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## Integrating Ethics into the Curriculum: A Case Study on Developing an Ethics Colloquium

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# Integrating Ethics into the Curriculum: A Case Study on Developing an Ethics Colloquium

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## Abstract

Business ethics is certainly not a new topic, but highly publicized corporate scandals have renewed the call for ethical decision-making in the business world. Colleges and universities are being challenged to better prepare future business leaders for ethical decision-making. The purpose of this paper is to share how the Economics and Business Department faculty from a small, liberal arts institution explored one model for integrating ethics education into the department curriculum. A team of department members explored ethics programs at other institutions and researched models for integrating ethics into the curriculum. Using ideas from their research the faculty team created an ethics colloquium that could be effectively piloted within the current department structure and curriculum. This paper describes the structure of the colloquium, student reflections on the benefits and suggested improvements for the course, and lessons learned by the faculty team that facilitated the course.

**Keywords:** ethics, curriculum, colloquium, small college

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the wake of the corporate scandals involving Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco, there has been a renewed focus on business ethics. Business ethics is not a new topic; the past is littered with scandals, including price-fixing, insurance fraud, junk bonds, and insider trading (Couger 1989; Gray & Clark 2002; Powers & Vogel 1980) and subsequent calls for focus on ethics. According to Guy (1990), the U.S. Bureau of Justice reported that nearly eleven thousand people were convicted for fraud, forgery, and embezzlement in federal cases alone during 1986. Clearly ethical decision-making continues to be an issue for business today.

Growth in technology has brought with it many ethical questions – some new, some just new versions of old questions. There are questions about intellectual property, plagiarism, and piracy (Bodi 1998). IT professionals are concerned with their level of responsibility for the type and quality of computer output generated (Pliagas 2000). More broadly, IT professionals are becoming part of organization-wide discussions of appropriate use of computer services and information stores (Bodi 1998; Couger 1989; Pliagas

2000; Stahl 2001). IT workers manage and process the information within an organization and so are intimately involved with confidential information, what information is available, who gets access to that information, and how that information is retained, backed up, and deleted (Jaffe 2004). Because of their knowledge, those in IT positions are being called to actively join the conversations about privacy, information sharing, and other ethical dilemmas (Bodi 1998; Wilder & Soat 2001). IT professionals have a responsibility to realize the possible uses of the technologies they create and maintain and to be part of the conversation on the implications of those uses (Wilder & Soat 2001).

The cost of poor ethical decision-making can be high for organizations and their many and varied stakeholders. In addition, there is evidence that ethical decision-making is good for business. Ethical decision-making can enhance trust between parties, and trust reduces the cost of transactions. When trust is low, parties implement internal and external controls to protect themselves from broken trust, and such regulation adds overhead (Gray & Clark 2002). Quoting a Harvard study conducted over 11 years, Mitchell (2001) notes

that “companies that paid attention to customers, employees and stockholders outperformed those that didn’t in growth of net income over the 11-year period by a factor of 756” (p.9). Mitchell (2001) also cites a 1999 survey of over 50 studies on the relationship between social performance and financial performance of corporations, that concluded “almost two-thirds of these studies found an ethical advantage of some significance, whereas less than one-tenth found the converse” (p.10).

Given that organizations benefit from ethical behavior, and that ethical business behavior is necessary to maintain the trust of investors and society at large, organizations have tried different approaches to deal with ethical issues. Many organizations now have some form of ethics policy and/or have created high-level executive positions in ethics and compliance (Jacobs 1999; Wilder & Soat 2001). Associations have developed codes of ethics (Jacobs 1999). Policies and codes may cover issues such as proprietary information, conflict of interest, use of computing resources, and privacy (Jacobs 1999). The reality, though, is such policies can be hard to enforce, and controls put in place to ensure ethical and trustworthy behavior can in fact undermine trust building in an organization.

Ultimately, authors argue, building an ethical organization starts with instilling values and ethics in individuals (Foote 2002; Jacobs 1999; Jana 1998). Educational institutions have been called upon to help in building ethical leaders. The IS 2002 Model Curriculum includes exhibiting strong ethical principles as part of the IS discipline, and ethics are explicitly stated as part of the learning goals for both the Electronic Business Strategy, Architecture, and Design course and the Analysis and Logical Design course. Through such requirements for accreditation and curriculum standards, and financial support from the business community and foundations, colleges and universities have renewed their focus on ethics as part of the business, and specifically IS, curriculum (Pliagas 2000; Couger 1989; Smith & Oakley 1996; Cole & Smith 1995).

## 2. DEVELOPING AN ETHICS COURSE

Luther College is a private liberal arts institution affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. The mission of the college involves helping students connect faith and learning, freedom and responsibility, and life’s work with service. In keeping with this mission, ethical decision-making is an important component in students’ development. The MIS major resides in the Department of Economics and Business, which also offers majors in accounting, economics, and management. Just as ethical issues are prominent in IT, all aspects of business are facing new ethical challenges today. Thus, the Luther College MIS faculty combined with faculty from management, accounting and economics to look at ways to make

ethics a more intentional part of the curriculum. In order to help investigate ways the Department of Economics and Business could better prepare students for facing ethical issues, the department applied for and received a grant from the James S. Kemper Foundation. The Foundation places priority on curricular development with an emphasis on ethics and values in business education.

The objectives stated in the grant proposal were:

- To offer a collaborative educational format that encourages dialogue on ethical leadership between undergraduates and business leaders.
- To offer opportunity to highlight business ethics on campus and allow the students to interact with business leaders representing corporations beyond the Decorah vicinity.
- To recognize the value Luther’s liberal arts focus contributes to students’ ethical development.

The project was broken down into three phases:

- Planning and exploratory visits to various centers for ethical leadership around the Midwest during the summer of 2003.
- Development and implementation of a team-taught course incorporating invited speakers.
- Hosting a public seminar on business ethics and leadership on the Luther College campus.

During the summer of 2003, representatives from the Economics and Business Department visited with representatives from the University of Thomas (MN) and the Center for Ethical Business Culture and from DePaul University – College of Commerce Institute for Business and Professional Ethics. The information from those visits, and other publications from those who have integrated ethics into their curriculums provided a number of suggestions for making ethics education effective.

Ethics consists of two parts – the theoretical principles and the application of principles (Gilbert 1992). Starting ethics discussions with a more theoretical foundation or framework is helpful. Pliagas (2000) notes the usefulness of starting with “values clarification” so that students realize they come into the class with their own standards and ethics. Hatton (1996) talks about helping students recognize the individual codes of ethics and rules that guide their individual decision-making. Once students understand their own ethical framework, they need practice applying that framework. Carruth and Carruth (1991) suggest that exposing students to real ethical dilemmas before they enter the work place through readings and discussions may allow them to be better prepared for the ethical dilemmas they will face in the future. People often mimic the behavior they see in others, particularly those in authority (Gray & Clark 2002). Thus, involving business people in discussions with students about real ethical business cases can help

students learn ways of approaching ethical dilemmas (Hatton 1996; Cole & Smith 1995), and help students understand the risks involved in unethical behaviors (Fraedrich & Guerts 1990). Because undergraduates often have little work experience, it seems more effective to place an ethics course later in the curriculum, after the functional classes, so that students have some foundation in the business environment (Gilbert 1992).

### 3. STRUCTURING THE COURSE

Because of staffing and departmental considerations, the faculty of the Economics and Business Department worked together to create a general business ethics course open to all majors in the department for the pilot course. In order to provide students as much exposure as possible to “real world” situations and those who deal with such situations, the course was created as a colloquium, meeting seven Monday nights during the spring semester. All but the final meeting, which was used for course evaluation, consisted of an outside speaker talking with students about how ethics were incorporated into his/her organization and/or work life. Meeting times were set for three hours, and most meetings used the full time. Speakers included: (1) the CEO of a relatively small completely employee-owned, intentionally values-centered manufacturing company, (2) a representative of the Center for Ethical Business Culture (MN), (3) a mid-level manager of a large technology-driven organization, (4) chief corporate compliance officer for an international manufacturing organization, and member of the Ethics Office Association and the MAPI Ethics & Compliance Council, (5) two leadership development consultants in a team presentation, and (6) Donna Wood, the David W. Wilson Chair in Business Ethics at the University of Northern Iowa.

The speakers each approached ethics from a different standpoint. Themes included the development of individual values, understanding one’s affinity groups and formal theory on values and ethical development. A number of the speakers presented ethical dilemmas from their work experience and helped students analyze the situations presented. Some of the speakers addressed the development of corporate policies on ethics and how such policies relate to the individual employee. Beyond setting policy, speakers explained how their organizations use mission and policy for developing and maintaining an ethical culture in the work place. Students were also given the opportunity to role-play as they worked through ethical issues using a business simulation created by the Center for Ethical Business Culture.

Five members of the Department of Economics and Business were co-facilitators of the course. At least one faculty member representing each major in the department (accounting, economics, management, and

MIS) was included on the team. After each meeting, students were required to write a one-page reflection on the speaker’s presentation. Each reflection was read and responded to by a member of the faculty team.

For students, the course was offered as a one-credit elective for seniors in the department. Twenty-four seniors, representing all four majors, were enrolled in the course. The course was graded credit/no-credit. To receive the credit, students were required to attend and participate in each session and to complete the reflection papers for each session.

### 4. EVALUATING THE COURSE

In the week prior to the final meeting, students were sent a questionnaire via email asking them to respond to several questions intended to qualitatively assess the impact and structure of the course. The questions were:

- Describe your impressions and conceptualization of business ethics before taking this course.
- Has this course changed your conceptualization of business ethics?
- How would you describe your ethical framework and approach to ethical decision-making before taking this course?
- Has this course changed the way you think about your ethical framework and approach to ethical decision-making? If so, how?
- Which session(s) gave you the greatest personal insight into the development of ethical practices in business?
- What suggestions do you have for improving the structure or format of the course?

#### What Students Found Beneficial

Students indicated the course positively affected them in a number of ways. First, many students gained an expanded view of business ethics, including the variety of situations people face and the variety of reasons people may be prompted to make unethical decisions. Students came to better understand how large scandals could be allowed to take shape because of the minor decisions of a lot of individuals - individuals who may not even realize the implications of their decisions. Similarly, students began to recognize that while some decisions do not appear ethical on the surface, they might have ethical implications.

Second, students appreciated being challenged to intentionally identify their values, what influences shape those values, and how those values influence their decision-making – before they hit the “real world.” As one student reflected, her ethical framework prior to taking the class was “unexamined.” Even students who had a strong sense of their values before entering the course seemed to benefit from intentional examination

of how those values might affect their decision-making in a work environment. Students found different speaker's tips for evaluating whether you are doing the right thing to be helpful – for example, asking yourself if your decision/actions were publicized on TV, would you feel comfortable with what you had decided?

Third, students valued gaining an understanding of how corporate policy and culture can be shaped to help employees in ethical decision-making. Yet, many students expanded their view of ethics as they came to recognize that ethics is more than just following the rules, and in many situations, there is not one “right” answer. Students came to recognize the challenge of balancing the interests of various stakeholders when those interests may be in conflict.

Fourth, students appreciated seeing the positive side of business ethics. They saw evidence that there are people and organizations that care about creating and sustaining an ethical business culture, rather than simply more evidence of scandals. Students felt positively about the chance to see that good ethics can make good business sense. Many appreciated hearing from professionals that business is not only about the “bottom line.”

Finally, students appreciated the chance to address real problems from the work place with business professionals. The speakers presented a variety of cases and scenarios and gave students a chance to analyze the situations. Speakers also explained to students how such situations had been dealt with in reality, so that students could get a flavor for the implications of their decisions. Students found great value in role-playing with a business simulation that placed students in key organizational roles where decisions needed to be made.

### Student Suggestions

Students also had a number of useful suggestions for improving the course. First, three-hour meetings made maintaining attention difficult. The general consensus seemed to be that two hours was a long enough time period to really learn from a speaker, but short enough that students could stay engaged the entire time. Second, while speakers came from varied backgrounds and presented different ethical issues, there was a noticeable amount of overlap in topics, particularly values recognition. In addition, the course schedule was set based on the availability of the chosen speakers. Such a schedule meant that topics were not necessarily presented in the best order. For example, a presentation containing much of the theory of ethical development happened late in the semester, while the business simulation was done at the second meeting. The flow of the semester would have been improved even by simply exchanging the timing of those two topics. Each speaker was also given freedom to develop his/her own presentation. Each speaker was given suggestions by the faculty team on what would be useful for students

and what the faculty team felt that speaker's unique area of contribution might be. Students suggested the faculty team provide more structure for speakers to help keep the flow of material engaging and effective. Third, while students found great value in case discussions, they felt even more casework, or another simulation would have been useful. In particular, students felt role-playing was an underutilized tool. Finally, students found the required reflection papers to be a good tool for reflecting on the presentations, however, they suggested time for group reflection on each speaker, or even small group discussions following each speaker.

### Faculty Lessons

Most importantly, as a faculty, we learned that we could impact students' thinking about ethics. While there is no guarantee that the students will always make good ethical decisions because of the course, there is evidence that we have heightened students' sensitivity to ethical issues and their awareness of their own value systems. We also learned that we have more work to do in this area. Some students commented that this experience helped them to see that business is about more than the bottom line and that there was a difference between compliance and ethics. Such comments indicate that as a faculty need to do a better job of incorporating ethical issues and decision-making into all of our courses – a suggestion many researchers have made. Having created a faculty team to facilitate this colloquium, we have actively engaged five people in finding ways to effectively incorporate ethics into the curriculum, which should make integrating ethics across the department easier.

Second, we learned that while students need some fundamental ethical theory, case studies and role-playing are where students benefit most. In addition to simply presenting or analyzing more cases or simulations, students need time to discuss and reflect on their analysis. Small groups may be an effective tool for such discussion.

Third, our experience reflects the research that suggests engaging students and business people together is an effective model. Students showed great enthusiasm in engaging with professionals from a variety of organizations. Speakers from the “real world” appear to have a level of credibility with students that faculty members are not always given. And, having speakers who can approach ethics from different angles – CEOs creating organizational culture, compliance officers creating policy, and employees working with the rules and the culture – helps students get a more comprehensive view of business ethics.

Finally, the structure of the course seemed reasonably effective. While the faculty is not certain that a stand-alone course is the best approach to ethics, such a format does allow better flexibility for bringing in outside speakers. If we were to do this course again, we would

be more intentional about providing structure and scheduling our speakers, so that we might more effectively order topics and minimize unneeded repetition. And, we would definitely reassess the length of the class period so that we may get the most from each presenter, but also keep students engaged throughout the class.

## 5. CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PLANS

As technology continues to evolve and be absorbed into our daily lives, ethical issues surrounding the development and use of various technologies will grow. We as a faculty recognize the need to enhance the way we deal with ethical issues in our curriculum. The students we serve today will be future business leaders, and we have the opportunity to help them develop a solid ethical foundation in preparation for their careers. We believe the ethics colloquium model incorporates many of the ideas others have found effective in teaching ethics, and we believe with further refinements, such a course will continue to be an effective tool for student development.

Based on what we learned from the pilot colloquium, the MIS faculty are creating a second iteration of the ethics colloquium to be taught during Luther's January term. We intend to incorporate the lessons we learned from the original colloquium to structure the January course, Social and Ethical Implications of Computing. During the January term, students only take one course, which typically meets for two hours each day, so we will be able to utilize many of the positive structural features of the colloquium, such as guest speakers. While we believe guest speakers are an integral part of the course, the faculty will present more content in this new course, particularly regarding ideas of building a personal ethical framework. Utilizing the faculty more will allow us to provide a relatively consistent, quality course, each time we offer the course, thus mediating some of the risk in having the course content and quality be primarily dependent on guest speakers. The most significant change, though, is that this time, the course will be facilitated by only two faculty members, both in MIS, and thus will focus specifically on social and ethical implications of computing. We believe the original colloquium taught us valuable lessons about structuring an ethics course, and we hope this second offering will help us refine our approach to best serve the needs of our MIS students.

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