A STUDY OF THE IMPACT OF UNETHICAL BEHAVIOR AMONG BUSINESS STUDENTS IN AN EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Mike Shurden, Lander University, Greenwood, SC
Susan Shurden, North Greenville University, Tigerville, SC
John Garlick, South Carolina State University, Orangeburg, SC

ABSTRACT

Ethics is a relevant and interesting topic, which also is an area of concern in college and employment settings because students ultimately seek jobs, often in the business community. This paper examines some of the ethical issues which students are currently encountering. Additionally, it identifies the significance of these issues from the perception of students in various business classes at a small, public, southeastern university. The study further examines the likelihood of students continuing to engage in unethical conduct within an educational setting if they believe it will cause harm to others. Surveys were administered in six business classes. The classes consisted of two sections of managerial accounting, two sections of operations management, and two sections of Analytical Analysis II. The diversity of these classes would give the authors a good sample of both upper level and lower level business students. The purpose of the surveys is to gather data on the ethical behavior of business students. The survey consists of thirty questions covering a wide range of ethical issues. The data will be analyzed for significant differences, and inferences will be made regarding the behavior of business students.

INTRODUCTION

Atkins & Radtke (2004) indicate that several studies (Johnson & Beard, 1992; Stevens, et al, 1993) have been done on the concept of students' perceptions of ethics in business (1). Likewise, Shurden, Santandreau, & Shurden (2010) conducted a study in which students were surveyed in 16 ethical areas within the business realm ranging from personal use of company e-mail to accepting gifts from clients. The overall result in the Shurden study indicated an increase in awareness concerning ethical issues over a period of three years whereby the students were deemed to have been taught ethics (8). This study is in contrast to an observation made by McCabe in 2005 whereby he indicates that after working in the corporate world for over 20 years, his return to the classroom revealed an "erosion in the ethical values of recent college graduates" (5, 2005).

According to Richter & Buttery (2002), "ethics refers to a set of rules that define right and wrong conduct that help individuals distinguish between fact and belief, decide how issues are defined, and decide what moral principles apply to the situation…" (7, p. 142). Within the area of unethical behavior among college students is the topic of academic dishonesty which includes the subject of plagiarism. This topic is only one of the questions in the following study on the unethical behavior among business students. Other questions addressed are whistle blowing on classmates, protecting classmates by covering for them either by signing the roll when they are absent or allowing them to copy homework, doing homework for them or sharing group work. Likewise, using the excuse of illness to miss an exam due to under preparedness is discussed in this study. Students surveyed are then asked how to minimize this unethical behavior from their perspective. The results will hopefully help faculty in addressing the issue of student unethical behavior among business students in an educational environment.

METHODOLOGY

A study was conducted of business students enrolled in select classes at a small, southeastern, public university. Approximately 118 students were surveyed with 111 of the surveys being useable. Students

were advised of the nature of the study and told that it was voluntary on their part. There were 30 questions in the survey regarding ethical situations within the educational environment. Of these 30 questions, the following nine questions were selected as representative of ethical situations which can occur within an educational environment.

DATA ANALYSIS

According to Table I, only 23% of the students in the study indicated that cheating on exams was "likely" to exist at this university and 4% indicated "very likely". This means that the majority of the students at this university do not deem cheating to be a problem. If cheating were a problem, they believe it would cause "significant" harm to the school, their classmates, and themselves.

Table 1
Cheating on Exams

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	25%	48%	23%	4%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
You	19%	17%		64%
Your classmates	21%	27%		52%
Your school	13%	26%		61%

However, academic dishonesty is a major area of ethical concern with faculty at other universities and with the authors (5, McCabe, 2005), (2, Johnson & Martin, 2005) with about 75% of students admitting to cheating in 2005 and only 5% of those students getting caught (2, Johnson & Martin, 2005). In fact, Johnson & Martin (2005) indicated that during their interview of students on the subject, "one student likened cheating to driving over the speed limit—everybody knows it is against the rules, but everybody does it". It is the authors' opinions that cheating on tests is more prevalent at this university than perceived by the students, and perhaps the opinion by students in the Johnson and Martin study (2, 2005) could represent the reason for the minimal perception by the students in our study.

Table 2
Allowing another student to copy your work

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	11%	32%	42%	15%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
You	33%	33%		34%
Your classmates	25%	40%		35%
Your school	31%	36%		33%

The concept of academic dishonesty can include allowing a student to copy your work. The authors generally attribute this unethical behavior to homework situations; however, it could include cheating. In this survey, the authors intended the question to be anything other than cheating on tests, which was the aforementioned question. Table 2 shows that students consider this type of unethical behavior as "likely" to occur with a 42% rate and "very likely" at 15%. They also perceive the harm caused to them as almost

equally ranging from "little" at 33%, "moderate" at 33% and "significant" at 34%. These students also deem this behavior as having a "significant effect" on classmates with a response rate of 35% and a "significant effect" on the school at 33%. The almost equal response rate in regard to the "significant effect" is approximately 20% to 30% lower than in the question regarding cheating, indicating to the authors that students do not believe this "copying work" behavior as having an effect as serious as the cheating situation on themselves, others, or the school.

Table 3
Allowing someone else do your assignment

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	28%	34%	32%	6%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
you	29%	32%		39%
Your classmates	34%	34%		32%
Your school	36%	33%		31%

Allowing others to completely do an assignment is along the same line of unethical conduct as cheating. However, it has a slight difference to "allowing someone to copy" as in Table 2 in that it absolves the perpetrator of doing any work whatsoever with another individual completing the entire assignment. This type of unethical behavior could also include the next question regarding plagiarism because if a paper is written by one individual and turned in by another, plagiarism has occurred by the perpetrator taking credit for another's work. According to the results in Table 3, 32% of the students believe this behavior is "likely" to occur at this university with only 6% believing it is "very likely" to occur. If it does occur, 39% of the students believe there will be "significant" harm to themselves, 32% believe "significant" harm will occur to classmates, and 31% believe "significant" harm will occur to the school. The authors believe this is a serious infraction, especially if it involves a research project.

Table 4
Plagiarism (copying work directly from a source and turning it in as your own)

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	32%	39%	24%	5%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
you	24%	18%		58%
Your classmates	29%	21%		50%
Your school	19%	22%		59%

Plagiarism is an area that goes "hand in hand" with cheating. Based on Table 4, students in the study do not view this ethical issue as a problem at this university. A total of 29% (combined) view plagiarism as likely or very likely. As with the cheating on exam question, the majority of the students at this university do not perceive plagiarism as a problem at this university; however, if it were a problem, over half indicate that it would cause "significant" harm to their school, classmates, or themselves.
 In an overall analysis of the above three questions, they would all be grouped under "academic dishonesty". While some academic dishonesty such as plagiarism may be attributed to ignorance (2, Johnson & Martin, 2005), the perception of Bill Puka (6, 2005), a philosophy professor at Rensselaer

Polytechnic Institute indicates that professors themselves are to blame for academic dishonesty. His article "Student Cheating" (2005) indicates that many professors pride themselves on making courses difficult for students. "They [the professors] depict themselves as 'hard-nosed graders' who give 'killer exams,' which many fail and almost all do poorly on" (6, p. 33). Likewise, if the truth be known, college business professors take few if any courses on teaching prior to entering the classroom. Generally, they are often more interested in research than their performance in the classroom (6, Puka, 2005, p. 34.)

Table 5
Whistle blowing (ratting) on a classmate

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	33%	51%	15%	1%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
you	53%	22%		25%
Your classmates	28%	33%		39%
Your school	39%	33%		28%

The authors define whistle blowing as revealing unethical conduct. The results in Table 5 show that 33% of the students believe it is "very unlikely" that whistle blowing will occur at this university, and that 51% believe it is "unlikely". If whistle blowing on the part of peers occurred, 53% believe it would have little effect. However, the effect of whistle blowing on other classmates is deemed to be "significant" as indicated by 39% of the students, and only 28% of the students believe the effect on the school is "significant". The authors believe that the 53% who indicate that whistle blowing would have little effect on them could imply this is the percentage of students in the study who would be less likely to be involved in academic dishonesty, either by cheating or plagiarizing.

Table 6
Signing the class roll for an absent student

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	14%	28%	36%	22%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
you	48%	24%		28%
Your classmates	40%	24%		36%
Your school	46%	31%		23%

The authors have observed that students tend to "cover" for one another, especially if there is a friendship relationship. Therefore, the results to the "forging class roll" question are not surprising. Based on Table 6, the majority of the students indicate that this conduct is "likely" (36%) to occur or "very likely" (22%) to occur. If it did occur, 46% the students perceive the harm it would cause to the school is "little", with 40% and 48% respectively believing the harm to classmates and to themselves is "little". Likewise, the authors do not deem this infraction as to be as severe as academic dishonesty; therefore, the consequences to the student would not be that significant.

Along a similar vein of a student missing class and allowing someone to sign the roll for them is the concept of using illness as an excuse to miss class. Table 7 indicates that students at this particular university deem missing class due to illness as "very unlikely" to occur with a 31% response rate, followed by 39% viewing it as "unlikely" to occur. A combined total of 30% believe it is "likely" or "very likely" to occur among these university students. Perhaps these responses indicate that approximately 70% of the students surveyed would themselves be unlikely to use illness as an excuse, or naiveté on the part of the students as to the magnitude of this problem could be prevalent. The authors believe students are more "likely" to use this excuse, especially if unprepared for a class where a test may be given that day. Likewise, these students believe that "little" harm is done in using illness as an excuse with 43% of the students indicating "little" harm to themselves; 64% of the students indicating "little" harm to classmates; and 52% of the students indicating "little" harm to the school will occur.

Table 7
Telling the professor that you are ill on a day of an exam because you are not prepared

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	31%	39%	25%	5%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
you	43%	23%		34%
Your classmates	64%	23%		13%
Your school	52%	29%		19%

The results of the next two questions pertain to group work, both taking credit for group work and allowing for group credit, are presented in Tables 8 and 9 respectively. In both questions, 41% (Table 8) and 46% (Table 9) of the students, respectively, believe this conduct is "likely" to occur with 13% (Table 8), and 16% (Table 9) believe it is "very likely" to occur. That indicates a total of over 50% of the students believe this behavior occurs. If this behavior in Table 8 and 9 does occur, 27% and 28% respectively believe it will cause "significant" harm to them, with 39% and 38% believing it will cause "significant" harm to classmates, and 31% and 28% respectively believing it will cause "significant" harm to the school.

Table 8
Allowing a student to get credit for group work although they did not contribute

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	22%	24%	41%	13%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
You	36%	37%		27%
Your classmates	19%	42%		39%
Your school	37%	32%		31%

Table 9
Putting your name on a group assignment although you made no contribution to the work

Questions	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Likely	Very Likely
How likely is conduct in this area?	14%	24%	46%	16%
How much harm would this conduct cause	Little	Moderate		Significant
You?	34%	40%		28%
Your classmates?	28%	34%		38%
Your school?	31%	31%		28%

Table 10 shows the students' response regarding methods that may discourage unethical behavior. "Public disclosure" and "threat of severe punishment" received support of 84% and 81% respectively by the students. A "written policy" received only 59% support of the students.

Table 10
Discouraging Unethical Behavior

Questions	Yes	No
Would a written policy on ethical conduct affect your behavior?	59%	41%
Would the threat of severe punishment discourage unethical behavior?	81%	19%
Would public disclosure discourage unethical behavior?	84%	16%

These results may indicate that more action needs to be taken rather than just putting something in writing. Students may need more of a punishment based approach to discouraging unethical behavior than a passive approach.

The students in this survey indicated how effective they thought certain initiatives by faculty would be in minimizing the risk of unethical behavior in an educational setting. The results are presented in Table 11.

Table 11
How effective do you think the following initiatives would be in minimizing the risk of unethical behavior?

Possible Initiatives	NE	SE	FE	VE
Close teacher monitoring	4%	38%	48%	10%
A student code of ethics	14%	40%	34%	12%
Ethical discussions in all classes	11%	40%	35%	14%
A confidential system to report conduct without being identified	8%	27%	40%	25%
A university zero tolerance policy regarding unethical behavior	6%	24%	39%	31%

NE = Never Effective   SE = Somewhat Effective   FE = Fairly Effective   VE = Very Effective

"Close teacher monitoring" was deemed by 48% of the students as being fairly effective on the 4-point Likert scale which ranges from "not effective", "somewhat effective", "fairly effective", and "very effective". Only 10% consider monitoring as "very effective". The majority of the students overall in the survey indicated teacher monitoring was "effective" to some extent (combined total of SE, FE, VE). While, only 4% of the students believed teacher monitoring was "not effective". The authors believe that teachers who monitor the classroom, especially during tests, will curtail the majority of the unethical

behavior which occurs, yet some will cheat anyway. Increased technology use by students, such as cell phone and programmable calculators, seem to make it virtually impossible to curtail all cheating.

\ Having a student code of ethics was believed to be "somewhat effective" and "fairly effective" with responses of 40% and 34% respectively. The university in which this survey was conducted actually passes out the Business code of ethical conduct in pamphlet form to students (together with an incentive to stop by and get one of also handing out chips or candy) during the early weeks of the semester. Additionally, most universities have a published code of ethics in their student handbook indicating the consequences for unethical conduct. Generally, the consequences may involve a tiered system whereby the instructor is given the option of assigning a failing grade on the test, which may later be followed with failing the student from the class with ultimate penalty of suspension for repeat offenses. The code of ethical conduct also generally allows for a review board consisting of faculty and students to determine the "fate" of the perpetrator. One of the authors of this paper has used this method. The paperwork and meetings prior to the consequences being handed down makes this "peer review board" method less likely to be used, in our opinion. However, the positive aspect of this method is that it takes the responsibility away from the professor who may be bombarded with pleas for mercy on the part of the student.

Ethical discussions in the classroom were deemed by students to be effective with 40% indicating answer "somewhat effective", 35% indicating "fairly effective", and 14% indicating "very effective". Again, the university at which this survey was conducted requires some discussion of ethics in each classroom because it is a goal established as part of their accreditation process. One of the authors spends approximately a week of classroom time for the teaching of ethics. However, the question has been posed as to whether ethics can be taught (3, Kullberg, 1988). Shurden, Santandreu & Shurden (8, 2010) indicated in their research that ethical awareness of student's progress increased with years spent at this particular university; therefore, it is our opinion that this method of having ethical discussions is effective.

Whistle blowing, which was previously defined by the authors as reporting unethical conduct, has taken a "hit" in the previous years. In business alone, the whistleblowers of the Enron and WorldCom scandals were ostracized and shunned by their fellow employees (4, Lacayo, R. & Ripley, A, 2002). Many of us were reminded in elementary school of not being a "tattletale" as if it were an annoyance to teachers to be told that a fellow student had misbehaved. Therefore, it is not surprising to the authors to discover that 25% of the students surveyed said that "A confidential system to report conduct without being identified" would be "very effective". This response was followed by 40% believing it to be "fairly effective". However, the question arises to this author as to if that would be a "doable solution" in the day when evidence is paramount to having proof of an infraction in any unethical situation (4)?

Lastly, 31% of the students believed that it would be "very effective" if the university had a zero tolerance policy regarding unethical behavior. This response was followed by 39% believing this method to be "fairly effective". How surprising to the authors that the total of these two indicators (70%) would seem to condone a "one strike and you are out" policy. It occurs to the authors that this number may be the students who are least likely to be unethical if they are advocating such a stringent system.

CONCLUSIONS

Students in this survey perceive some unethical conduct as more likely to occur than other. Fifty seven percent and thirty eight percent believe that conduct including "copying work" and "having others doing their assignments" occurred at this university, at a combined total of "likely" and "very likely" at 57% and 38% response rates. The authors believe the students perceive this type of conduct to occur with homework assignments rather than tests. Only 27% and 29% respectively believed that cheating on tests and plagiarism was "likely" or "very likely" to occur at this school. A much higher percentage of students believed that "group work" type of unethical behavior occurs at 54% and 62% respectively for

the responses of "allowing a student to get credit for group work although they did not contribute" and "putting your name on a group assignment although you made no contribution to the work". As for situations involving students not being in class, 58% of the student believe that it is "likely" or "very likely" that students will forge class rolls for others students, with only 30% believing that students are "likely" or "very likely" to use illness as an excuse to miss class. Finally, only 16% of the students surveyed believe that whistle blowing is "likely" or "very likely" to occur at this university.

In reviewing the possible initiatives that might be effective in controlling unethical behavior among student, the perception among the students themselves was that a "confidential system of reporting" and a "zero tolerance system" would be more effective than "teacher monitoring", "ethical discussions" or a "student code". Sixty five and seventy percent of the students, respectively deem having a "confidential system" and "zero tolerance" as being more effective. Additionally, 84% of the students believe that "public disclosure of unethical conduct" and 81% believe that "severe punishment" are more effective in discouraging unethical conduct rather than 59% believing in the use of a "written ethical code of conduct" as being more effective. The authors believe this to be a rather noble approach by the students. Perhaps it can be ultimately concluded that these students have the desire to be ethical and believe in stringent measures to monitor unethical behavior. Further research is needed to determine the effect various strategies would have on minimizing unethical behavior.

REFERENCES

(1) Atkins, N. & Radtke, R. R. (2004). Students' and faculty members' perceptions of the importance of business ethics and accounting ethics education: Is there an expectations gap? *Journal of Business Ethics*, Article no. 303. 1-22.
(2) Johnson, S. A. & Martin, M. (2005). Academic dishonesty: A new twist to an old problem. *Athletic Therapy Today*, 10(4). 48-50.
(3) Kullberg, D. (1988). Right or wrong: How easy to decide. *New Accountant*. 4(1), 16-21, 37.
(4) Lacayo, R. & Ripley, A. (2002, December 30). Persons of the year 2002: The whistleblowers. *Time Magazine.* 160(27). Retrieved from http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1003998-2,00.html
(5) McCabe, D. L. (2005, Summer/Fall). It takes a village: Academic dishonesty. *Liberal Education.* pp. 26-31.
(6) Puka, B. (2005, Summer/Fall). Student cheating. *Liberal Education*, pp. 32-35.
(7) Richter, E. M. & Buttery, E. A. (2002). Convergence of ethics? *Management Decision*, 40(2), 142-151.
(8) Shurden, S. B., Santandreu, J. R. & Shurden, M. C. (2010). How student perceptions of ethics can lead to future business behavior. *Journal of Legal, Ethical, and Regulatory Issues*, 13(1). Retrieved from http://www.readperiodicals.com/201001/2123454361.html
(9) Stevens, R. O. Harris and Williamson, S. (1993). A comparison of ethical evaluations of business school faculty and students: A pilot study. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 12, 611-619.