accept whatever values their key stakeholders, notably government, society, industry, and students seek to impose. Scott (2003) adds, the sad result is that ethical issues are in danger of becoming second-order issues in the modern higher education, as ethical issues have tended to be redefined as essentially procedural issues rather than as fundamental issues directly connected to the core mission of the university. This shift can be readily observed in the context of enrollment and graduation as concentrate on much narrower, often technical, issues such as student success and student services. Robinson and Moulton contend, "The scarcity creates or worsens ethical problems for institutions of higher education" (2005, p. 72).

A similar shift can be observed in the context of teaching is that the critical inquiry has been reduced to problem solving. "A college degree", according to Robinson and Moulton "is a credential that conveys a set of expectations that the holder has reached a certain level of intellectual level of competence, proficiency, and judgment" (2005, p. 79). Instead of encouraging 'big debates' about the desirable development of the curriculum that would enable the students to attain a set of expectations, a certain level of intellectual level of competence, proficiency, and judgment, universities now focus on policies and procedures designed to avoid, or punish, plagiarism by students. Scott (2003) presents two possible interpretations of the significance of this apparent conspiracy of silence and culture of disinterest with regard to ethical issues in higher education; subordination of university values to external political

and market forces combined with an internal collapse of morale and confidence, and the apparent erosion of traditional academic values.

*The fix*

Like any other kind of work, according to Wilcox and Ebbs (1992) work in academic life is laden with values, and has a moral dimension that emerges from the ethical reflection characteristic of institutional self-scrutiny. Three elements, teachers, institutional leadership, and students play vital yet equal role in higher education. According to (Boyer 1990) the role of the teacher can be conceived in four phases: teaching, discovery, application, and integration, each of which has its own ethical assumptions and problems. In light of Boyer's assertion, students are vulnerable before and unequal to the scholar, therefore, trust must characterize faculty-student and faculty-administration relationships. Often the competing needs of faculty-student-administration relationships roles cause conflicts in higher education, resulting often in conflicting and self-defeating outcomes, particularly when individual values are significantly higher than those of the organizational values are.

Beckner suggests virtues of university teaching (2004, p. 128, Table 9.1).

Virtue	Examples of Application
Respectfulness	In teaching students and in relation with colleagues
Sensibility	Toward students seeking tutorial support; conducting peer review activities
Pride	In adequate preparation to teach
Courage	To innovate in teaching practice;

	confront challenging situations with students and colleagues
Fairness	Particularly in relation to assessment issues; investigation of complaints about colleagues
Openness	In relation to self, peer and students evaluation of practice
Restraint	In conveying the teacher's ideological and or theoretical position; checking emotional reactions
Collegiality	In managing courses and invoking consultative processes with students and colleagues

Ethical decision-making help successful leadership in the face of ever-increasing complexities in higher education. Wilcox and Ebbs (1992) posit that leadership in higher education continues to be under intense pressure to respond to societal and business issues resulting from trends in demographics, enrollment, and economic and social forces that bring both possible disruption and opportunity. The use of ethical values and ethical reflections in decision-making can positively affect the institution's ability to respond to complex decisions about funding and the budget. Leaders in higher education must establish processes for defining the issues, making decisions by reviewing alternatives based on ethical rules and principles, deciding whether to carry out the action, and then implementing it using the best deliberative judgment.

Ethical decision making (adapted from nine steps to underline ethical decision-making by Kidder, 1995, pp. 183-86 as cited in Beckner, 2004).

Determine	Guidance
Recognize that there is a moral issue	The matter is not

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	<p>simply one of convention, manners, or involving other values, such as economics, political, technological, and aesthetic.</p>
Determine the actor	<p>If there is a moral issue, whose is it? Is it mine or someone else's?</p>
Facts	<p>Gather the relevant facts</p>
Test	<p>Test for right vs. wrong issues. Test for right vs. right paradigm. This serves to bring sharply into focus the fact that it is indeed a genuine dilemma, in that it pits two deeply held core values against each other</p>
Apply the resolution	<p>Locate the line of reasoning that seems most relevant and persuasive to the issue at hand</p>
Investigate the "trilemma" options	<p>Is there a third way through this dilemma? Perhaps a compromise</p>
	<p>Make the decision</p>
	<p>Revisit and reflect on the decision</p>

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Racism, sexism, homophobia, substance abuse, and academic dishonesty are some of the complex issues students on today's campuses encounter, for which they are often ill prepared by experience or individual development. The distinctive nature of the ethical environment that consistently asserts the importance of human dignity, nourishes growth and achievement, and insists on respect in interpersonal communication and relations and other institutional ethos affects the values and

interests manifested in the campus climate and the overall effect of the college experience on the student.

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