

# Student Perceptions of the Ethics of Professors

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## Abstract

Ethical violations are becoming common in the business world. Teaching proper ethical behavior can begin in college. In this study, we surveyed 350 students to determine what affects students' perceptions of the ethics of professors and to determine whether or not taking a course in ethics changes this perception. The most important factor in determining whether or not a professor is ethical is "fairness in grading." Surprisingly, there was no statistically significant difference between students who took a course in ethics and those who did not in their perception of what makes a professor ethical or unethical. There were some differences, however, between males and females in these perceptions. By learning ethical principles at the college-level, there may be an impact on ethical behavior when in the business world.

## Key Words

Ethics, business, academia, teaching, college

## Introduction

The improvement of ethical standards is of great importance to society. The first place to focus on ethical standards may be in our universities, as there is a high prevalence of ethical violations among college students. From 75-90% of college students admit to cheating on tests and/or plagiarizing information (Center for Academic Integrity, 2000; Pullen, Ortloff, Casey, & Payne, 2000). Formal ethics courses in college are often a student's first exposure to ethical standards (de Russy, 2003).

Although some professors in colleges teach ethics courses, the overall discipline of professors are not perceived as ethical when compared to numerous other professions. In a November 2003 CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll (AFSCME, 2004), Americans were asked to rate the ethical standards and honesty of individuals in various professions. The top professions with "high" or "very high" ethical ratings were: nurses (83%), physicians (68%), veterinarians (68%), pharmacists (67%), dentists (61%), college teachers (59%), engineers (59%), policemen (59%), members of clergy (56%), and psychiatrists (38%). At the bottom of the list were car salesmen (7%), a group that has been at the bottom in every poll since 1977. College professors may rate higher than car salesman, business executives (18%), and lawyers (16%), but it is a bit disheartening to note that they rate well below nurses and other health-care professionals.

In one study surveying professors about ethical attitudes toward students by professors, ethical professors were those who were fair, did not ignore cheating among students, and did not take advantage of their position of power. Female professors differed from male professors and were more likely to believe that it was unethical to lower course demands for those with many work or family demands. Also, those who taught ethics courses were more likely to consider it unethical to accept a student invitation to a party as compared to those who did not teach ethics courses (Birch, Elliot, & Trankel, 1999). In another study, giving lower grades to students who disagreed

with a professor's views and also having a sexual relationship with an undergraduate student were almost unanimously viewed as unethical by professors (Robie & Kidwell, 2003).

Besides the attitudes of college professors, some studies focus on the ethical behaviors of professors from the viewpoint of college students. Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, & Allen (1993) found that professors and students had similar perceptions as to which behaviors were ethical and unethical. There were also few differences between men and women. The most endorsed highly unethical behaviors under virtually all circumstances included the following: "Teaching while under the influence of alcohol, cocaine, or some other illegal drug" (93.6%); "Making deliberate or repeated sexual comments, gestures, or physical contact toward a student that are unwanted by the student" (90.7%); "Teaching while under the influence of alcohol" (89.8%); "Teaching that certain races are intellectually inferior" (83.8%); "Including false or misleading information that hurt the student's chances when writing a letter of recommendation for a student" (80.3%); and "Including material on the test that was not covered in the lectures or assigned reading" (72.8%).

In another study, Kuther (2003) studied the ethical behaviors of professors from the viewpoint of college students. She used a 5-point Likert-style scale ranging from: 1 = "Not ethical under any circumstances" to 5 = "Ethical under all circumstances." The behaviors that were viewed as most unethical were: "Teaching while under the influence of cocaine or other illegal drugs" (mean=1.10); "Teaching while under the influence of alcohol" (mean=0.13); "Insulting or ridiculing a student in his or her absence" (mean=1.21); "Telling colleagues confidential disclosures made by a student" (mean=1.29); "Insulting or ridiculing a student in the student's presence" (mean=1.31); "Ignoring strong evidence of cheating" (mean = 1.43); and "Ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment" (mean=1.47).

Students and professors can view behavior differently with regard to ethics. Morgan and Korschgen (2001) com-

pared the opinions of students and professors on 16 items dealing with faculty behavior. Faculty saw the following behaviors as being more unethical than did students: using easy tests to win popularity, accepting rebates from textbook publishers, and using profanity. Students, on the other hand, found a failure to update notes as being more unethical than did faculty. Both students and faculty agreed that ignoring cheating and ridiculing students were highly unethical acts.

In this manuscript we explore what affects students' perceptions of the ethics of their professors. Also, we study whether students who completed a course in ethics have different attitudes with regard to their professor's ethical behavior. We hypothesize that taking an ethics course would affect their perception of their professor's ethical behavior.

## Method

### Participants and Procedures

This study was conducted at a large urban university with an enrollment of almost 15,700 students; sixty-nine percent are undergraduates. All students were eligible to participate. We received 350 completed self-report questionnaires. A self-administered questionnaire was given to students in the college cafeteria and at other common facilities on campus. Students were approached at different times throughout the day. The response rate was 80.0%. The sample was 62.0% female and 86.9% of respondents were less than 26-years-old. With regard to taking an ethics course, 37.1% ( $n=130$ ) took a course, 54.0% ( $n=189$ ) did not take a course, 7.4% ( $n=26$ ) were not sure, and 1.4% ( $n=5$ ) did not answer the question.

### Measures

**Close-ended questions:** We asked four close-ended questions. Two separate questions consisted of, "Overall, how ethical do you think college professors are?" and "How ethical do you think you are? Response choices ranged from 1 = "extremely ethical" to 5 = "not at all ethical." We also asked, "How important is each of the following factors in determining whether a college professor is ethical or not?" There were 10 different factors consisting of: promptness, accessibility outside of the classroom, honesty in presentation of materials, use of class as a soapbox to present views about outside subjects such as politics, fairness in grading, preparedness for class, making bigoted statements, playing favorites among students, making a sexual advance, and harmless flirting. Response choices ranged from 1 = "very important" to 5 = "not important." We also asked, "Is it important that a professor of ethics is ethical before you listen to what they have to teach?" Response choices ranged from 1 = "definitely" to 5 = "definitely not."

**Open-ended questions:** We asked two open-ended questions. One question was, "Think of the most ethical professor you ever had, what about this professor made you think s/he was ethical?" The other question was, "Think of the least ethical professor you ever had, what about this professor made you think s/he was unethical?"

### Statistical Analyses

We calculated descriptive statistics for the all the close-ended questions. T-tests for independent samples were used to calculate mean differences between the groups of either taken or not having taken an ethics class. We excluded those who were unsure ( $n=26$ ) or omitted this question ( $n=5$ ) from these analyses. We also used t-tests for independent samples

for the gender comparisons. Multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to compare mean differences among the question with the 10 different factors of determining whether a college professor is ethical or not before we conducted the univariate independent analyses. The open-ended questions were calculated with frequencies of occurrence per relevant category. All analyses were conducted with SPSS Version 11.5 (SPSS, 2002).

## Results

As shown in Table 1, the average value for the student perceptions of the ethical level of their professors was 2.54. Only a bit more than half of the students believed that professors were either extremely ethical or ethical. We used a t-test to determine whether the average rating for those who had taken a course in ethics would be different from those who had not taken a course. There was no statistical difference ( $t\text{-value} = -0.35$ ,  $df = 316$ ,  $p > .05$ ) between the average ratings of students who had taken a course in ethics ( $M=2.52$ ,  $SD=0.73$ ) and those who had not ( $M=2.55$ ,  $SD=0.77$ ).

As shown in Table 2, students perceived themselves as being more ethical than their professors with an average rating of 2.27. Examining the top two categories of the scale ("extremely ethical" and "ethical") highlights the difference more clearly: 68.9% ( $n=241$ ) for self versus 52.4% ( $n=183$ ) for college professors. We used a t-test to determine whether the average self-rating for those who had taken a course in ethics would be different from those who had not taken a course. There was no statistically significant difference between ( $t\text{-value} = -1.01$ ,  $df = 317$ ,  $p > .05$ ) the average self-ratings of students who had taken a course in ethics ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=0.93$ ) and those who had not ( $M=2.46$ ,  $SD=0.72$ ).

As shown in Table 3, means are used to list the courses in order of importance, from most to least important. Students believed that all the factors would be important in determining whether a professor was ethical or not. The most important factor was "fairness in grading" with a mean of 1.30. In fact, 94.3% considered this factor to be in the two highest categories of "very important" in the determination of whether a professor was ethical or not. The least important factor was "use of class as a soapbox," with a mean of 2.61.

We compared whether having taken a course in ethics would make a difference in these importance ratings. Wilks' lambda MANOVA omnibus test for the model with ethics course use as a predictor was not significant,  $F(1, 306) = 0.88$ ,  $p = > .05$ , and the null hypothesis that the ethics factors did not differ was not rejected. An examination of the univariate ANOVA analyses indicated that there also were no significant differences ( $p > .05$ ) for any of the measures.

We believed that men and women might rate the importance factors in different ways. Specifically, "making a sexual advance" and "harmless flirting" were factors that we clearly believed would have sex differences. Wilks' lambda MANOVA omnibus test for the model with gender as a predictor was significant,  $F(1, 333) = 2.72$ ,  $p = < .001$ , and the null hypothesis that the ethics factors did not differ was rejected. As shown in Table 4, univariate ANOVA analyses indicated 5 significant factors of "preparedness for class," "playing favorites among students," "making a sexual advance," "harmless flirting," and "accessibility outside the classroom." These significant values were maintained even after adjusting for having taken an ethics course. After a Bonferroni correction and setting p-values for

significance at 0.005 (0.05/10), three of the factors ("playing favorites among students," "making a sexual advance," and "harmless flirting") remained significant where women believed that these factors were more important in determining the ethics of a professor than did men.

As shown in Table 5, the average value for importance for a professor of ethics to be ethical before you would listen to what they have to teach was 1.92. More than three quarters of the students endorsed this as either definitely or probably. We used a t-test to determine whether the average rating for those who had taken a course in ethics would be different from those who had not taken a course. There was no statistical difference ( $t$ -value = 0.028,  $df$  = 311,  $p > .05$ ) between the average ratings of students who had taken a course in ethics ( $M=1.91$ ,  $SD=1.12$ ) and those who had not ( $M=1.91$ ,  $SD=1.10$ ).

With regard to our open-ended question of what makes a professor ethical, being a fair grader was the most important factor in being perceived as ethical ( $n=81$ , 23.1%). For example, students wrote, "His tests were very fair and so was his grading system," and "Her exams were directly from her lectures." Other important factors were not showing favoritism to any students ( $n=42$ , 12.0%), coming to class on time ( $n=36$ , 10.3%), presentation of class materials without bias ( $n=32$ , 9.1%), and caring for students ( $n=31$ , 8.9%).

Favoritism included comments such as, "open to everybody/no favoritism," and "Professor \_\_\_ because she treated us well and equally." Coming to class on time included comments such as, "She was always on time." Presentation of class materials without bias included comments such as, "She taught from everyone's point of view," and "When presented with a controversial discussion of race in a racially mixed class, the professor presented facts and opinions in a professional and non-insulting manner, as not to show favor or to insult any students." Caring for students included comments such as, "My political science teacher two semesters ago, he always took time after class on the phone to help with work and other aspects of life," "He really listened to each student," "always has a friendly relationship with her students," and "He was very understanding." Other factors that made students believe that a professor they had was ethical included knowing the material well, being organized and following the syllabus, and being available to students.

With regard to our question of what makes a professor least ethical, similarly the converse of being unfair to students was the most important factor in being perceived as one who lacks ethics ( $n=48$ , 13.7%). For example comments included, "unfair grading," "She told us at the beginning of class that she does not give As," and "lies about what will be on test." Other important factors were: making sexist/bigoted statements ( $n=35$ , 10.0%), showing favoritism ( $n=32$ , 9.1%), poor teaching/being unprepared ( $n=24$ , 6.9%), being consistently late for class ( $n=23$ , 6.6%), and not relating well to students/bad attitude ( $n=21$ , 6.0%). Ten students (2.9%) mentioned not following the syllabus as a factor. Factors that did not get many mentions but are still alarming include: "not making a sexual advance" ( $n=7$ , 2.0%), "using foul language" ( $n=7$ , 2.0%), "making sexual remarks" ( $n=3$ , 0.9%), and "having an affair with a student" ( $n=1$ , 0.2%).

Making sexist/bigoted statements included, "She always bordered on racist statements. She was very covert in how she said them. I hated that because it would be very hard to prove," and "He was extremely rude and made racist comments." Showing favoritism included, "He was playing favorites among students even when he gave grades," and "The professor was unethical because he picked favorites and those out of his favor never

scored as high as those he liked." Poor teaching/being unprepared included, "My least ethical professor comes unprepared to class, rushes through the material," and "always repeated that the subject she teaches is not her specialty." Being consistently late for class included, "He was never on time," and "always late." Not relating well to students/bad attitude included, "She was unpleasant and mean towards me and other students."

## Discussion

We found that only a little more than 50% of students believed that professors were either extremely ethical or ethical. Also, students perceived themselves as being more ethical than their professors. One consistent result obtained from both our quantitative and qualitative analyses is that fairness in grading is the critical factor that many students use in determining whether a professor is ethical or unethical.

These results about fairness in grading are similar to the results obtained by Kuther (2003). Kuther found that dishonest grading practices were one of the areas considered unethical by students. These areas included ignoring strong evidence of cheating, allowing for the likeability of a student to influence the way one graded, and ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in assignments.

Contrary to our hypothesis, having taken an ethics course did not affect students' perception of their professor's ethical behavior. One may expect that among students who have not taken a course in ethics, they would consider being a fair grader the major factor in determining whether a professor is ethical or not. This could be due to the influence of self-interest influencing decisions. However, among students with some knowledge of ethics this is quite surprising. They should be able to recognize that fair grading (usually meaning easy grading and/or not using questions on exams that were not discussed in class) indicates very little about the ethics of a professor. Ethical professors may be tough graders and unethical ones may be easy graders. It is just not easy to measure "fairness" when it comes to grades.

Our findings with regard to gender where women considered "making a sexual advance," and "harmless flirting" as more important ethical issues than men may be because of the gender roles related to those areas. Presumably, women tend to be more concerned about flirting and sexual advances on the part of professors than men since they are more likely than men to be at the receiving end of these behaviors. These results differ from the study of Keith-Spiegel et al. (1993) where they found minimal if any differences between men and women. It is possible that since our study was conducted 10 years after their study, in today's world women in universities are more comfortable about asserting their rights to be treated fairly without being sexually harassed.

Professors can benefit by considering their ethical obligations and responsibilities. Cahn (1986) attempts to provide ethical guidelines for professors so they will be aware of their professional responsibilities. For instance, professors, just like physicians and attorneys, have an obligation to stay current in their profession. They also must give fair exams, grade them carefully, and return them promptly. The AAUP has a Statement on Professional Ethics on its website (<http://www.aaup.org/statements/Redbook/Rbethics.htm>). The statement includes such principles as a professors "primary responsibility to their subject is to seek and to state the truth as they see it. To this end professors devote their energies to developing and

improving their scholarly competence." In addition, professors should "avoid any exploitation, harassment, or discriminatory treatment of students." They should "respect and defend the free inquiry of associates. In the exchange of criticism and ideas professors show due respect for the opinions of others." Interestingly, with regard to the harassment topic that the AAUP clearly defines as indicative of unethical behavior, the male students did not consider this area as of great concern as compared to the female students. We recommend that universities who need to monitor a professor's behavior with regard to possible harassment issues should consider consulting with predominately female students who are more sensitive to this topic.

Our study has some limitations in that we only assessed students at one college and our results may not be representative of other colleges. Although a small possibility, it also is entirely

possible that the students whom we surveyed did not do well on their ethics courses and may not be representative of students who take ethics courses.

In summary, our study with students has implications for the business world. Students need to learn more about ethics in order to prevent ethical violations from occurring once they enter the workplace. There are numerous analogies between the academic world and business world. A professor who flirts with students is not much different than a corporate employer who tolerates sexual innuendoes. Fairness in grading is not much different from the way a manager treats a worker. By having students learn and understand ethics in college, they will be more prepared to successfully incorporate these principles into the business world.

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Table 1  
Beliefs of 349 Students Regarding How Ethical They Perceive Their College Professors

	Frequency	Percent
Extremely ethical (1)	14	4.0
Ethical (2)	169	48.4
Somewhat ethical (3)	134	38.4
Slightly ethical (4)	27	7.7
Not at all ethical (5)	5	1.4
Mean	2.54	
Standard Deviation	0.76	

Table 2  
Beliefs of 350 Students Regarding How Ethical They Perceive Themselves

	Frequency	Percent
Extremely ethical (1)	42	12.0
Ethical (2)	199	56.9
Somewhat ethical (3)	85	24.3
Slightly ethical (4)	19	5.4
Not at all ethical (5)	5	1.4
Mean	2.27	
Standard Deviation	0.80	

**Table 3**  
Beliefs of 350 Students Regarding the Importance of Various Factors in Determining Whether a Professor is Ethical

Factor	Very important (1) % (n)	(2) % (n)	3 % (n)	4 % (n)	Not important 5 % (n)	M	SD
Fairness in grading	78.0 (273)	15.7 (55)	3.7 (13)	0.9 (3)	1.1 (4)	1.30	0.60
Honesty in presentation of materials	72.0 (252)	20.3 (71)	6.0 (21)	0.0 (0)	1.7 (6)	1.39	0.75
Preparedness	56.9 (199)	28.0 (98)	9.7 (34)	2.3 (8)	2.3 (8)	1.64	0.92
Promptness	40.9 (143)	33.1 (116)	15.1 (53)	4.9 (17)	6.0 (21)	2.02	1.14
Lack of bigotry	48.0 (168)	19.1 (67)	18.9 (66)	4.3 (5)	8.3 (29)	2.04	1.27
Sexual advance	61.4 (215)	7.7 (27)	7.1 (25)	5.1 (18)	18.6 (65)	2.12	1.60
Accessibility	35.1 (123)	34.0 (119)	18.9 (66)	6.6 (23)	5.4 (19)	2.13	1.13
Playing favorites	50.6 (177)	16.6 (58)	11.1 (39)	6.3 (22)	15.1 (53)	2.19	1.49
Harmless flirting	46.6 (163)	15.1 (53)	12.6 (44)	8.0 (28)	17.4 (61)	2.34	1.54
Class as soapbox	24.6 (86)	22.9 (80)	28.9 (101)	10.9 (38)	11.4 (40)	2.61	1.29

Note: Sample sizes may vary slightly due to omissions by participants. Percentages may not total 100% due to the presence of omissions. M=mean and SD=standard deviation.

**Table 4**  
Significant Gender Differences Among 349 Students Regarding the Importance of Various Factors in Determining Whether a Professor is Ethical

Variable	Male M (SD) (n=132)	Female M (SD) (n=217)	F-statistic	p-value
Preparedness	1.80 (1.00)	2.63 (1.21)	6.67	.01
Sexual advance	2.46 (1.63)	1.54 (0.87)	9.90	.002
Harmless flirting	2.66 (1.50)	2.13 (1.52)	9.78	.002
Accessibility	2.30 (1.19)	1.98 (1.04)	7.03	.008
Playing favorites	2.51 (1.47)	1.98 (1.45)	10.30	.001

Note: Sample sizes may vary slightly due to omissions by participants. One individual did not report his/her gender.

**Table 5**  
Beliefs of 343 Students Regarding the Importance of a Professor of Ethics Being Ethical

	Frequency	Percent
Definitely (1)	160	46.6
Probably (2)	102	29.7
Not sure (3)	42	12.2
Probably not (4)	28	8.2
Definitely not (5)	11	3.2
Mean	1.92	
Standard Deviation	1.10	

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