

# A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF ETHICALITY AND INTERPERSONAL SKILLS IN ONLINE HIGHER EDUCATION

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## ABSTRACT

*It is unclear how online higher education faculty members perceive ethical behavior. Currently, there are no federal or state requirements for faculty to adhere to a set of ethical teaching standards in the United States. This basic qualitative study explored faculty perceptions of ethical behavior and the ethical use of interpersonal strengths in online higher education. The data analysis for this study was 229 written responses from the survey used in Or et al.'s (2022) quantitative study. The findings show that faculty members subjectively viewed ethicality and the related influences on and implications of ethical behavior. While interpersonal skills were viewed as essential to ethical behavior in online higher education, these skills are demonstrated by varying means and have different styles based on class context and the beliefs of students.*

**Keywords:** *ethics, online higher education, interpersonal skill, character strengths, online faculty*

## INTRODUCTION

The focus of higher education leaders is to demonstrate the importance of, and hold faculty members accountable for, demonstrating ethical behaviors (Rothman, 2017). According to Sethy (2018), higher education faculty should be accountable for ensuring the quality of teaching, objectifying student-learning outcomes, and meeting societal expectations. There is a continuous effort to achieve high standards for quality teaching and student outcomes by way of accreditations (Powell, 2013) and instructor work performance reviews (Cadez et al., 2017). Establishing high standards for behavior provides boundaries and establishes conditions for ethical behaviors. However, there is a lack of specific instructions on how to behave in specific situations.

For centuries, philosophers and scholars have debated what constitutes good or exemplary teacher conduct (Arendt, 1990; Gibbon, 2019).

Teachers' ethicality incorporates their habits, morals, interactions with students, professional aptitude and readiness, and student satisfaction ratings. Moreover, ethicality extends beyond the classroom to include how faculty communicate and collaborate with other faculty and administrators. These behaviors may affect faculty morale, job satisfaction, and retention. While there has been much research on the ethical expectations of faculty in the traditional brick-and-mortar university, there is limited research defining ethical behavior for online higher education faculty. This study used as a framework the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, which is foundational in understanding how educators' presence affects online teaching. Still, there is a need for more research on the practices of faculty ethical behaviors in online higher education (Martin et al., 2020).

According to some research, universities would do well to adopt a set of ethical codes for faculty

or require adherence to a professional association's code of ethics for faculty in higher education (Keykha & Imanipour, 2020; Sethy, 2018). These policy changes are necessary and would emulate how other professions, such as engineering, medicine, and law, expect professionals to follow strict professional ethical codes (American Association of University Professors (AAUP), 2020; Sethy, 2018). Under these policy changes, sanctions may be consistently enforced across academic institutions to ensure adherence to standards associated with academic freedom, tenure, and proper dismissal protocol for all faculty regardless of discipline. In the absence of such ethical codes or nonspecific guidelines, faculty may rely on their beliefs about correct ethical behavior. Quality assurance processes and actions in higher education should be used to sustain quality online learning (Altman et al., 2020). Further, legal and ethical norms are assumed to be congruent in academic settings (Tauginienė & Jurkevičius, 2017).

There is a need to examine faculty perspectives on ethical behavior in online education (Or et al., 2022). Higher education leadership should explore how faculty perceive ethical behaviors and character strengths in their teaching and mentoring roles. Character strengths are related to faculty ethical behavior in education, and there is literature on the relatedness between faculty characteristics and ethicality, and the need for further research (Mahon, 2021; Martin et al., 2019). The present study addresses these research needs in the literature by exploring how online faculty perceive ethical behavior and interpersonal skills as they relate to ethicality in their online higher education teaching roles.

This basic qualitative study involved exploring individual faculty perceptions about faculty ethical behaviors in online higher education and their perceptions of faculty interpersonal strengths regarding faculty ethical behavior. Symbaluk and Howell (2018) explained that interpersonal rapport with students directly affects both student satisfaction and teacher effectiveness and that to build rapport, educators should be warm, kind, friendly, patient, and helpful. Interpersonal strengths are a type of character strength or virtue (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). The research questions for this study were intentionally broad to allow for considerable personal exploration and for the participants

to focus their perception of the aspects of the research question. If the participants answered the questions by focusing on the “who,” such as self, other faculty, or leadership, we assumed that was the most important. Similarly, if they answered the questions focusing on “what” ethics and interpersonal strengths look like online, we assumed the “what” was most important, and the same for “how” and “why” answers. This addressed how and/or why ethics or interpersonal strengths are important.

#### *Peterson and Seligman's Character Strengths*

Peterson and Seligman's (2004) model of character strengths and virtues underpins this study. Peterson and Seligman (2004) model provided two definitions of character strengths. One definition indicated that character strengths are positive traits reflected in thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that exist in degrees that can be measured individually (Park et al., 2004). Character strengths can be defined as a disposition to act, desire, and feel that requires judgment and leads to excellence or flourishing (Park et al., 2004). As interpersonal strengths are a type of character strength, they lead people to behave virtuously and ethically.

To explain interpersonal strengths, this study used Peterson and Seligman's (2004) examples: kindness, love, leadership, teamwork, and playfulness. To create a more detailed understanding of these five standard characteristics of interpersonal strengths, Peterson and Seligman conducted extensive research and formulated many iterations of their VIA Classification of character strengths and virtues to find the five-factor analysis of character strengths (interpersonal strengths, emotional strengths, intellectual strengths, strengths of restraint, and theological strengths).

There are differences between virtues and character strengths. Character strengths are an individual's aspirational ideals related to behavior that is carried out, not just concepts without action (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Virtues, conversely, are aspirational ideals regarding behaviors that follow ethical expectations but may not be put into practice (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Character strengths used in a positive engagement are socially desirable. In academia, interpersonal skills can be strengthened through faculty development (Bickle et al., 2019; McGovern, 2011). One part of this study involved an examination of how faculty

perceive interpersonal strengths as they relate to ethicality in online higher education teaching.

### *Effective and Ethical Online Teaching*

There are different ways to define effective online teaching. Martin et al. (2018) examined the effective components of award-winning (effective) online faculty and found that timely responses to questions and assignments rated the highest. Online faculty should consider the following as effective teaching practices: relevant and authentic course materials, multimedia resources, digital content assignments, reflections on learning, and clear explanations of the purpose of assignments (Martin et al., 2019). Many of these components of effective teaching practices are mentioned as ethical online teaching practices (Aldosemani, 2020; Keykha & Imanipour, 2020).

Effective teaching strategies can be considered ethical online necessities including institutional support, student connection with their institution, quality interactions with faculty, and assistance with technical issues (Olufunmilayo Adekson, 2020). Many of the “effective” teaching strategies, characteristics, and relationships are mentioned in literature as “ethical” teaching strategies, characteristics, and relationships (Heyman, 2010).

### *Community of Inquiry*

While there are other models of college teaching (Ballenger & Sinclair, 2020; Carmo, 2020), the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is commonly used to examine the teaching components of effective online teaching (Thompson et al., 2017). CoI is a framework that can be used to explore three principal dimensions of online teaching and learning; social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 1999).

Social presence is the social and affective activity that occurs in online classrooms and includes emotional expression, group cohesion, and open communication (Oh et al., 2018). The concept of social presence in telecommunications was manifested decades ago by Short et al. (1976). The CoI concept of cognitive presence specifically calls attention to sustained communication that leads to the construction of meaning. Educators’ cognitive presence may include methods that help individuals make meaning (e.g., by answering specific questions), engagement in collaborative exploration with students, the use of active and integrated

reflection, interaction in the classroom, and facilitation of collaborative application of new ideas (Van Schie, 2008). Teaching presence is the use and integration of both previously mentioned cognitive and social presences which, when combined, produce meaningful personal learning outcomes (Garrison et al., 1999). Teaching presence includes instructional design (e.g., activities, curriculum), facilitating discourse (e.g., discussion topics, providing personal meaning), and direct instruction (e.g., direct feedback, injection of new knowledge) (Garrison et al., 1999; Van Schie, 2008). The CoI framework and Van Schie’s (2008) concept map were used for this qualitative study to code and categorize the faculty responses to identify themes.

### *Online Faculty Ethicality and Interpersonal Strengths*

To identify what is ethical in online teaching, it is useful to start by defining the term unethicality. Alt and Itzkovich (2015), for example, use the term incivility to demonstrate the unethicality of faculty and define it as “an interpersonal misconduct involving disregard for others and a violation of norms and respect” (p. 1). Students’ perceptions of faculty behavior may be based on their subjective perceptions of justice and belief in a just world. Hence, this may lead to perceptions of right and wrong behavior having individual variances (Alt & Itzkovich, 2015).

When appraising a faculty member’s behavior in terms of ethics, one should consider contextual factors. These may include individual strengths and weaknesses, what is acceptable behavior, and cultural and individual worldviews, health, values, beliefs, and political climate. Aristotle claimed that virtuous behaviors are those that are appropriate to one’s context and role, and that morality alone cannot guide virtuous or right behavior outside of intellectual consideration of the contextual factors (as cited in Bartlett & Collins, 2012). In today’s virtual world, some contextual factors may have changed with regularity for teaching online higher education. This may include COVID-19 and the transition to online education from face-to-face education (Korkmaz & Toraman, 2020). While there is a growing body of research on ethical behavior in online learning environments, faculty ethical behaviors and interpersonal skills may still be considered a relatively neglected topic (Aldosemani, 2020).

Interpersonal character strengths are positively and moderately related to ethical engagement in online higher education (Or et al., 2022). Positive relationships between character strengths and ethics may lead to positive work-related outcomes. The connection between one's character strengths and those required by the job may predict workplace well-being, work performance, and workplace deviance (Harzer et al., 2017).

The data analysis for this basic qualitative study was the written responses from the survey used in Or et al.'s (2022) quantitative study. The quantitative study examined relationships between ethical engagement in online higher education faculty and these three skill sets: intellectual, interpersonal, and emotional. This qualitative study explored faculty perceptions of ethical behavior and ethical use of interpersonal strengths in online higher education.

## RESEARCH METHODS

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

The purpose of this basic qualitative study was to explore how online faculty in higher education perceived faculty ethical behaviors and how they experience interpersonal strengths and ethicality at a four-year university in the southwest United States. The data analysis for this basic qualitative study is the written responses from the survey used in the Or et al. (2022) quantitative study. This study presents an analysis of the qualitative responses from the survey used in the quantitative study. After IRB approval was obtained, a survey was emailed to 2,500 higher education faculty at a four-year university who are currently teaching online courses. The recruitment strategy used was stratified random sampling, to obtain a sample of active online faculty regarding their perceptions about faculty online ethicality and the use of interpersonal strengths. The university's research center facilitated recruitment via email and SurveyMonkey was used to collect data anonymously. No incentives were offered, and demographic information was not considered in this study. Faculty members at this university work remotely throughout the United States, and are adjunct instructors who may work at other universities.

This study was intentionally exploratory with very broad, open-ended questions, which allowed much flexibility for participant answers. The

survey addressed the following two research questions about faculty's perceptions of ethical behavior in online teaching and their beliefs about interpersonal strengths in the behavior of online faculty:

RQ1: How do online higher education instructors describe faculty ethical behaviors in teaching online?

RQ2: How do online higher education instructors describe their beliefs about the role of interpersonal strengths (including kindness, love, leadership, teamwork, and playfulness) in online faculty's ethical behaviors?

The open-ended survey questions were worded as such:

Q1: Tell me about your experience with faculty ethical behaviors related to online higher education teaching.

Q2: Tell me your thoughts on how interpersonal strengths influence online higher education faculty's ethical behaviors (interpersonal strengths: kindness, love, leadership, teamwork, playfulness).

After receiving the participant's responses from the survey, a total of 229 online faculty responded to Q1 and 230 responded to Q2. In data cleaning and error checking, several responses were excluded as irrelevant for analysis. Those included items such as "N/A," "I'm not sure," or irrelevant answers. A total of 25 responses were removed from Q1 and 19 from Q2. This resulted in 204 and 211 usable responses. The remaining 204 and 211 responses were used to complete the analysis.

A thematic analysis two-cycle coding process was used to analyze the data and identify themes (Saldana, 2016). In the first cycle, two faculty members and one graduate student assigned open codes to chunks of text. In an iterative process, these codes were analyzed and refined. In the second cycle, an axial code was created by collapsing codes into broader categories. By iteratively reviewing the codes, certain patterns were distinguished, which resulted in further collapsing the categories into broader themes. To ensure rigor in the coding process, each researcher separately coded portions of the data to identify the initial codes and final themes (Morse, 2015). A consensus was reached on the final codes and themes of the analysis.

## RESULTS

We performed a thematic analysis that produced four themes for the first research question and three for the second. These four themes emerged for Question 1: (a) judgments and opinions, (b) effects of ethical decisions, (c) definitions of ethicality, and (d) considerations in ethical decision-making.

The first theme concerned judgments and opinions regarding ethical behaviors. Faculty responded to this question by stating how ethical they are and how ethical (or unethical) they think others are. While they discussed how they perceive others as unethical by pointing out their inconsistent teaching practices and stating that adjunct faculty are less ethical, others volunteered their opinion that they are not sure if others are ethical or not. Those who discussed their ethicality perceived their level of ethicality as high.

The second theme was the experience of ethical decisions. Participants discussed how their ethical behaviors or the ethical/unethical behaviors of others affected them personally in their jobs and their emotions. This revolved around their perception of their ethical decision-making as well as others.

The third theme dealt with participants' definitions of ethicality concerning online ethical behavior. Participants chose to describe what ethical behavior is, what it looks like to them, or what ethics should be. The participants discussed issues such as equal opportunities for all students (cultural sensitivity, fairness, providing additional support if needed), interpersonal relationships between faculty and students, quality communication, aspirational ethics (always doing the right thing without reward, the golden rule), and levels of flexibility (whether they felt ethical behavior included rigid expectations and high levels of flexibility or grace or somewhere in between). Ethicality was described by faculty as virtuous behavior, which includes fairness, equality, honesty, integrity, and treating students and colleagues with respect, compassion, and empathy. Teaching approaches and strategies were included in the definition of ethical behavior in online higher education. Examples included being present (with students in the classroom), grading with rigor, fostering student growth, and modeling ethical behaviors.

The final theme for RQ1 was considerations of ethical decision-making in online higher education.

Several online faculty discussed specific student issues. Others explained why ethical decision-making can be difficult. They discussed factors specific to online education such as isolation. They remarked both positively and negatively about colleagues and management, regarding issues such as disagreements or how positive support increases the desire and ability to remain ethical. The most common topic was the need to communicate differently online than when teaching in person. One participant said that ethical behavior is time consuming.

It is important to attempt to summarize the responses to this broad research question that asked online faculty to expand upon their experiences with faculty ethical behaviors in online higher education. They responded by discussing their judgments and opinions of their ethicality as well as that of others, how ethical decisions impact their jobs and their emotions, and what their definitions of ethical behavior are. The responses varied greatly but aligned with equality, levels of flexibility, communication with students, and colleagues' kindness, helpfulness, and clarity. The responses about considerations in ethical decision-making in online higher education discussed how student issues affect decision-making, and how factors such as pressures from the university and students, and time constraints, make ethical decisions tough at times. They responded to how the quality of the relationship with their colleagues and leadership affects decision-making. See Table 1 for an overview of Question 1 responses, themes, categories and codes, and sample participant responses. The sample participant responses do not necessarily represent the categories and codes provided.

The following three themes emerged from answers to Question 2: (a) how faculty members exhibit interpersonal strengths is important, (b) interpersonal skills are important in online ethical teaching, and (c) considerations when using interpersonal skills vary depending on the context and beliefs.

The first theme that emerged regarding interpersonal strengths in ethical behavior was that *how* faculty members exhibit interpersonal strengths is important. For this category, we used the CoI's social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Respondents described what the CoI framework

termed as social presence, that interpersonal strengths influence online higher education faculty's ethical behaviors when faculty demonstrate care, sincere concern, emotional support, and encouragement. It included providing them with authentic and engaging learning experiences, really listening to their concerns and needs, being a good leader, and modeling virtuous behaviors that align with CoI's cognitive presence. Providing clear course expectations and grading thoroughly and objectively fell under CoI's teaching presence classification and they explained that carefully choosing written words is an interpersonal strength in itself when teaching online.

The next theme that emerged for Question 2 was why interpersonal skills are important in ethical teaching. The responses focused on how, specifically, interpersonal strengths influence ethical teaching online, especially considering the nuances of the online medium as well as the individual needs of students. The respondents stated that interpersonal skills are necessary because they influence all other behaviors in online teaching. The high quality interpersonal skills of faculty result in better teaching and better student outcomes. Further, the use of interpersonal skills helps students' engagement and motivation, not only making students more likely to succeed but making the instructors' work more enjoyable. Faculty members discussed online nuances regarding online communication that usually takes place in writing and, therefore, one has to express oneself as clearly as possible to avoid misinterpretation. Faculty members explained that facial expressions and other subtle cues are unavailable, but students recognize and appreciate the instructor's efforts to use interpersonal skills. Faculty members felt that being online made it easier to communicate because there is more time to formulate carefully worded responses while others felt the online modality made it more difficult to communicate with students.

The last theme that emerged for Question 2 was that considerations when using interpersonal skills vary depending on the context and instructor beliefs. Topics addressed faculty members' perceptions about the characteristics that impact interpersonal skill usage and ethical behaviors such as spirituality, genuine concern for the student, passion for the field, experience/insight, and

self-discipline. Faculty members discussed the benefits and pitfalls of humor online (it can be mistaken and should only be used when appropriate), and which interpersonal strengths are important when working with colleagues, such as support, modeling, and teamwork. In the responses to this question, faculty members expressed their subjective perceptions of the levels of their ethicality as compared to those around them. They mentioned how burnout can cause faculty to rely less on interpersonal strengths and they provided more definitions of ethical behavior such as not just doing it for the money, holding students accountable, having integrity, and being honest. As an extension of their answers to question one, there were further discussions about equality and flexibility for all students.

To summarize the responses to the second question about their thoughts on how interpersonal strengths influence online higher education faculty's ethical behaviors, participants said that *how* faculty members exhibit interpersonal strengths is important (through relationships, care, virtuosity, listening, leadership, clear expectations, and fair grading), interpersonal skills are important in online ethical teaching (helps to motivate students, although some find it harder to use interpersonal skills online versus face-to-face, some find it easier, and it is a necessary piece of ethical teaching) and there are considerations when using interpersonal skills that vary depending on the context and the instructor's beliefs (using humor only when appropriate, having a passion for the field and for helping students succeed, how interpersonal skills play into their ability to do what is ethical including being fair to all, dealing with student dishonesty, and allowing appropriate levels of flexibility). See Table 2 for an overview of Question 2 responses, themes, categories and codes, and sample participant responses.

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## RESULTS TIED TO LITERATURE

Faculty members discussed ethicality by looking at their level of ethicality as compared to other faculty members. This method of analyzing through comparing and contrasting is supported by decades of philosophical discussions on ethics including Aristotle (ca. 335 B.C.E./2012) on the importance of context in ethical decision-making

Table 1. Themes, Categories and Codes, and Sample Participant Responses for Question 1.

Theme	Categories and Codes	Randomly Selected Sample Participant Responses from this Theme
<p><b>1. Judgments and opinions of their ethicality as well as that of others.</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Judgments about self</li> <li>· Judgments about others</li> <li>· Inconsistency in others</li> <li>· Not sure about others</li> <li>· I am ethical</li> <li>· Adjunct not as ethical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “I believe I am consistently ethical in all my behaviors related to online higher education teaching.”</li> <li>· “Everyone I have worked with is hard-working, diligent, ethical, and holds high moral conduct in all situations.”</li> <li>· “The adjuncts don't do a good job.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>2. How ethical decisions impact their jobs and their emotions.</b></p>	<p>Affect:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Feelings about other's unethical behaviors</li> <li>· Feelings about student unethical behaviors</li> <li>· Feelings about navigating the ethical decision-making process in online higher education</li> </ul> <p>Effects on self and others:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Negative consequences of others' unethical behavior</li> <li>· Karma—poor ethicality leads to poor outcomes</li> <li>· Thinking often about ethical decisions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “Not all instructors are committed to teaching but rather just facilitating online courses. I find this disappointing and disheartening.”</li> <li>· “I have been frustrated when students come to my class unable to write well, and then tell me they have a 4.0 GPA. This tells me that other faculty members do not take the time to give serious constructive feedback and make sure grades reflect a student's true quality of work. I think this approach is unethical and does a great disservice to students and the university.”</li> </ul>
<p><b>3. Their definitions of ethical behavior.</b></p>	<p>Equal opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Cultural sensitivity, equality for all</li> <li>· Extra support for those with less academic aptitude</li> <li>· Extra support for academic dishonesty</li> </ul> <p>Interpersonal relationships:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Building relationships with students</li> <li>· Interpersonal skills usages such as positivity, compassion, empathy, respect, golden rule</li> </ul> <p>Communication:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Communicating clearly</li> <li>· Listening well</li> <li>· Setting clear expectations</li> </ul> <p>Aspirational ethics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Doing what is right without reward</li> <li>· Always having high moral standards</li> <li>· Doing God's will</li> </ul> <p>Levels of flexibility:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Allowing grace and extensions is ethical</li> <li>· Holding students accountable with little flexibility is ethical</li> <li>· Balancing grace and extensions and holding accountable is ethical</li> <li>· Thinking I'm accountable so I hold others accountable</li> </ul> <p>Teaching approaches:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Being present and involved in the classroom</li> <li>· Providing feedback</li> <li>· Grading fairly and with rigor using a rubric</li> <li>· Modeling good and ethical behaviors for students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “I treat my students in the same manner. I am respectful and courteous in my communication to/with all at all times. I provide caring support to students lagging behind due to so many factors—health, family issues, etc.”</li> <li>· “I get a sense of individuals and class character very similar to teaching in the (face-to-face) classroom.”</li> <li>· “It is harder to read students online, without those visual cues we rely on, so I think it is even more important in an online environment to demonstrate equity among the students and a caring attitude.”</li> <li>· “I strongly believe faculty need to be honest and do what is right.”</li> <li>· “It is hard when it is an email or a late assignment, but you have to remember to treat them the same as you would someone in your office.”</li> </ul>

<p>4. Considerations in ethical decision-making in online higher education.</p>	<p>Student issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Students can be rude and demanding regarding the grading of poor work</li> <li>· Dishonesty, lying, cheating, plagiarizing</li> <li>· Reasons why ethical decision-making is difficult</li> <li>· University pressures can make it harder to be ethical</li> <li>· University support can make it easier to be ethical</li> <li>· Balancing the ethical expectations of the university with their ethical standards is sometimes difficult due to time constraints and student load</li> </ul> <p>Online issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Online communication can be tricky</li> <li>· A sense of isolation for faculty makes collaboration impossible</li> <li>· Being ethical is necessary for online teaching</li> </ul> <p>Faculty and leadership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Dislike of other faculty/team members affects behaviors</li> <li>· The level of faculty support from leadership either hinders or supports faculty ethical behaviors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “Online adjunct instructors are having to choose between Raising the Bar and student complaints about not receiving an “A” on all of their work. When students (customers) complain for whatever reason, the adjunct instructors may be in jeopardy of not receiving another contract to teach. This can be an ethical dilemma for adjunct instructors and may be influencing adjunct faculty ethical behaviors related to online higher education teaching.”</li> <li>· “Ethical behavior is important but heavily influenced by university policy and learning management systems, despite what is stated expected practice. This sways very differently depending on the university.”</li> <li>· “It is exceptionally important to have ethics/morals in an online environment given the potentiality for bad behavior to occur in the face of not being seen.”</li> <li>· “Ethics in online teaching can be challenging however the biggest issue I’ve faced ... is the administration not supporting faculty when they have identified an ethical issue such as plagiarism.”</li> </ul>
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Table 2. Themes, Categories and Codes, and Sample Participant Responses for Question 2

Theme	Categories and Codes	Sample Participant Responses
<p>1. How faculty members exhibit interpersonal strengths is important.</p>	<p>Social Presence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Leadership skills</li> <li>· Personal relationships with students</li> <li>· Care</li> <li>· Foster growth</li> <li>· Instill a sense of worth</li> <li>· Appropriate use of humor</li> <li>· Provide videos and other authentic learning tools</li> <li>· Communicate online persona and a strong sense of self</li> <li>· Listen to students fully</li> </ul> <p>Cognitive Presence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Prompt and thorough replies</li> <li>· Facilitating appropriately</li> <li>· Modeling</li> <li>· Teamwork</li> <li>· Providing individual and extra support</li> </ul> <p>Teaching Presence:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Providing clear expectations</li> <li>· Grading thoroughly, objectively, and with feedback</li> </ul> <p>Careful Wording:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Written communication is where individual strengths are evident online</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· “I always ask my learners to share their background information so that I can refer to their personal information during discussions. Learners seem to appreciate that personal touch.”</li> <li>· “... kindness and love enhance (students’) personal and academic development.”</li> <li>· “I like to respond to students who share personal experiences, so they know that I have read their posts, and thank them for sharing. I host webinars that allow students to participate directly and because there is video, we can all see each other and establish a relationship.”</li> <li>· “I always put myself in the student’s place when there is an issue in a class as I was in their shoes in my past. Online instructors should always possess the interpersonal strengths in kindness, empathy, and setting the tone for the class in those areas.”</li> </ul>



<p>2. Why interpersonal skills are important in ethical teaching.</p>	<p><b>Interpersonal skills influence ethical teaching online:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Influences everything online</li> <li>· Essential for student success</li> </ul> <p>Online nuances:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Interpersonal skills are harder online</li> <li>· Despite not being face-to-face, can communicate interpersonal skills in writing</li> </ul> <p>Perceptions of how faculty demonstration of interpersonal skills helps students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Kindness reinforces strengths</li> <li>· Teamwork necessary for engagement</li> <li>· Playful leaders increase personalization</li> <li>· Personalization makes faculty approachable</li> <li>· Helps students be more dedicated to achieving goals and persevering</li> <li>· Students appreciate the use of interpersonal skills, flexibility, and being heard</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· "It is important to be able to implement some interpersonal skills to keep students engaged and motivated."</li> <li>· "If a student feels their instructor understands them, they are more willing to put forth a good effort to succeed."</li> <li>· "They readily pick up on instructors who have a heart for their students and care about their educational and career goals. Instructors cannot fake that and get away with it. They must be authentic, straightforward, and forthright in their interactions with their students."</li> <li>· "I try to be selfless and act in the interest of all of my students, collectively. I allow my personality and humor to come through in my discussions, but it is clear the rules must be followed."</li> <li>· "Students are happier when you are merciful and kind."</li> <li>· "The students are quick to recognize and express appreciation for manifestation of interpersonal skills."</li> </ul>
<p>3. Considerations when using interpersonal skills varies depending on the context and beliefs.</p>	<p>What guides ethical behavior and use of interpersonal skills:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Spirituality</li> <li>· Genuine concern for students</li> <li>· Interpersonal strengths drive what we do and are a set of values about how to relate to others</li> <li>· Passion for the discipline</li> <li>· Experience and insight serve as guides</li> <li>· Self-discipline</li> </ul> <p>Benefits and pitfalls of playfulness and humor online:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Can be mistaken online</li> <li>· Important to use appropriately</li> <li>· Interpersonal skills are important for working with colleagues</li> <li>· Support</li> <li>· Modeling</li> <li>· Teamwork</li> </ul> <p>More discussion on what ethical behavior looks like online:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· Not just for the money</li> <li>· Integrity and honesty</li> <li>· Treating all equally</li> <li>· Flexibility and accountability for students</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>· "My spirituality directly effects my ethical and moral beliefs and actions."</li> <li>· "I believe I am a better teacher because I always look for what's 'right' and 'good' in every person."</li> <li>· "Some believe in doing the right thing by their students. Some are more influenced by making as much money as they can. Many seem to start wanting to teach and do a good job. But the system of too many students, too many assignments to grade, (and) low pay just runs them down."</li> <li>· "You have to be a leader in the online environment and set the example for the students. That means getting your work right so they will do the same. I love a sense of humor, but you have to remember it might not translate well in writing."</li> <li>· "Seek to interject humor and playfulness into all conversations."</li> <li>· "The attitudes at the top shape those further down. If supervisors have no respect for employees, employees will have no respect for customers. Respect and honesty count all the time."</li> <li>· "(Having) strong interpersonal skills helps me communicate and collaborate with fellow faculty."</li> <li>· "Ethical behavior means treating all equally and fairly. It is really just common-sense behavior."</li> </ul>

and Socrates on knowing oneself (Arendt, 1990). Their definitions of ethical behavior varied greatly, much like the concept of academic rigor, especially in the online context (Duncan et al., 2013).

The findings suggest that ethical decisions and behaviors impact faculty members' jobs and emotions and at the same time their ethical decision-making. Student dishonesty and plagiarism places faculty members in an ethical dilemma as they want to help the students, hold them accountable to university and personal faculty policy,

be fair, model ethical behavior, and all the while uphold university expectations for high student ratings (of their instructors) and help maintain or increase student retention and graduation numbers. Faculty members stated that holding students accountable is an ethical requirement. Even though students get much information on academic honesty, some simply do not get it and there has been a disturbing decline in academic integrity (Biswas, 2014). A few faculty stated that they feel negative about other faculty members whom they do not

consider to be teaching ethically or students who tell untruths or submit assignments with plagiarism. Ethical decision-making does not seem to be an occasional act; rather it is woven throughout many aspects of their work. These negative feelings can lead to burnout and the level of burnout, per participant responses, affects the level of ethical behavior and engagement in positive and ethical interpersonal skills with students and other faculty members. Burnout syndrome can be brought on by occupational stressors related to emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishments, and it can affect the instructor for years (de Araújo Leite et al., 2019).

Along those lines, when making ethical decisions, instructors state that they must try to balance the load or overload of expectations from their university, which may include research activities, mentoring other faculty, program and course development projects, and other duties in addition to teaching (de Araújo Leite et al., 2019). Some faculty discussed how the use of interpersonal skills was not only ethical but increased their job satisfaction. It is recommended that universities understand the significance of psychological flexibility, psychological stress, and the levels of loneliness as they relate to the mental health and wellness of faculty members (Ortega-Jiménez et al., 2021). This should include understanding how faculty members' interpersonal skills may benefit students and their colleagues and how faculty members exhibit interpersonal strengths, which is important. The discussion around humor and playfulness highlighted the need to use both with caution. How and when to use interpersonal skills vary depending on the class context and beliefs of the students.

Faculty members discussed the need to build relationships with students. This aligns with Schlesinger et al.'s (2015) findings that quality interactions between students and professors are an essential element in education. Similarly, Walker (2015) wrote about the importance of relationship-based teaching in higher education in the social work field. There is much research on how positive faculty-student interactions influence student satisfaction (Baber, 2020; Bickle et al., 2019; Davis, 2019; Izmirlı & Şahin Izmirlı, 2019; Unrau et al., 2017). In addition to relationship building, cultural equality was a central topic in the survey

responses. Blue et al. (2018) suggested that educators can champion the cause of multicultural awareness through instruction, activities, and conversations.

The discussion on quality academic relationships between faculty members and students aligns with what participants said on the matter of why interpersonal skills are important in ethical teaching. Diversity, equality, and fairness seemed of utmost importance in academic relationships (Phuong et al., 2017). Regarding the first theme in the second research question, we used Van Schie's (2008) concept map as a guide for the thematic analysis as some of the responses closely aligned with the characteristics of the social, cognitive, and teaching presence of the CoI framework for this theme. The CoI social presence supported the participants' responses as they discussed personal relationships, care, fostering growth and self-worth, virtuosity, playfulness, authentic learning, and listening. CoI's cognitive presence aligned well with participant responses on prompt and thorough replies, being a good leader, modeling behavior, teamwork, and providing additional support. Lastly, CoI's teaching presence aligned with participant responses on topics around clear expectations, prompt grading, and thorough feedback (Thompson et al., 2017).

Consistent with previous research, participants noted that students have a wide variety of needs and issues that sometimes lead to the need for additional faculty support (Kim & LaBianca, 2018; Witkow et al., 2015). Examples by faculty included emotional issues, stressors, language barriers, mental health or medical disorders, years the student has been out of school, writing deficiencies, and other personal or life factors. Kim and LaBianca (2018) support this notion by proposing all institutions establish clear guidelines concerning writing help for international students in higher education who struggle with English. Alonso et al. (2018) acknowledge that many mental health disorders may cause impairment or, at the least, unique struggles for students.

## DISCUSSION

Some of the main principles from participants' definitions of ethicality are that faculty need to be kind, fair to all, good leaders, and to connect with students in helpful ways. The issue of multiple

factors of ethicality arose in responses to both research questions. The questions were intentionally very broad to allow participants considerable personal exploration of their perceptions. We found that definitions of ethicality and participants' general perspectives vary greatly across the board. In other words, answers depended in large part on who (faculty, students, colleagues, management), what (behaviors, courses, grading), and how/why (driving forces, interpersonal strengths).

The responses were organized into codes, categories, and themes based on the content in this thematic analysis. The most striking result of the study was the variety of perceptions by faculty members of the basic concepts of ethics and interpersonal strengths. Given these differences, ethics and interpersonal strengths do not have clear unified definitions for faculty in online higher education from this particular university.

We presume this ambiguity is similar to other universities, in part because faculty members at this university work remotely throughout the United States and were both full-time and adjunct instructors who may work at other universities. Participants made judgments about themselves and/or others when asked to tell us about ethicality in online higher education. Future recommendations focusing on faculty members' self-assessments of their level of ethicality should align with assessments by their students and their leadership. There seems a very high level of subjectivity related to each individual's beliefs about what is moral and right in online higher education.

While it was not an initial goal of the study, we discovered that the responses included exact or related terms for Peterson and Seligman's (2004) core virtues of justice (fairness, leadership, citizenship, and teamwork) in participants' discussions on ethicality and of humanity (altruism, generosity, kindness, and benevolence) in their discussions of interpersonal strengths.

Based on their research, Symbaluk and Howell (2018) found that effective instructors frequently exhibited such qualities as fairness and caring, knowledge, course preparation and lesson planning, classroom environment and student treatment and provided feedback and helped students. It seems clear that feedback to students is a necessary component of online student learning (Knight et al., 2021; Symbaluk & Howell, 2018).

To meet university expectations, some faculty members must, at times, forsake their previous teaching strategies, which they believed were ethical. Some students will punish instructors, which encourages instructors to sacrifice the learning process for the sake of student satisfaction (Crumbley et al., 2001). Plagiarism was an issue for participants as well as having to make the decisions of whether students were telling the truth. Greenberger et al. (2016) discussed difficulties related to plagiarism online and that plagiarism is sometimes unintentional. Instructors sometimes have difficulty investigating issues of plagiarism and making the call on whether to report them as a code of conduct offense. These types of student issues seemed to cause negative affect and in serious cases can, at least in part, lead to decreased job satisfaction, burnout, and a poorer mental health status.

Besides student satisfaction rates, other factors guiding (un)ethical behavior are faculty personal beliefs, values, and other university expectations. Regardless of what currently drives online higher education faculty's ethical decision-making, it is possible that faculty's ethical decision-making can be positively altered by university training and accountability to university ethical expectations (AAUP, 2020; Altman et al., 2020; McGovern, 2011; Sethy, 2018; Simpson & Lindsey, 2020).

Another factor related to ethical behavior is how the instructor's interpersonal skills, the values of the university, and the faculty member's values and beliefs relate to online higher education faculty's flexibility. Ultimately, about one-third of the comments on this matter were in favor of faculty being flexible, another third remarked on the importance of not allowing students extensions and holding them accountable, and the other third said it is important to find balance between the two. For flexible online classes, the amounts and types of leeway, grace, or extensions online faculty give students varies greatly.

## **LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study was intentionally exploratory with very broad questions that allowed great flexibility for participant answers. Research Question 1 focused on ethicality but allowed participants to answer from different perspectives. Their definitions of the terms ethicality and interpersonal

strengths varied to such a significant degree it nearly rendered them impossible to categorize into themes. We read the participants' responses carefully to ascertain their true intent and meaning to the best of our ability. While Research Question 2 provided some examples of interpersonal strengths, it also allowed participant flexibility. Codification, with broad questions, generally leads to broad themes. This may make replicating this study more difficult. Others may want to code deductively based on theories such as Community of Inquiry.

Another limitation was the relatively small faculty sample. While the participants showed considerable diversity due to the nature of online/remote faculty demographics, the findings are still limited to the faculty of this four-year university in Arizona. Online higher education stakeholders may find it helpful to use a broader set of data to duplicate studies at other four-year universities in the United States. Yet another limitation is the subjective nature of the responses. Respondents likely have blind spots about their or others' ethical behaviors or interpersonal skills and abilities, or they may have poor insight into the rationale for their explanations of what ethicality looks like in online higher education and how interpersonal strengths can or should be used in ethical online higher education instruction. This supports the notion that duplicate studies would be beneficial.

One recommendation for future research is to explore factors that affect the formation of ethical decision-making for online faculty. In addition, we recommend future research on how faculty perceive their ethical behavior and how their internal ethics are altered by university expectations. This type of study would further investigate the role of the university work environment and its policies and procedures in altering the ethical behavior of online faculty.

Schutte and Malouff (2019) explained that "the strengths most prominent in an individual have been termed signature strengths" (p. 1180). It could be interesting to explore whether advantages exist for instructors to rely primarily on their signature strengths as opposed to feeling obligated to incorporate many unnatural (relative to each individual) interpersonal skills. This could be studied by way of quantitative research examining student engagement and their perceptions of courses taught by instructors using primarily their signature

strengths versus those instructors who are not.

One interesting finding was the emphasis on the potential hazards of the improper use of humor in online education due to the likelihood of misinterpretation and consequential negative, emotional reactions. We recommend further studies of the interpersonal skill of humor as it is used in online teaching (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Further investigation is also necessary on how much experience plays a part in levels of ethicality in online higher education. Participants stated that they perceive higher levels of ethical behaviors come, at least in part, from experience. This notion has been supported for decades beginning with John Dewey in 1938. Likewise, further exploration is needed to formulate a concrete definition of ethicality that can be used by faculty. Similarly, more research is necessary to uncover which interpersonal skills are considered ethical requirements in online higher education.

Finally, Sethy (2018) suggested that in India, faculty (unethical) behaviors are not monitored by any accrediting bodies. To discover if this is the case in the United States or other countries, universities and their stakeholders may benefit from further exploration of which universities require faculty to become members of a professional organization with ethical guidelines and requirements, which use their internal system of holding faculty accountable for ethical behavior, and the implications of unethical behaviors for those not monitored or held accountable. Similarly, researchers could compile university faculty handbook definitions of ethical behavior for online higher education faculty across the disciplines.

## CONCLUSION

There are still many unknowns about ethicality in higher education. Since COVID-19 drastically impacted universities when they turned from face-to-face to online teaching, it is now more important to examine what ethicality looks like in online higher education and the role of interpersonal skills in ethical engagement. The Community of Inquiry framework is one way to categorize and examine faculty engagement and presence. Peterson and Seligman's *Character Strengths and Virtues: A Workbook and Classification* provides a theory to measure virtues and character strengths. Further studies on ethical engagement and the use

of interpersonal strengths in ethical online higher education will benefit universities, faculty, students, and other stakeholders. Finally, university administrations will do well to consider whether their current ethical expectations and policies are sufficient to uphold all stakeholders' expectations. Two methods for improvement would be for faculty to uphold existing associations' ethical requirements for higher education teaching or the creation of a universal definition of and criteria for ethical behavior for faculty with a university-wide plan for accountability.

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