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What is the Role of Business Educators in Preparing Future Leaders

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study is to gain insight from experienced and practicing industry leaders, experts in the field of corporate ethics, and philosophy/ethics scholars, as to the value of a business ethics education. Specifically, what are the desired learning outcomes of a business ethics course, as it relates to knowledge, skill and disposition?

Keywords: Ethics, Business Education

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The AACSB is viewed as the premier accrediting authority over business programs in the U.S. Its mission is to advance quality management education through accreditation and thought leadership. A report of the AACSB suggested that “business schools are vital societal institutions that create value in a myriad of ways. Ample evidence is presented that dismisses the sometimes cited critical perception that business schools exist exclusively to serve profit-seeking businesses or salary-minded students” (AACSB 2010, 3). Embracing the perception that business program graduates are *not* to be solely focused on profit seeking, suggesting a broader societal purpose of commerce, makes it intuitively easy for curriculum gatekeepers to establish Business Ethics as an essential building block for student learning.

As influential as *The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business* (AACSB) is upon management and business education, there are no explicit standards for the student learning outcomes related to Business Ethics. The AACSB has supported, since the 1980s, the inclusion of business ethics courses; but, it has been suggested that many schools only do the minimum (Luthar and Karri 2005, 357). Jennings (2004, 13) suggested that there had been little from the AACSB “on moral absolutes or ‘bright line’ virtue ethics such as honesty, fairness or even false impressions in financial disclosures.” Rather the MBA curriculum “trained students in the importance of smoothing out earnings so as to maximize shareholder value, the often-stated role of business.”

The regional accrediting authorities, such as *The Middle States Commission on Higher Education*, expect academic institutions to establish evidence of student learning as relates to the institution’s stated program goals and expected learning outcomes. Also, there appears to be a

lack of consensus as to the role business ethics education plays (Nicholson and DeMoss 2009). Does it “make the workforce more honest?” or “teach people to think for themselves?” Are teachers to focus on the discipline of ethical theory and then expect students to apply the theory, or is case-study review the correct strategy? (Shaw 2012).

It had been suggested that business schools had served as a negative influence on business leaders with too much focus on analytical skills, teaching students how to cut corners in order to gain a competitive advantage; further suggesting that this educational style contributed to the downward spiral of corporate leaders’ ethical behaviors (Mitroff 2004; Cavico and Mujtaba 2009; Heller and Heller 2011, 31; Zingales 2012). Others have suggested that business schools are not to be held accountable for the ethical, financial and economic crisis; rather, it is the lack of individual character that is the cause (Heller and Heller 2011, 31). Milner et al. (1999) found that business students score lower on ethical scales coming *into* school when compared to non-business majors, suggesting a selection bias rather than an influence of the business education. Regardless of cause, corporate scandals, disappointment in boards’ governance oversight, the increase in regulatory regulation, the reach of the global market, criticism of scholars, and the increased focus on corporate social responsibility have collectively placed a renewed focus on Business Ethics (Jackson 2006).

A review of fifty ethics courses from AACSB accredited undergraduate programs revealed that the course content included four needed areas: (1) the responsibility of business in society, (2) ethical decision-making, (3), ethical leadership, and (4) corporate governance. But the authors suggest that these topical areas were inconsistently covered and that “added emphases is needed in the classroom to raise students’ awareness of the importance of a broader horizon of ethical issues confronting the workplace and society” (Heller and Heller 2011, 34). More foundational ethics training has been suggested such as ethical egoism, utilitarianism, morality, and philosophy, that will lead the individual to greater self-reflection (Cavico and Mujtaba 2009; Jennings 2004).

Whether educational scholars agree or not, *employment* in either the for-profit or not-for-profit sector is among the desired outcomes of a business student’s education. Therefore the views and expectations of employers are valuable inputs as the faculty builds the curriculum for its students.

METHODOLOGY

The preliminary results of an exploratory study will be shared at the NEDSI Conference. Feedback will be sought at the NEDSI Conference on these insights. These insights will be incorporated into a more fully developed research article that will be published at a later date.

This study use methods most effective within the qualitative paradigm.

Subjects: To reduce research bias, triangulation will include subjects with varying professional positions as related to this topic. Three subject groups will be interviewed: (1) Senior Leaders

who influence the culture of their organizations as well as make leadership decisions related to selection and promotion; (2) Individuals who design, establish, and/or lead corporate ethics programs; and (3) Ethics scholars.

Data collection: The data will be collected using the method of in-depth interview. Open-ended questions will allow the subject to express his or her view, experiences, and opinions related to this topic.

Data analysis: Content analysis will be used to systematically reduce the data allowing the themes to emerge.

Discussion and Conclusion: Following analysis, the themes emerging from the data will be related back to the literature with recommendations made and strategies suggested.

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