

## **Should college education play a significant role in teaching students about ethics?**

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### **ABSTRACT**

A ten question survey was administered to a medium size university in the Midwest. The responses were fashioned in a 5-item Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The results were interpreted by SPSS and relationships, frequencies, and descriptive statistics were drawn from the results of this program. The purpose of this study was to investigate the findings of this survey that indicated that one's education institution should be responsible for ethics training and whether one's sex or race would determine their stand on ethics education. Several items of interest were derived from this study including science and engineering as the only discipline that indicated ethical training could be achieved before one enters university life as indicated in the appendices.

Keywords: Ethics, Ethics in College, Ethical Dilemma

## INTRODUCTION

College students will indicate that ethics training is both important and expected (Wang & Calvano, 2015). Based on the survey results, ethics is important in one's college education and therefore should be taught as part of an educational program. However, the source of this education or training is not being questioned by students. Thus, according to the survey administered, it can be interpreted that students do not care where ethics training is administered. Collins, Weber, & Zambrano (2014), argue that this ethics training could be administered online but precautions should be made. Should students have received ethics training at home, at work, or at church? If ethics education is taught in post-secondary education then should it be included in all classes or just entry level classes? Should a student's discipline indicate a greater need for ethics training? These and other questions were asked.

## SURVEY

A ten question survey was administered to a medium size university in the Midwest. The responses were fashioned in a 5-item Likert Scale ranging from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. The results were interpreted by SPSS and relationships, frequencies, and descriptive statistics were drawn from the results of this program. Demographics gathered include a student's sex, age, and race. The survey results included an n of 585. The null hypothesis was "no relationship existed between gender [sex] and agreeability with respect to "college education should play a significant role in teaching students about ethics," and the alternate hypothesis is that there is a relationship between gender and agreeability.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the overwhelming response that students consider college to be an ethics teaching institution, one has to wonder if ethics is being considered outside of college. Of the 585 student responses to the question, "should college education play a significant role in teaching students about ethics, 547 students or 93.5% agreed and strongly agreed. The difficulties arise though in who will teach these ethics classes? Also, Geary & Sims (1994), even questioned if the innate characteristics of ethics could even be learned? In other words, could students learn basic "right and wrong" from a college course and if they could is there room in the college program to teach this (Frank, Ofofibe, & Gradisher, 2010)? Other questions arise concerned methodology, a paradigm for moral reasoning, and basic decision-making tools (Cohen & Bennie, 2006).

Comer & Vega (2005), developed a tool for assessing moral behavior called the PET (Personal Ethical Threshold) and then later presented the tool to "represent an individual's susceptibility to situational pressure in his or her organization that makes moral behavior more personally difficult (Comer & Vega, 2008, p. 129). This assessment though, as research indicates, is not required in any classroom thus the time to administer (one class session) and then the analysis has not yet been determined what to do, even if evidence points to the declining of student's ethics. After all, the scenarios depicted in the survey have to be explained and interpretation may be left to the beholder.

In what framework does one determine what is right and what is wrong? What moral instrument gets used and does this apply to the class or to individual student? Today, universities have an international reach so many differing nations are represented in one classroom and it

could be likely that each student may return to his or her nation upon completion. Chen, Tang, & Tang (2013), discovered that race did matter which was in conflict with the results of the survey administered (see Appendix), and American males were tempted to cheat in an open classroom when love of money and temptation was present. This love of money may be construed to a grade, course completion, or even graduation. Within the same study of Chen, et al, Chinese males or females did not present the same ethical decline as did the American students (2013). Finally, does gender (sex) become a deciding factor?

It is not a surprise that almost twice as many female students (547 to 386) responded with agreed or strongly agreed as twice as many females responded to this survey as males responded. This could imply that male students do not care much about surveys or that male students consider themselves to be ethical in nature and just disregarded the survey completely. Can ethics education be effective? Darwish (2015), stated that ethics education has been taught throughout the world and some of this teaching is in response to debacles like Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia, and Tyco. Additionally, Hadley & Alexandre (2015), surveyed 40 current and former graduate students and found that “three themes emerged: (a) ethics as part of business education; (b) approaches to ethical decision making; and (c) balancing the needs of business with stakeholder interest” (p. 388).

It was also no surprise that when students from different academic disciplines were asked the same question there were varying results but one could expect students from engineering and health care to be a little higher but this was not the case. Additionally, with today's business compliances, it would be reasonable to expect the business college to recommend ethics training with nearly the same consideration as engineering and health care and this was just the case. In fact given the following colleges as indicated in Appendix 1 and Appendix 2 one can see that, with the exception of science and engineering, only a slight number over 90% of the respondents consider ethics training to be taught at the college level. One must speculate that this ethics training may not have been introduced at home or at a person's place of spiritual growth (i.e. church, synagogue, or temple). Another item of interest is these same graphs is the analysis of the other colleges. Not only did they deviate quite a bit from the mean but why would business students such as accounting students that will likely someday be charged with signing an ethical and moral statements if they do indeed practice their discipline after graduation.

## **ADDITIONAL RESEARCH**

Additional research is required in this topic to discover whether a student's religious background has any bearing on the origin of ethical education. Several questions could be added to the survey to seek the student's faith-based background, whether she or he were home-schooled, or even their current understanding of religious principles. One question could even request the religious denomination (i.e. Christian, Judaism, or Hinduism). Pauli, Arthur, & Price (2014), hypothesized that “one's religious affiliation of an institution should be negatively related to student perceptions of the acceptability of cheating” (p. 100). This hypothesis was supported in their study ( $\Delta R^2 = .045$ ,  $F=8.647$ ,  $p=.004$ ).

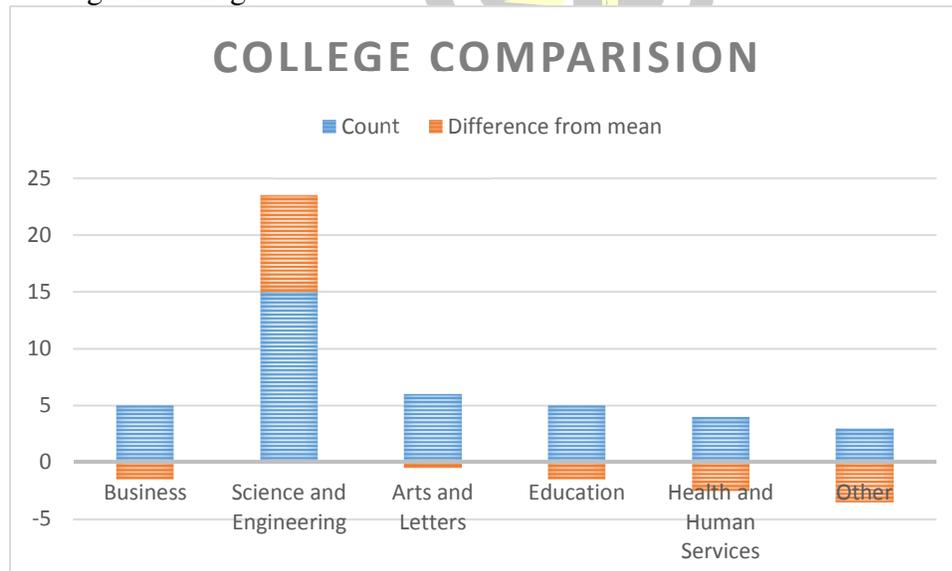
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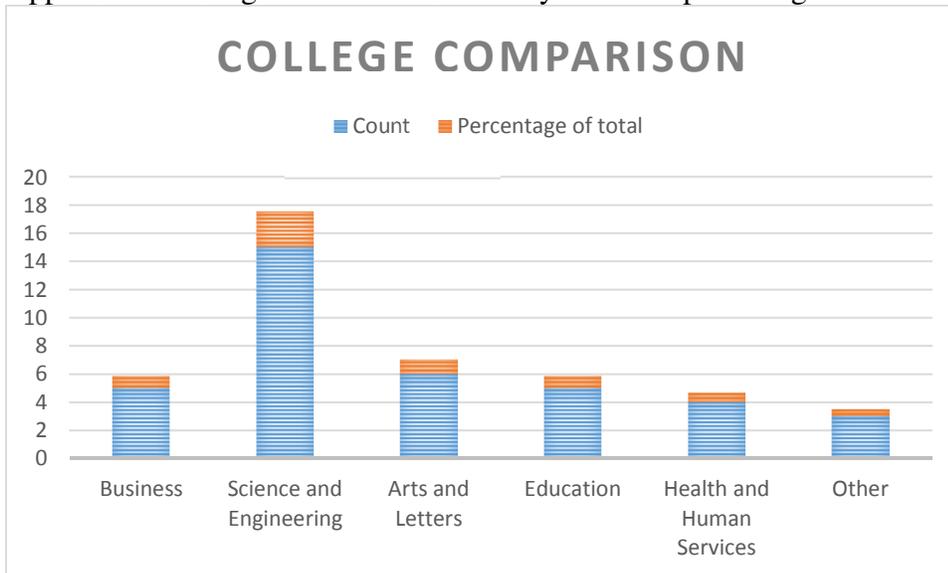
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## APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Colleges within the university that disagree and strongly disagree that ethics should be taught in college



## Appendix 2: Colleges within the university and their percentage of total



## Appendix 3: Survey Instrument

This instrument is not to be used without the express written permission of the authors.

## Questionnaire

- Likert-scale responses ( Question 1-9)
  1. strongly agree
  2. Agree
  3. Neither Agree Nor Disagree
  4. Disagree
  5. Strongly Disagree
- 1) College education should play significant role in teaching student about ethics.
- 2) Faculty helps students develop values in their classes.
- 3) Faculty incorporate ethics instructions into their classes.
- 4) Faculty should enforce ethical standards with their students.
- 5) Ethics are very important to me.
- 6) I hold myself to the same ethical standard to which I hold others.
- 7) In general, students abide by the University's Honor Code.
- 8) I consider the faculty in my Major to be ethical human beings.
- 9) By the time student reaches college, it is too late to teach them about ethics.
- 10) Yes or No responses (Question 10\_1 to 10\_5)
  - 10\_1) Personally, I consider plagiarism to be a form of academic dishonesty.
  - 10\_2) Personally, I consider submitting another person's work as my own to be a form of academic dishonesty.
  - 10\_3) Personally, I consider copying off of other student's exam papers to be a form of academic dishonesty.
  - 10\_4) Personally, I consider texting other students' exam questions while testing to be a form of academic dishonesty
  - 10\_5) Personally, I consider failing to report others observed cheating to be a form of academic dishonesty.