

Expanding Ethics Education: Professionals Can Participate

By Ann L. Watkins and [Venkat M. Iyer](#)

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Article:

Numerous studies have assessed the degree to which business schools have integrated ethics education into their business programs. A survey of accounting educators sponsored by the American Accounting Association (AAA) in conjunction with the National Association of State Boards of Accountancy (NASBA) indicated that less than half of business schools offered a separate course in ethics (Mastracchio, *The CPA Journal*, January 2005). A similar study of department chairs of colleges in New York found that only 66% of the respondents indicated that ethics was discussed in introductory accounting courses (Haas, *The CPA Journal*, June 2005). These results are consistent with the findings of *Educating for the Public Trust* (2003), commissioned by PricewaterhouseCoopers.

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) International is the leading accrediting organization, with 432 accredited institutions worldwide. Ethics education has been a required component in AACSB International—accredited school curricula for several years. The AACSB developed a web-based ethics resource center for its members, and in June 2004 published the guide *Ethics Education in Business Schools*.

Study

The following study focused on accounting programs awarded separate accreditation by AACSB International. A thorough analysis of websites of each program, as well as course descriptions, was performed. Although results were not subsequently verified by contacting department chairs or reviewing course syllabi, they are robust enough to suggest that, even after extensive calls for ethics education were made, the subject of ethics has not been widely or extensively incorporated into the AACSB—accredited accounting curricula. Of the 162 accredited accounting departments, less than 30% offered a separate ethics course, which is considerably less than the AAA's survey of business schools in general. Individual course descriptions for undergraduates were examined to see if they included the word "ethics" (see the *Exhibit*).

Universities did not fare better at the graduate level. Less than 15% of the accredited accounting departments provided a separate graduate-level ethics course, and less than 25% offered other graduate courses with the word "ethics" in the course description.

This should give the profession some cause for concern, as several academic studies have indicated that ethics education can be beneficial in a number of ways. Ethics education makes accounting students aware that they will face choices that may harm someone involved, and it enables them to identify an ethical dilemma. Discussing potential ethical situations that students may encounter gives them the opportunity to identify ethical predicaments and how they should resolve the situation. If properly administered, accounting ethics education would allow students the opportunity to build upon their own ideas. It also demonstrates that there may be more than one correct way to react to a situation. In other words, ethics education can provide students the opportunity to see that there are uncertainties in the accounting profession, and how to handle them.

Accounting ethics education can encourage students to question their behavior, consider the behavior of others, and understand alternatives to ethical dilemmas. It also provides students the chance to exchange ideas so they can discuss and hear others' beliefs in order to make informed decisions when they reach the workplace and face real ethical decisions.

Ethics education has the potential to develop a sense of moral obligation and the skills necessary to deal with ethical conflict. Enhancing moral development skills allows individuals to more accurately realize an ethical dilemma, no matter what the main influence over their decision is.

EXHIBIT Individual Course Descriptions Containing "Ethics"	
Course	Percentage
Accounting Principles	<5%
Financial Accounting	<3%
Auditing	<54%
Tax	<6%
Managerial	<16%
Government or Not-for-Profit	<2%
Accounting Information Systems	<2%

The Role of Professionals

A student's ideas can be subjected to careful scrutiny in order to develop objective ideas and understand morally appropriate behavior (Buss and Patterson, *Journal of Business Ethics*, March 1993).

The professional ethics of accountants is an important issue relating directly to the integrity of the profession and its ability to secure the public trust. The visibility of ethics education in accounting programs may also increase public confidence in the profession. Professionals can also play a valuable role by partnering with academics to develop case materials that will provide students with valuable exposure to and insights into ethical situations. The AICPA's Professor/Practitioner Case Development Program provides one example of such efforts. This program currently has a series devoted specifically to ethics and fraud in business. Additionally, professionals should consider coauthoring case studies with academics in academic journals, which would also ensure wide distribution of ethics case materials.

Professionals can also focus their efforts locally. Many university accounting departments work closely with advisory boards composed of various accounting professionals from the local community in an effort to obtain feedback and suggestions with respect to curriculum development. Through their positions on advisory boards, professionals can encourage the inclusion of ethics education in local universities. Funding for faculty to attend conferences and workshops focused on ethics education is also important.

Finally, and perhaps most important, professionals can enter the classroom. Practitioner participation in classroom ethics discussions can provide valuable insights into ethical dilemmas that students may face in the workplace. Discussing different behaviors and viewpoints may enable students to better understand the ethical implications of their actions.

Students' Awareness

The introduction of case materials, coupled with professional participation in the classroom, can improve students' decision-making processes and may better prepare them to respond professionally to ethical situations. This could make students aware of the different views and behaviors of professionals and provide them with the opportunity to recognize accounting issues and dilemmas that they may encounter in practice.

Although it is difficult to teach ethics in the classroom, making students aware of the ethical implications of their actions and providing them the skills to resolve ethical dilemmas may enable future professionals to make more ethically informed decisions.