

Wednesday, February 19, 2020

Do Business Ethics Classes Make Students More Ethical? Students and Instructors Agree: They Do!

I'm inclined to think that university ethics classes typically have little effect on students' real-world moral behavior.

I base this skepticism partly on **Joshua Rust's and my finding**, across a wide variety of measures, that ethics professors generally don't behave much differently than other professors -- and if they don't behave differently, why would students? And I base it partly on my (now somewhat dated) **review** of business ethics and medical ethics instruction specifically, which finds shoddy research methods and inconsistent results suggestive of an underlying non-effect.[1]

On the other hand, part of the **administrative justification** of ethics classes -- especially medical ethics and business ethics -- appears to be the hope that students will eventually act more ethically as a result of having taken these courses. Administrators and instructors who aim at this result presumably expect that the classes are at least sometimes effective.

The issue, perhaps surprisingly, isn't very well studied. I parody only slightly when I say that the typical study on this topic asks students at the end of class "are you more ethical now?", and when they respond "yes" at rates greater than chance, the researcher concludes that the instruction was effective.

Nina Strohming and I thought we'd ask instructors and students what they thought about this. We wanted to know two things. First, do instructors and students think that business ethics instruction *should* aim at improving students morally? Second, do they think that business ethics classes *do in fact* tend to improve students morally?

Our respondents were 101 business ethics instructors at the 2018 Society for Business Ethics conference, plus students from three very different universities: 339 students from Penn (an Ivy League university with an elite business school), 173 students from UC Riverside (a large state university), and 81 students from Seattle University (a small-to-medium-sized Jesuit university, where **Jessica Imanaka** coordinated the distribution). Surveys were anonymous, pen and paper. Students completed their surveys on the spot near the beginning of the first day of instruction in business ethics courses.

Using a five-point scale from "not at all important" to "extremely important", Question 1 asked respondents to "rate the importance of the following goals that YOU PERSONALLY AIM to get [to have your students get] from your business ethics classes:

An intellectual appreciation of fundamental ethical principles

An understanding of what specific business practices are considered ethical and unethical, whether or not I [they] choose to comply with those practices

Tools for thinking in a more sophisticated way about ethical quandaries

Interesting readings and fun puzzle cases that feed my [their] intellectual curiosity

Practical knowledge that will help me be a more ethical business leader [them be more ethical business leaders] in the future

Satisfying my [their] degree requirements

Grades that will look good on my [their] transcripts

Brackets indicate changes for the instructors' version.

The target prompt was the fifth: Practical knowledge that will help them be more ethical business leaders in the future.



[students in a **business ethics class**]

Responses were near ceiling. 58% of students rated practical knowledge that will help them be more ethical business leaders as "extremely important" to them, the highest possible choice. The mean response was 4.44 on the 1-5 scale. This was the highest mean response among the seven possible goals. 40% of students rated it more highly than they rated "satisfying my degree requirements" and 48% rated it more highly than "grades that will look good on my transcript". Responses were similar for all three schools. If we accept these self-reports, gaining practical knowledge that will help them actually become more ethical is one of students' most important personal aims in taking business ethics classes.

Instructors' responses were similar: 58% said it was personally "extremely important" to them to have students gain practical knowledge that will help them be more ethical business leaders in the future. The mean response was 4.41 on the 1-5 scale.

Question 2 asked students and instructors to guess each other's goals (with the same seven possible goals). Students tended to think that professors would also very highly rate (mean 4.71) "practical knowledge that will help students be more ethical business leaders in the future". Professors tended to think that students would regard such knowledge as important (mean 4.09) but not as important as satisfying degree requirements (mean 4.42).

Question 3 asked respondents how *likely* they thought it was that "the average students gets the following things from their [your] business ethics classes". The same seven goals were presented, with a 1 - 5 response scale from "not at all likely" to "extremely likely".

Overall, both students and instructors expressed optimism: Both groups' mean response to this question was 3.84 on the 1-5 scale.

Based on this part of the questionnaire, it looks like students and instructors agree: It's important to them that their business ethics classes produce practical knowledge that helps students become more ethical business leaders, and they think that their business ethics classes do tend to have that effect.

On the second page of the questionnaire, we asked these questions directly.

Question 4: Do you think that, as a result of having taken [your] business ethics classes, [your] students on average will behave more ethically, less ethically, or about the same as if they had not taken a business ethics course?

Among instructors, 64% said more ethical, 35% said about the same, and 1% said less ethical. Among students, 54% said more ethical, 45% said about the same, and again only 1% said less ethical.

Question 5: To what extent do you agree that the central aim of business ethics instruction should be to make students more ethical? [1 - 5 scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree"]

Among instructors, 63% agreed or strongly agreed and only 19% disagreed or strongly disagreed. Among students, 67% agreed or strongly agreed and only 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

The results of these direct questions thus broadly fit with the results in terms of specific goals. **Either way you ask, both business ethics students and business ethics instructors say that business ethics classes should and do make students more ethical.**

Many cautions and caveats apply. The results might be influenced by "socially desirable responding" -- respondents' tendency to express attitudes that they think will be socially approved (maybe especially if they think their instructors might be watching). Also, instructors attending a business ethics conference might not be representative of business ethics instructors as a whole -- maybe more gung-ho. Students and instructors might not know their own goals and values. They might be excessively optimistic about the transformative power of university instruction. Etc. I confess to having some doubts.

Nonetheless, I was struck by the apparent degree of consensus, among students and instructors, that business ethics classes should lead students to become more ethical, and by the majority opinion that they do indeed have that effect.

Note:

[1] However, Peter Singer, Brad Cokelet, and I have also recently conducted a **study** that suggests that under certain conditions teaching the philosophical material on meat ethics can lead students to purchase less meat at campus dining locations.