

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS ABOUT COLLEGIATE ETHICS: WHAT WE CAN LEARN FROM OUR STUDENTS

Pam Pringle, Christopher Newport University, United States (ppringle@cnu.edu)

Sally Sledge, Norfolk State University, United States (sasledge@nsu.edu)

ABSTRACT

College ethics scandals have been in the news in recent years with increasing frequency. Unfortunately, when an ethics scandal occurs on a campus, it can be very difficult for the institution to overcome. This study includes a survey of graduate and undergraduate business students from several U.S. colleges about their perceptions of college ethics. The results show that students do in fact care about the ethical reputation of universities and this reputation does impact their application decisions and can influence students to transfer should there be a scandal at their current institution. Suggested strategies are given for administrators and managers to promote ethical behaviors on campus and avoid scandals.

Keywords: *collegiate ethics, student perceptions, academic dishonesty*

INTRODUCTION

Ethics has been a common topic in the media in recent years. Collegiate ethical scandals have also been reported with increasing frequency, yet they have not been published with the same coverage intensity by scholars in academic journals. Given the increasing number of unethical collegiate incidents that have been reported in the last decade, the authors felt this subject deserved attention. This paper will include an exploratory study of student perceptions of collegiate ethics. Students make higher education purchase decisions based on their perceptions of colleges and universities, so it makes sense to determine the impact that ethical scandals and the ensuing media coverage of them has on those perceptions. We believe that the results will provide important information for administrators and marketers at colleges and universities to respond to and prevent such issues.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this research is to learn how colleges and universities, particularly administrators and faculty, can best manage ethical challenges and scandals in this 24/7 instantaneous media age. The secondary purpose is to identify possible steps an institution might take to mitigate the effects of a scandal once it has occurred in order to begin the process of rebuilding the institution's reputation.

BACKGROUND

The authors have been researching college ethics since 2003. Initially research was focused on the Business School at Christopher Newport University, the level of academic cheating being reported and the development of interventions to build and sustain a culture of integrity within the school. A student honor council was created in the business school and student research on this topic was encouraged. The International Center for Academic Integrity's (www.icaai.org) survey instrument, created and managed by Dr. Don McCabe, was administered twice to both students and faculty over several years. The first use of the survey provided benchmarks in levels of cheating, types of cheating and level of knowledge of the university's honor code. Interventions were developed and implemented and a follow-up administration of the survey showed considerable improvement in all three areas. Dr. Sledge moved to Norfolk

State University and with the creation of a student honor council in that business school and implementation of similar interventions is raising awareness and impacting the culture. Research and findings have been published in several journals and presentations have been made at a variety of conferences, several of which included student presenters. Over time our research focus widened in two directions. Firstly, levels of cheating in high schools. This resulted in the creation of a one day integrity conference for high school juniors and seniors and their faculty advisors which runs every second year at Christopher Newport University. It is sponsored and organized by the student honor council. It was also run this past year at the ICAI international Meeting in Vancouver, British Columbia. Secondly we focused on ethical scandals in business organizations and the impact this has on consumer perceptions of these organizations, their purchase decisions and the long and difficult task a business faces in repairing their image. It seemed an obvious next step to this research, to educational institutions and the impact that ethical scandals within these institutions have on students, alumni, parents and the community at large. This paper represents our initial findings in this area.

SCANDALS IN THE NEWS

Over the last 5 years, quite a few collegiate scandals have been highly publicized, such as the Penn State football coach molestation scandal (Queen, 2011) and the Florida A&M band hazing scandal (Ellis, 2015). Other highly publicized college ethics scandals include the MIT Admissions Dean claiming false degrees (Lewin, 2007) and the University of Maryland Business School professors catching 12 students cheating on a final exam using a false answer key created by the professors themselves (Anonymous, 2003). However, there are many other collegiate ethical scandals that go unnoticed or unreported. All of these incidents damage the reputations of the institutions, their administrators, faculty, and staff, as well as students and alumni. Our hope is that this research can help to reduce the number of these incidents and at the same time help institutions to develop sound processes to manage the fallout once such incidences occur thus minimizing the long term negative impact of such events on an institution's reputation.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Interestingly academic dishonesty has been documented at all levels of study. Bushway and Nash (1977) reported student cheating in the first grade. Decoo (2002) found that approximately 50% of students cheat in middle school and about 70% cheat in high school.

There have been a number of studies on collegiate ethics since the 1980s. Don McCabe et al. (2002) found that a culture of positive academic integrity was the main driver of perceptions of cheating and academic dishonesty. Kissamore, Stone and Jawahar (2007) found that for students, personality had the most influence on academic dishonesty. For less-adjusted students, integrity culture had more influence on the intentions to commit academic dishonesty.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study included surveying 156 undergraduate and graduate college students at 3 universities in the Southeastern United States. The survey includes questions from the Ethics & Compliance Initiative questionnaire, (www.ethics.org) along with original questions from the authors. The surveys were anonymous and optional for students. The respondents provided comments in open-ended questions. The methodology involved comparative analysis of the quantitative survey responses and item analysis for the qualitative survey responses.

RESULTS

55% of respondents indicated that a college scandal would affect their decision to attend a school. Another 17% said it would impact their decision if the nature of the scandal was something in which they had an interest. Only 16% said news of a scandal at a college or university would have no impact on their decision. 68% of students indicated that they had received ethics education at their college and over 60% indicated that there were identified channels to report unethical behavior at their school. 24% of students indicated that they would report unethical behavior if they

observed it and 22% said it would depend on how well they knew the individual. 11% indicated that they had reported unethical behavior. All respondents identified that unethical acts by any group within a university or their alumni had a negative impact on the image of the institution but acts by administrators and faculty seemed to rank highest.

STUDENT COMMENTS

The students provided a number of useful comments that illustrated their ideas about college ethics and what universities can do to maintain a positive ethical culture. Below are some of the comments.

- Have programs/events... put on workshops
- Hold meetings and interactive gatherings for students on campus
- Provide all information
- Make training mandatory for all students
- Have a common theme/message on letters, emails, website, television to get the information across
- Impose harsh/strict penalties

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGE ADMINISTRATORS

College administrators need to manage the reputations of their universities in a proactive way with a focus on ethics in everyday processes. They need to be intentional in creating an environment that fosters integrity. They need to set the standards and expectations and then be seen to be acting upon them in everything they undertake. They need to be intentional not only in their communications but also their actions.

All members of the university community must be held to a high standard. An honor code that is perceived to be for students only will bear little fruit. It must be a standard for all and perceived as such.

Social media needs to be used to the university's advantage with positive marketing messages. It is not enough to send out a blast now and again. It must be managed on an ongoing basis. It is important to ensure that messages aimed at those external to the university are also shared with faculty staff and students within the university. This will help to prevent a disconnect between what is promoted and what is.

When an incident occurs, administrators need to be seen to be addressing the issue, be seen to be proactive in dealing with it rather than simply reacting to media pressure. They need to immediately acknowledge the issue and immediately begin a process to address the situation. A brief description of the process should be made public as quickly as possible to prevent media speculation on how the institution may or may not deal with the incident. Getting the institution's message out clearly and quickly ahead of the media hype can greatly reduce the long term negative impact of the ethical scandal. Appropriate follow-up in actions taken and or changes made will also need to be made public in a timely and appropriate manner.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COLLEGE FACULTY

College faculty need to incorporate ethics discussions and lessons into their classes. This accomplishes two goals. It informs students of the importance of ethical standards and provides a forum to help students develop and practice ways to analyze ethical situations and make sound decisions. It also clearly demonstrates faculty belief that ethical standards are important and it provides a role model for actions within the classroom and beyond.

University policies that relate to the college's honor system should be upheld by all faculty in a consistent manner. When a faculty member chooses to ignore cheating or inappropriate "sharing" or collaboration on individual assignments in their class they are sending the message that it is ok to act this way. It also sends the message that he/she does not respect the honor code of the institution or cannot be bothered to do what is needed to uphold the code. This creates mixed messages for the students as they go from class to class and undermines the perception of

integrity within the institution which will inevitably lead to more individuals engaging in cheating activities or other unethical activities over time.

LIMITATIONS AND PROPOSED WORK

This study has some limitations. The sample size was 156, but additional surveys have been completed for future analysis. Also, 3 universities were represented here, however, we intend to continue this research to include more universities. We hope this project will be completed in the next year. We plan to publish the results of the larger study to disseminate this information to a wider audience.

CONCLUSION

This study generates some valuable conclusions about student perceptions regarding collegiate ethics. Students showed that they do care about the ethical reputations of the universities that they attend, or those that they might attend in the future. Students showed that they will make purchase decisions about higher education using information that they receive in the media. Traditional college age students seem to pay particular attention to college marketing messages on social media. Therefore, colleges and universities should monitor the messages they send on social media to include positive ethical indicators. Responses to the questionnaire indicate that an ethical scandal at one university can impact other universities if they share similarities. Thus, all colleges must be careful to acknowledge the ethical behavior of other schools, and be proactive rather than reactive to ethical incidents.

REFERENCES

- Anonymous. (2003). 6 Confess to Cheating on Exam with Cell Phones. Retrieved August 8, 2015 from <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/jan/31/nation/na-cheaters31>
- Bushway A. & Nash W. (1977). School cheating behavior. *Review of Educational Research*. 47:623–632.
- Decoo, W. (2002) *Crisis on Campus: Confronting Academic Misconduct*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Ellis, R. (2015). 3 found guilty in Florida A&M band hazing death. Retrieved July 16, 2015 from <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/24/us/florida-am-hazing-death/>
- Ethics and Compliance Initiative. Retrieved August 8, 2015 at <http://www.ethics.org>
- International Center for Academic Integrity. Retrieved August 20, 2015 at <http://www.icaai.org>
- Kissamore, J., Stone, T. & Jawahar, I. (2007). Academic Integrity: Individual and Situational Factors on Academic Conduct Contemplation. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 75, 381-394.
- Lewin, T. (2007). Dean at M.I.T. Resigns Ending a 28-Year Lie. Retrieved on August 8, 2015 from http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/27/us/27mit.html?_r=0
- McCabe, D., Treviño, L., & Butterfield, K..(2002). Honor Codes and Other Contextual Influences on Academic Integrity: A Replication and Extension of Modified Honor Code Settings. *Research in Higher Education*, 43, (3), 357-378.
- Queen, E. (2011). Ethical Lesson of the Penn State Scandal. Retrieved July 16, 2015 from <http://www.cnn.com/2011/11/10/opinion/queen-penn-state-ethics/>