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Ethical Dilemmas in Higher Education Administration Through Gender-Base Perspectives

History and Philosophy of Higher Education

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I chose the topic *Ethical Dilemmas in Higher Education Administration Through Gender-Base Perspectives* because it will serve to reinforce my ability to make a difference in the field of higher education. I believe that all stakeholders within institutions of higher education should always be fairly and justly treated and never have to concern themselves with anything but education.

Ethics is an increasingly important topic for all professions. Today, more than ever, ethics must be at the very core value of an institution's and individual's decision-making and actions. Every person and institution have a specified code of ethical standards that govern behavior (Starratt, 1991). Without ethical standards, how can good and bad conduct, and acceptable and unacceptable behavior be differentiated by individuals, institutions, and professions?

Ethics and morality often have different meanings to individuals depending on their backgrounds and the culture in which they were raised; these can be very conflicting (Martinson & Haughey, 1995; Neff, 1990). This makes teaching ethical issues in any profession an even more difficult task. Diversity in the workplace adds to the complexity of the issue of ethics. Recently, teaching diversity has been a trend to include ethics in most curricula (Martinson & Haughey, 1995). Individuals safeguard their own respective ethics through honesty, integrity, autonomy, justice, decency, goodness, morality, and their own sense of self-worth. People must mirror their values and beliefs. Teaching the theory behind ethical actions and the skill of making ethical decisions can help facilitate ethical behavior and improve ethical uniformity within all professions, including higher education.

Ethical behavior in life consists of more than just adhering to the law and codes of ethics. Ethical behavior in education must extend beyond what is merely legal. Individuals must be

concerned with what is moral. The question is whose morals would provide the most legitimate model of personal and professional development? A person must realize that there is a moral obligation, which governs their making of a *right* or *wrong* decision.

The problem in teaching ethics is that no two individuals, organizations, or professions have the same values, nor do they weigh complex situations in the same way. There needs to be a universal standard governing which actions are ethical and which ones are not. One way to solve the issue of ethics and ethical dilemmas in facing all professions is through education. This can come from a variety of sources: parents, friends, role models, as well as institutions. Brockett (1988) described two major aspects of ethics: (a) one with a focus on moral questions, (b) the other as a set of beliefs that guides one's actions.

Ethics in Higher Education

There is a need for ethics training to be included in all various college curricula, including higher education leadership courses/programs. As people enter the workforce in institutions of higher education, they are faced with ethical dilemmas without any guidance on how to approach them, let alone solve them. Sommers (1993) realized that a large number of college students simply do not think there is a right or wrong decision when faced with moral choices. Sommers previously published another article in which she criticizes the ethics curricula taught in American universities. These curricula lack private morality of teaching, private decency, honesty, personal responsibility, and honor. The curricula that Sommers analyzed focused more on the social aspect rather than the moral aspect of ethics. Sommers explained that between the mid-to-late 1960s, applied-ethics courses began to increase in college programs and today, there are thousands of ethics courses offered.

Texas A&M University in 1990 received funding from the National Science Foundation

for a research project requiring ethical case studies in the undergraduate engineering college. The students' responses, and student and faculty evaluations, demonstrated that there is a need for professional ethics in the curricula. The two-year project and the study entitled *Introducing Ethics Case Studies into Required Engineering Undergraduate Courses*, provides information and data to educators so that they may introduce ethical issues to their students and profession. Some of these case studies dealt with the moral evaluation of actions, identifying and addressing value issues within *their professional work* (Rabins, Harris, & Pritchard, 1998).

The article, *Teaching Ethics and Values in Public Administration: Are We Making a Difference* addressed the question of whether ethics education truly makes a difference in the life and behavior of men and women pursuing careers in the public sector (Menzel, 1997). In a 1995 survey by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) member schools, MPA students required to complete an ethics course revealed that ethics education has a positive impact on MPA students. With a code of ethics and an ethics curriculum in public administration, students indeed enhance values, knowledge, and skills, which facilitates their acting ethically and effectively (Menzel, 1997).

At the University of Rhode Island, an ethics project encouraged professors to teach ethics in all of the core classes in the Master of Public Administration program. This ethics project paired up adult learners and the faculty of higher education, and faced them with an ethical dilemma. This project highlighted the value of joint collaboration when ethical dilemmas are confronted and discussed. Participants are able to analyze a wider range of complex dilemmas at various administrative levels (Killilea, Pasquerella, & Vocino, 1995). The project affirmed that in a decision-making process, there should always be more than one person deciding an outcome. A group discussion promotes an exchange of ideas, an interactive approach, diverse perspectives,

and results in a learning experience for all involved. When discussing an ethical issue among a group of decision-makers, there will predictably be a period of time in which some ethical principle will be *violated*. This is only normal because everyone has a different perception of what is acceptable and unacceptable. In the context of ethics, one person's opinion is meaningless. Ethics takes on meaning only in relation to differing value systems.

In a 1996 ethics education study, Masters of Public Administration alumni were asked (a) if they faced ethical dilemmas on the job, and (b) did ethics education help them resolve these dilemmas? Of those who faced an ethical dilemma, 43% felt that ethics education helped them 31% said it did not, and the rest were not sure (Menzel, 1997). Value enforcement and ethics reasoning helped the alumni form their decisions. Ethics courses help students to reason, clarify, reinforce existing values, identify ethical issues, make more objective decisions, and make students aware of legal implications.

Menzel (1997) addressed the fact that some students feel ethics courses are not important, simply because they believe ethics and formal education should have been instilled in a person by age ten. Others, though, felt that they need an environment, which supports or allows the use of ethical considerations as part of the criteria for decision-making, rather than merely discussing the academic theory of various belief system (Holt, 1998). During any restructuring period, educational leaders and all parties involved must promote an ethical and moral environment (Starratt, 1991). This educational information should prepare students to recognize and formulate ethical decisions. No replies in this study could be accounted for by the intensity of the dilemmas. Maybe the respondent's dilemmas were so unimportant that they resolved the problem because of their formal education or upbringing.

The Graduate School of the University of Montana has designed a new graduate program

requiring ethics as part of the general education curriculum. It is felt that this will help address those who are deficient in an ethics background but plan to teach applied and professional ethics in secondary and post-secondary higher educational settings (Institute for Business and Professional Ethics, 1997).

Banner and Cannon (1997) explained that teaching ethics implies putting the students' satisfaction of needs and wants before those of anyone else. This is the right thing to do, and the benefit is compounded by building the students' trust and understanding so that learning is facilitated. Student-centered ethics must be the focus of teachers' efforts simply because students could not be taught and are unlikely to learn. Because of the ethical issues confronting adult and higher education, educators and administrators more than ever must create an environment, which fosters the development of individual knowledge and understanding. Educators and administrators must not only facilitate learning, but also model and promote responsibility, civility, and values as well (Merriam & Caffarella, 1991). In the absence of this, an educator is merely offering information. By welcoming ethical obligations in their work, educators and administrators can provide the right forum for ethical behavior.

Banner and Cannon (1997) believed that educators could not let their students go away without learning. The classroom must have an ethical environment and provide a protected place for students to discover themselves, gain knowledge and see the world more openly and deeply in a controlled environment. Educators and administrators should never abuse their position of authority through prejudice, favoritism, and inappropriate intimacy. Abuse results in loss of honesty, truth, fairness, and equality. Doing the right thing through guidance, knowledge, protection, and truthfulness helps all stakeholders in the institution develop their own sense of worth and code of ethics.

An ethical issue occurs when available resources such as an educator and administrator's time, knowledge, and skills, as well as supplies, are limited. Ethical dilemmas arise if specific needs are not met for every stakeholder. For example, time is a very limited and precious resource in higher education, and definitely in other industries. An educator and administrator, as a result, may be available to help some stakeholders while neglecting others. This example can cause an imbalance of equity, equality, commitment, and responsibility. Equality means treating all the students equally, no matter the situation as they are all seeking the same knowledge and understanding to transfer it into the real world. Educators and administrators must give an equal professional distribution of resources, equal access to opportunities consistent with ethical practices, respect through honesty and fairness, and must use the best available knowledge and practices in instruction. Hollander (1983) felt it is important to deal with ethical dilemmas as early as possible and treat all stakeholders fairly.

Galbraith, Sisco, and Guglielmino (1997) recognized that ethical dilemmas in education are inevitable and define the relationship between ethics and values to be somewhat of a disconnect. Ethics is a moral rightness of an action that is determined by one's conscience, the customs and norms of a particular community, by-laws and standards, and by considering consequences. Values, however, are beliefs, principles, and standards that guide the actions of an individual or group. Zinn (as cited in Galbraith, Sisco, & Guglielmino, 1997) offered a number of questions one might ask himself or herself when confronted with an ethical dilemma such as will there be any harm done as a result of one's decision to act or not act? Does an individual have an intuitive feeling that something is not quite right? Moreover, is any code of ethics being violated? As long as decisions are ethically based or a person's intention is good, whatever one does will be the right thing. As educators and administrators, it behooves us to do

the right thing, because we are constantly faced with a myriad of ethical dilemmas, to name a few: plagiarism, cheating, intimate relationships, teacher qualifications, hiring practices, and technology. Smith and Reynolds (1990) mentioned that higher education professionals must have high expectations to promote high standards of ethics within their institution. This is important because all the decisions that are made in higher education reflect the welfare of students, faculty, administrators, and staff. These decisions also affect the community and other stakeholders whom the institution serves. As a result, institutions of higher education must act with fairness, be aware of their actions, and be held accountable for those actions.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore ethical dilemmas facing responses of sampled administrators. An attempt was made to determine the factors, which contribute to the difficulty of resolution of ethical dilemmas faced by professional administrators.

Research Questions

Seven research questions were designed for this study.

Research Question 1. What does the term ethics mean to you?

Research Question 2. What leadership skills do you use to ensure that any unethical conduct that is observed in the institution is not tolerated or ignored?

Research Question 3. How do you maintain the highest standards of personal and professional ethics?

Research Question 4. Maintaining consistent standards of conduct are important when dealing with personal and business-related opportunities or pressures. What do you do to promote a consistent set of values?

Research Question 5. What techniques do you use to earn trust and respect of others?

Research Question 6. How do you, or how would you, promote ethical behavior throughout the institution you have an affiliation?

Research Question 7. What ethical dilemmas have you faced as an administrative professional leader and how did you solve them?

Methodology

A qualitative methodology was used for this study. This section describes the setting, participants, procedures of data collection, limitations of the study, and data analysis. This study took place in a number of administrative offices at Florida Atlantic University and other local institutions of higher education. Participation in the study was voluntary as 16 administrative professionals in higher education responded. Of the participants of the study, seven of them were male, and nine of them were female. The procedures for data collection required the administrative professionals to answer the seven previously specified interview protocol questions. The participants in the study were asked to reflect and answer these set interview protocol questions regarding ethics and ethical dilemmas. All participants were given an Institutional Review Board consent form, which they all complied, signed, and dated. All the participants were advised that their identity would remain anonymous and the data would be kept confidential.

The researcher realized that there are limitations to this study. The sample population studied was not representative of national administrative professionals in higher education since the sample was drawn from three institutions in Palm Beach and Broward Counties. The sample was chosen purposefully for convenience by asking for volunteer participants in the several local campuses. As a student in the doctoral program at Florida Atlantic University, I enjoyed the easy access to my sample population. When a participant expressed an interest in the study, I

explained my research plan in more detail. The interview process focused on the seven questions from my interview guide, which was designed to elicit individuals' thoughts on ethics and ethical dilemmas facing higher education professionals. An open-ended method of questioning was used which offered an opportunity for participants to expand on responses.

Data Analysis

The purpose of the research was to obtain administrative professionals' subjective opinions and experiences regarding ethics and ethical dilemmas in higher education. Using qualitative methodology, I researched and analyzed the collection of data from the interviews. This approach was best suited for this study.

Findings

To understand what administrative professionals in higher education find meaningful regarding ethics and ethical dilemmas, I explored heir thoughts on the subject. The findings reflect what these administrative professionals in higher education perceived to be ethical dilemmas when conducting their everyday work and responsibilities. Each of these areas is discussed.

What does the term ethics mean to you?

Most of the female participants saw an alignment between daily actions and moral understanding. They described ethics as morals, principles, and values that govern a person's beliefs, thoughts, speech, and action. Religion and the Ten Commandments were also mentioned in relation to ethics. When making a decision, females felt they needed to weigh all the issues and take the appropriate action that they regarded as most fair.

The male administrative professionals' responses reflected an adherence to a set of values and beliefs. Male respondents believed that interacting with people should be within a

philosophical context that upheld the best interests of all involved. They regarded ethics as a necessity for individuals and institutions to govern conduct that is moral and legal. Furthermore, ethics was seen as necessary to set examples so that individuals could know what is right and wrong and to prevent them from selling out. This, in turn, would be best for the institution and safeguard the institution's assets as well. It was important to the respondents that individuals conduct themselves the same in public as well as in private life. This is what was regarded as instilling integrity.

What leadership skills do you use to ensure that any unethical conduct that is observed in the institution is not tolerated or ignored?

Most of the female participants advocated the use of policies and procedures regarding their ethical conduct. They feel communication is a necessity and that there should be meetings to discuss acceptable behaviors in relation to policy. Critical thinking was frequently mentioned as a method for taking all facts into consideration.

The male participants were very direct and did not tolerate unethical behavior of any kind. They felt a number of things were important: publish ethical statements, walk the talk so that others will follow, insist on honesty, and become a role model. Setting a tome for others to follow and quick discipline when necessary were common suggestions upon respondents.

How do you maintain the highest standards of personal and professional ethics?

The female participants reported feeling a responsibility to be an example of consistent values and beliefs, which they explained was something instilled in them as children. They felt that decisions should be made based on their own set of values so that they would not have ever to rethink their actions. They envisioned their decisions and actions as potentially being tomorrow's headlines as this further governed their actions. By focusing on open and honest

communication, and sticking to the rules, female administrators felt they would be doing the right thing by seeking out opinions of others.

Male administrative professionals felt that there are different levels of personal ethics which must be maintained. Personal standards of integrity, staying current with the laws, rules and regulations, analyzing options, and speaking out on improper conduct were their ways of taking appropriate action in a given situation. Seeing themselves as a reflection of family, friends, and associates exerts tremendous pressure on their behavior so as not to discredit them.

Maintaining consistent standards of conduct are important when dealing with personal and business-related opportunities and pressures. What do you do to promote a consistent set of values?

Females recognized a need to link critical business actions to core values and beliefs. When actions are reported as questionable, they use examples as teaching tools. They are consistent in their actions and behaviors concerning what is acceptable and unacceptable from others. Also talking with others and taking the time to explain what actions were taken in a decision-making process leads to an increase in the promotion of a consistent set of values. Spiritual life seems to be important as it keeps ethical decisions consistent.

Before making decisions, male administrators consider fair and consistent principles, and the impact they have on individuals. Each day they start with the thought of maintaining integrity and values so that they have satisfactory interactions with other people. A couple of other points important to the respondents were letting everyone know what is expected of them to ensure there is no misunderstanding, not seeking personal gain, and adherence to policies.

What techniques do you use to earn the trust and respect of others?

Female administrative professionals earn trust and respect by following up and following

through as a matter of course in their work habits. Seeking advice from colleagues on matters when needed, as well as displaying a level of trust and respect for others, are some other techniques. Also mentioned was maintaining consistent behavior, actively listen to evaluating others' needs, being fair and reasonable, and thinking of both sides of an issue.

On the other hand, male respondents earn trust and respect by providing guidance and then allowing others to do their jobs. Hiring someone to do a job, giving them guidelines and mostly giving them the freedom to make decisions are important. Other techniques are being straightforward and honest, treating others with respect, practicing listening, and earning it through your own actions. The very important point was that a person could not demand trust and respect – these have to be earned.

How do you, or how would you, promote ethical behavior throughout the institution you have an affiliation?

Females responded by stressing the institution's core values and beliefs: trust, honesty, respect, and teamwork. Set an example with your good work habits and values, and hold discussion forums for all stakeholders to discuss ethical behavior, and policy and procedures. All top administrators have to take the lead in promoting ethical behavior. They have to set a standard for the institution and have to follow the standard personally at all times. Administrators must be consistent and reward good behavior, yet inappropriate behavior should have consequences.

The male participants also mentioned a roundtable to brainstorm and role-play scenarios to help make a person think before they act. One term used was *storytelling* in which all stakeholders are told what the institution is all about. Acting as a role model, mentoring, subordinates, and encouraging in ethical behavior was seen as important.

What ethical dilemmas have you faced as an administrative professional leader and how did you solve them?

In the final question, dilemmas that females faced dealt with work productivity, differing business decisions, favoritism, personal relationships, gossip and rumors, firing an incompetent employee, and hiring practices. The males faced dilemmas, which pertained to work productivity and balancing the interest of employees with those of the organization.

Discussion

The complexity of ethics in the field of higher education clearly presents a challenge to those who work in this profession. In addition to cultural differences, diversity, and individual value systems, gender differences also play a role in the complexity of ethics. This was evident by the differing responses to the interview protocol questions. The female administrators communicated with others like their male counterparts; however, they actively listened. By actively listening to others, the female administrators allowed time for positive feedback.

Dr. Deborah Tannen (1990) addressed the issue of gender-specific communication style. These communication styles are predictable and can play a role in how individuals respond to ethical dilemmas. Tannen described elements of communication that supersede the spoken word. Among these communication styles are *Rapport Talk* and *Report Talk*. Women use a style of speaking called rapport talk, because it is mutually understanding and facilitates connections. Men prefer report talk, or conversation that preserves independence, and negotiates and maintains status in a hierarchical social order. This is done by exhibiting knowledge and skill, and by holding center stage. There is no right or wrong, good or bad conversational style; the styles are just that they are (Tannen, 1990).

Clearly delineating a code of ethics across gender, cultures, and ethnic persuasions, to

name a few variables, seems a daunting task. Despite this, it behooves all organizations to address this issue and make it a priority. Complexity notwithstanding, an ethical standard can be established and especially currently, it must.

The study had several limitations. First, only administrative professionals were interviewed at Florida Atlantic University and other local institutions of higher education that offered many different degree levels and programs. Caution should be used not to generalize these results to other administrative professionals in different institutions of higher education. Secondly, due to the previously established relationships between the participants, and myself details may have been omitted or may have biased my observations.

There are ethical issues and dilemmas that confront educators and administrative professionals on a daily basis and affect everyone in and out of their institution. Although each of us may not directly confront the same moral choices that some administrative professionals face, the decisions we make do determine how we live our days to assist others as role models and mentors. Educators and administrative professionals' choices determine the teaching philosophy we share, the relationships we have with others, the qualifications we achieved, our hiring practices, the equity we promote with all students and stakeholders of the institution, and the environment we support. If we think this through, these dilemmas affect the future of our profession and the status of the college/university. Kerr (1994) stated that higher education, as a profession must have leaders who can visualize the future regarding the institution's performance. Learning organizations must have behavior codes to promote integrity, honesty, decency, and fairness, in order for everyone within higher education to be aware of ethical dilemmas and have the ability and critical-thinking skills to collaborate with others in solving these issues. Cervero (1989) and Brown (1990) felt that adult educators are continually making

choices regarding the learning needs for students and the development of programs needed to become relevant to the students' success outside of the classroom. Brockett (1988) in his closing chapter had a concern that there was not enough research regarding this issue and hoped that other adult learners and administrative professionals in higher education would focus on examining the need to continue studying ethical dilemmas.

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