

A pilot investigation examining the ethical behaviors of accounting educators

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ABSTRACT

A need for a code of ethics to serve professorial accountants has long been recognized. The literature is rich with research studies examining various aspects of this topic. However, in recent years there has also been an interest in the development of a code of ethics for accounting educators. Until 2002 a code of ethics for accounting educators had not been formally adopted by any accounting educator's organization. This paper describes a descriptive study which replicated parts of an earlier study published in 1990. In this earlier study the authors found accounting educators surveyed indicated their belief that a number of their accounting faculty colleagues had engaged in many activities which they considered moderately to extremely unethical. The results of this study found an improvement in the perceived view of accounting educators by their accounting faculty colleagues. Further analysis revealed that the large majority of those surveyed indicated they believed the level of ethical behavior at their school was 'acceptable'. This was true for both larger schools and smaller one. Finally, faculty at smaller schools indicated a slightly lower degree of acceptability with regards to their colleagues' ethical behaviors.

Keywords: accounting educators, ethical behaviors, academic responsibilities



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I. INTRODUCTION

In recent years the topic of professional ethics for accountants has received a great deal of attention both in the academic literature as well as the popular media. This is due in part to the well-known accounting scandals involving Enron, Arthur Anderson, MCI, etc. Today, virtually all undergraduate accounting programs cover ethics in the classroom. In fact, many accounting programs have a separate course on professional ethics. However, until recently there was not a code of ethics specifically for accounting educators. Very limited research has been published in the area of ethics of accounting educators. The purpose of this paper is to describe a study which replicated parts of earlier research (Engle and Smith, 1990) which examined the degree of perceived faculty involvement in what was considered unethical behaviors. Additionally, this study examined overall perception of the acceptability of ethical behaviors of accounting faculty by colleagues.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

As early as 1981 the American Accounting Association was asked to consider developing a code of professional ethics for academic accountants. However, they concluded that “no strong support appears to exist for such a code nor does there appear to be any impelling evidence to suggest that such a code is needed.” (AAA, 1981). However, there was a continued effort to encourage the development of such a code (Loeb, 1990).

In one of the first empirical studies conducted in this area, 700 accounting educators were surveyed and presented with 29 specific scenarios and asked to judge, on a five-point scale, the ethical propriety of each of the activities (Engle and Smith, 1990). There were 245 usable responses. The possible responses ranged from totally ethical to totally unethical. Also, sanctions were attached to each of the possible replies to further clarify them to respondents. The sanctions ranged from ‘no sanctions’ to ‘dismissal’. The scenarios presented were grouped into activities related to teaching (student related), research, travel, outside employment, and publisher relations. Furthermore, educators were asked to estimate the percentage of accounting faculty at their institution that they believed were involved with each activity. Once again, the questionnaire recipients were asked to reply on a five point scale ranging from ‘Virtually None’ (0% to 5%) to ‘Virtually All’ (95% to 100%). To increase the validity of the responses, the data analysis conducted by the authors only included data from subjects who had indicated that they had been employed at their current school for at least two years.

Abbreviated results of the estimated perceived involvement of unethical by accounting faculty colleagues can be found in Table 1 (Appendix). The results indicated that a minority of accounting faculty were believed, by a significant number of respondents, to be engaging in many of the behaviors the majority had ranked as being moderately to extremely unethical.

In another empirical study in this area, 1,000 accounting educators were surveyed and asked to identify specific behaviors as ranging from being very acceptable to very unacceptable (on a five point scale). There were 151 usable responses. Based on the results obtained, the authors developed what was referred to as “hypernorms”.

Hypernorms were defined as “norms reflecting a high degree of consensus of what is acceptable or unacceptable behavior.” The results were used to develop ethical standards that could be used by accounting educators (Sirgy, Siegel and Johar, 2005). The resulting standards were similar to the ones tested by Engle and Smith (1990). In 2002 the International Association for Accounting Education and Research (IAAER) adopted a former code of ethics for accounting

educators entitled “*Global Code of Ethics for Accounting Educators*” (IAAER, 2008). The code discusses professional responsibilities in the areas of accounting education, academic research and to the accounting profession.

III. HYPOTHESES

As discussed earlier, since 1990, several major scandals have, among other factors, led to an increased awareness of the importance of professional ethics within the accounting profession, including higher education. Also since 1990 a code of ethics has been adopted specifically for accounting educators. These factors led the author to believe that the perceived occurrence of unethical behaviors by accounting educators might have decreased since the published results of the earlier study (Engle and Smith, 1990). Thus, the first hypothesis was as follows:

H1: There will be a significant improvement in the perceived ethical behavior of accounting educators by their colleagues as compared to the study published by Engle and Smith in 1990.

Another interesting question is whether there is a significant difference in the perceived ethical behaviors of accounting educators in small versus large schools. In this study a large school was defined as one with a total student body of 10,000 or more. In reviewing the literature, there is no evidence to suggest that there might be any such differences. This led the author to the second hypothesis:

H2: There will not be a significant difference between the perceived ethical behaviors of accounting educators by their colleagues when comparing smaller schools with larger schools.

IV. METHODOLOGY

A survey was sent via email to 250 accounting faculty chosen at random from *Accounting Faculty Directory 2016-2017* (Hasselback, 2017). There were 76 usable responses. The survey first asked faculty to provide an estimate of the percentage of accounting faculty at their schools that were, in their opinions, engaged in various activities. A five-point scale was used for responses ranging from ‘Virtually None (0% to 5%)’ to ‘Virtually All (95% to 100%)’. Next, faculty were asked to provide an overall opinion as to the acceptability of their colleagues’ ethical behaviors. Possible responses were ‘Acceptable’, ‘Somewhat Acceptable’ and ‘Unacceptable’. Finally, faculty were asked to provide some demographic information including length of employment at their current institution, size of the student body at their school, etc. As in the previous study (Engle and Smith, 1990) only responses from faculty who indicated they had been employed at their present school for at least two years were included in the data analysis. This was done to include the validity of the data.

V. RESULTS

The author in this current study chose to examine 13 activities he believed to be a good representation of the five areas of interest previously examined (Engle and Smith, 1990). The results of the first part of the survey are summarized in Table 2 (Appendix). By comparing Table 1 and Table 2 it can be seen that there was a higher level of perceived ethical behavior in all but one of the 13 activities.

The one area in which there was a lower perception of ethical behavior was in the area of plagiarizing research. The results of this study indicated that 10 percent of respondents believed a minority of their colleagues (6 to 39 percent) had engaged in the plagiarizing of research. Even more alarming is the fact that 2 percent of the respondents indicated that they believed approximately 50 % (40 to 60 percent) of their colleagues had been involved in plagiarizing research. However, overall, the results supported the first hypothesis.

The second part of this study examined whether overall views of ethical behaviors would vary based on school size as defined by total student enrollment. Smaller schools were defined as having a student body of less than 10,000 and larger schools were defined as having a student body of 10,000 or more. Of the total respondents, 39 indicated they were employed at smaller schools and 37 indicated they were employed at larger schools. The results can be seen in Table 3(Appendix). These results suggest little differences between the perceived ethical behaviors of accounting faculty when comparing smaller schools with larger schools. Faculty associated with smaller schools seemed to have only a slightly lower overall opinion of their colleagues' ethical behaviors. Thus, the results support the second hypothesis.

VI. FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper described a pilot study which replicated parts of an earlier study (Engle and Smith, 1990). Future research might expand upon the limited sample size as well as obtaining more demographic information for further examination. A larger sample size would increase the validity of the study. This previous study discussed demographic contrasts which included Ph.D. versus non-Ph.D., CPAs versus non-CPAs, males versus females, etc. The author believes adding additional demographic contrasts would enrich the results of the study.

VII. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The purpose of the paper was to discuss a descriptive study which, in part, replicated an earlier study that examined perceived ethical behaviors of accounting faculty by their colleagues. Faculty taking part in this survey were presented with a series of activities and asked to estimate the percentage of accounting faculty they believed were engaged in such activities. The results indicated that the perception of unethical behaviors has decreased since the previous study was published in 1990. Additionally, there appeared to be only a slightly lower view of the overall acceptable ethical behaviors of faculty from smaller schools as compared to larger ones. In conclusion, the results appear to be positive. It appears that, at least in the view of accounting faculty taking part in this study, accounting educators are engaging in less unethical behaviors than when the previous study was reported in 1990.

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APPENDIX

Table 1
 Estimates of Faculty Involvement
 Results by Engle and Smith
 (n=245)

	Virtually None (0% to 5%)	A Minority (6% to 39%)	Approx 50% (40% to 60%)	A Majority (61% to 94%)	Virtually All (95% to 100%)
1. Plagiarizing of research	91%	8%	1%	0%	0%
2. Falsifying data used in research	86	13	1	0	0
3. Falsifying school expense accounts	51	37	7	5	0
4. Attending a meeting at university expense but not substantively participating	22	54	18	6	0
5. Neglecting university responsibilities due to outside employment	28	56	1	2	0
6. Using university equipment for personal activities	25	54	13	5	3
7. Accepting a bribe from a publisher in exchange for textbook adoption	93	7	0	0	0
8.. Accepting a donation (to the school) from a publisher in exchange for textbook adoption	88	11	1	0	0
9.. Excessive cancelling of office hours	32	53	11	3	1

10. Dating a student in his/her class	82	17	1	0	
11. Dating a student not in his/her class who is not an accounting major	81	18	1	0	0
12. Having sex with students in exchange for grades	95	5	0	0	0
13. Accepting money or other gifts in exchange for grades	96	4	0	0	0



Table 2
Estimates of Faculty Involvement
Current Study
(n=76)

	Virtually None (0% to 5%)	A Minority (6% to 39%)	Approx 50% (40% to 60%)	A Majority (61% to 94%)	Virtually All (95% to 100%)
1. Plagiarizing of research	88%	10%	2%	0%	0%
2. Falsifying data used in research	88	12	0	0	0
3. Falsifying school expense accounts	67	29	2	2	0
4. Attending a meeting at university expense but not substantively participating	35	50	8	4	2
5. Neglecting university responsibilities due to outside employment	47	41	4	8	0
6. Using university equipment for personal activities	33	38	17	8	4
7. Accepting a bribe from a publisher in exchange for textbook adoption	94	4	2	0	0
8. Accepting a donation (to the school) from a publisher in exchange for textbook adoption	90	10	0	0	0
9. Excessive cancelling of office hours	50	42	6	2	0
10. Dating a student in his/her class	90	10	0	0	0
11. Dating a student not in his/her class who is not an accounting major	90	6	4	0	0
12. Having sex with students in exchange for grades	98	2	0	0	0

13. Accepting money or other gifts in exchange for grades	98	2	0	0	0
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Table 3
 Responses Comparing the Overall Acceptability of
 Ethical Behaviors of Accounting Faculty Between
 Smaller and Larger Schools
 Current Study
 (n=76)

	Acceptable	Somewhat Acceptable	Unacceptable
Schools with a student body less than 10,000	79%	21%	0%
Schools with a student body of 10,000 or more	84%	16%	0%

