

Ethical Decision-Making by Business Students: Factors of Influence

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Abstract

Business and university stakeholders ask what institutions of higher education are doing to improve student ethics. Our research produces a theoretic model offering insight into a comprehensive process of influences to business student ethical decision making, and its implications for the purposeful moral development of students. Using qualitative, grounded theory methods, we asked 27 business juniors and seniors how the university environment influences their ethical decision making in university life. The resulting model reveals five major categories found within this process: internalized ideals and beliefs, institutional expectations, influential stakeholders, university experiences, and academic context. Implications suggest the need for a comprehensive university plan of student development engagement by leveraging all aspects of university experience (academic, job, service, and social contexts). Recommendations include the active involvement of external agencies in the development process, and the integration of the student body in limited institutional rule making and policy.

Keywords

Ethical decision making, ethics influence factors, university business students, qualitative research, grounded theory

1. Introduction

Industry faces serious issues regarding the ethical behaviour of its leaders. So much so, that higher education stakeholders voice their unease about the cause of moral scandal by business leaders and demand that universities help do something about it. One result: a steady research effort directed toward university business schools to determine root causes, and the intervention methods needed to influence the ethical development of students (Audi, 2009; Caldwell, Karri, & Matula, 2005; Henle, 2006; Moosmayer, 2012; Nicholson & DeMoss, 2009).

Research efforts directed toward university business schools already recognize increasing acts of academic dishonesty and other unethical student behavior plaguing institutions in America (Cano & Sams, 2011; McCabe, Butterfield, & Trevino, 2006; Smyth & Davis, 2004). In particular, McCabe and colleagues (2006) express alarm at the level of cheating by undergraduates in business schools, noting greater occurrence by these students than those in any other academic unit. There is also research pointing to the fact that most business students acting dishonestly in school, also behave dishonestly in the work place (Sims, 1993). These findings suggest that American business students are increasingly acting in self-interest, making decisions that are ethically incompatible with traditional aspects of teamwork, service and higher-order ethical conduct outlined in Lawrence Kohlberg's model of moral development (i.e., moving from rule-based behavior and serving self-interest to recognition of group and community responsibilities; see Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983). Clearly, research findings hold serious implications for the future of business leaders and the well being of organizations.

Past research efforts in student moral decision making, while valuable in their own right, are often focused on a small group of variables deemed to be important in scientific study and selected by the researcher. Less prevalent, are discovery

oriented approaches that take a systems-wide perspective—casting a large net to identify other variables that may be significant in organizational behavior, yet often not addressed. In particular, these might include contextual factors, frequently lost in common research settings due to the traditional nature of “sterile environment” experiments. Contextual factors are so critical to organizational reality that some researchers believed they are vastly under-utilized (Aadland, 2010; Moberg, 2006).

This study opens the door to the ideas and perspectives of business school students in order to learn more about factors they believe influence their decision making, and how these factors work as a comprehensive process within an institutional context. We do this using a qualitative method designed to produce analytic generalizations. The purpose of this paper then, is to build a theoretic model elaborating how a university environment influences ethical decision making by business undergraduates, and to conceptually describe how these factors are operationalized. While there is plentiful research literature on individualized topics of behaviour and decision making involving cheating, plagiarism and honor codes, few provide a wider focus incorporating collective relationships between the student, university structure and institutional stakeholders (Hanson, 2010; Kelley, Agle, & DeMott, 2005; Kelley & Chang, 2007). In so doing, we believe this work contributes to a more complete understanding of business student ethical decision making within a collective-based ethics system and holds implications for research in business organizations.

2. University intention and student influencers

Various stakeholders, to include members of society, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and university educators feel existing efforts to prepare students ethically are not enough, and to some degree, that business schools teach world views

counter to moral motive—where money, power and fame are the ultimate goal (Folse, 1991; Giacalone & Thompson, 2006). Some schools are even accused of fostering higher levels of student narcissism—where decisions are overly focused on ends of self-interest (Bergman, Westerman, & Daly, 2010). Who can blame such critics? Traditional reform practice promotes piecemeal implementation of selectively focused programs—like developing a code of conduct or integrating an ethics component into existing curriculum, or enforcing compliance measures. Individually, the value of some of these programs is questioned (Bowden & Smythe, 2008). Indeed, rather than bastions of ethical enlightenment and development, literature questions whether universities are simply a business and students the consumers (Valey, 2001), thus representing the “values of the market” (Sawyer, Johnson, & Holub, 2009: 10).

We do know a wide range of factors that, taken individually, influence student ethical decision making. They range from national culture (Lin & Ho, 2008), the institution itself (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), institution type (Astin & Antonio, 2004; Evans, Trevino, & Weaver, 2006), individual university units (Astin & Antonio, 2004; Blasco, 2009; Bowen, Bessette, & Chan, 2006; McCabe, et al., 2006), faculty and staff role-modeling (Kelley et al., 2005), the academic major (Brown, et al., 2010; Kroncke, Smyth, & Davis, 2009; Smyth & Davis, 2004), peer group contexts (Auer-Rizzi & Berry, 2000; Gentile, 2010), beliefs (Ho, 2009; Wilson, 2008), teaching and training (Bowden & Smythe, 2008), and more. These studies are valuable contributions to learning about various aspects of ethical decision making. Keep in mind, many of these findings were generated within a controlled research setting excluding contextual factors and not designed to “discover” a large set of elements that compose an institutional ethics system.

3. University Efforts Toward Student Moral Development

In the last two decades American universities have responded to pressures to focus on ethical development by adding lectures, integrating content, or creating stand-alone ethic courses for the undergraduate curriculum. However, in a study involving institutions within the AACSB, international-accredited business school curricular efforts fail to meet student needs for the workplace (Nicholson & DeMoss, 2009). Kelley et al. (2005) reinforce concerns that ethics curriculum efforts are actually in decline, citing factors such as finding few faculty qualified to teach ethics content, institutional pressures to streamline curriculum requirements, and superficial stakeholder focus (as cited by Cornelius, Wallace, & Tassabehji, 2007).

The issue of student ethics development is far larger than determining curricular needs and teaching methods. While universities frequently discuss ethics related issues and address clear violations of policy and rules, they often are not purposeful in leveraging their infrastructure to create a comprehensive ethical environment (Kelley et al., 2005). In particular, Kelley and Chang (2007) stress the need for faculty training in ethics development and the necessary resources to adequately prepare students. Also, McCabe et al. (2006) suggest that significant improvement in student behavior rests on institutional efforts which include a larger process of institutional ethical community building. Involving students in university issues develops them ethically—sending a message of institutional commitment, and encourages student participative responsibilities (McCabe, et al., 2006).

4. The Student and the University System

Research shows that the student university experience plays a significant role in moral development (Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Three keys to this influence process emerge from research. First, student ethical behavior can be raised to a higher level of moral development while attending the university. Students arrive with an alterable level of ethical maturity (Astin & Antonio, 2004; Bowen, et al., 2006). Planned or not, the institution and its members both influence the character and behavior development of students (Blasco, 2009; Dey & Hurtado, 1995/1999; Kelley et al., 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Weidman, 1989/1999). Second, student behavior is influenced by their beliefs and attitudes (Roig & Marks, 2006; Wilson, 2008) and how they see and understand the beliefs and behavior of others. For instance, as role models, university member behavior emits constant ethical sense-making for students (Caldwell, et al., 2005; Hanson, 2010; Hughes, 2009; Kelley et al., 2005). Third, active student ethical development is needed to prepare students for the workplace. Few would argue that students entering employment will face significant ethically-related decisions (Gentile, 2010; Hughes, 2009). Simply put, knowing that student ethical identity is malleable and shaped by the institution and its agents, and that students enter with various cultural attitudes, values, and beliefs, it must be purposefully aligned with social and job related ethics needs. To do this, institutions need to identify and better understand those factors that influence moral development and ethical decision making. This research is meant to take a step in that direction.

5. Research questions

The research question guiding this study is, “How does the university environment influence ethical decision making by business university undergraduates?” Supporting questions include:

1. What factors influence ethical decision making in business university students?
2. How might specific factors influence the student?

As a qualitative study seeking student perceptions, both the term *university environment* and *ethical decision making* are defined by the meaning participants attribute to them. Questions involving “how” favor a discovery-oriented research approach to elaborate a process (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)—in this case, how ethical decision making is influenced.

This work rests on the epistemological stance of constructionism, where meaning is generated through student interaction with other people and institutional elements, emerging collectively, and represented as patterns of cultural behavior (Crotty, 2003). As related to university life, cultural context and interrelationships play a prominent role in student sense making.

6. Research design and methods

In examining the process of ethical decision making by business undergraduates, this research incorporated a grounded theory strategy (Charmaz, 2008; Creswell, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998, 1997). Grounded theory uses—in this case, those elements students identify as influencing ethical aspects of their decisions, and how those elements relate contextually. Simply put, we want to know what elements in a university setting in-

fluence student decisions and how that influence process works. This strategy (a) is discovery oriented, (b) grounds the resulting theoretic model in participant realities, and (c) directly links corresponding meaning to the future direction of universities in efforts at ethical development and community building within student life.

6.1 Setting, sample, and participants

The research for this study took place at a small private, religiously affiliated university in the southeastern United States. The undergraduate population included 1,570 traditional students, of which 234 were business majors. The initial sampling was purposeful, targeting 20 to 30 participants (Creswell, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998). Consequently, the resulting theoretical sample consisted of 27 volunteers from two different business courses representing business management majors. There were 19 male and 8 female participants, each signing a statement of informed consent. All participants met two sampling criteria: (a) enrollment as a traditional, full-time business student and (b) classified as either a junior or senior. Reasoning for junior or senior standing was based on the assumption that these students hold more university experiences and institutional knowledge than first- or second-year students. This is important, since qualitative researchers are to pursue sources rich in data, rather than selecting a sample representative of the population at large (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

6.2 Data collection

Data collection involved interviews, observations, and the investigation of related artifacts (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The primary author employed written interviews using open-ended, semi-structured questions (Kerlinger & Lee, 2000; Smith & Osborn, 2008). Questions are derived from relevant literature (theoretic sensitivity), and designed to answer the research questions. (The interview instrument is located in the appendix.) Follow-up interviews with 10 of the participants gathered new insights and pursued emerging themes.

Both authors also used observation of institutional activities and the investigation of institutional artifacts associated with participant meaning. Most activities and artifacts were identified from student interviews and later investigated to achieve fuller understanding of student expression. Activities included those of the classroom, chapel, and general campus interaction. Review of artifacts furthered interpretation of the data as well. These included specific policies that students mentioned as holding significance—like the student dress code, and things such as the student handbook and online web pages regarding university values.

6.3 Data Analysis

The primary author conducted the analysis using the grounded theory coding process described by Strauss and Corbin (1990)—open, axial, and selective. Recognized as an overlapping, recursive process, it is a lengthy exercise of comparing

and organizing data into emerging categories and subcategories based upon related properties and dimensions. Known as the constant comparison method, the researcher asked questions of the data throughout the study thereby clarifying categorical and thematic relationships (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Adhering to this rigorous coding method aids understanding of shared participant commonalities and their interrelatedness. The resultant theoretic abstraction, grounded in participant commonalities, imbues findings with explanatory power (Charmaz, 2008; Parry, 1999, 2003). Indeed, the full force of grounded theory lays in its conceptual generalization.

In this study, we analyzed all 27 interviews by sentence to ensure research thoroughness and data saturation. Open coding identified 353 meaning units, representing a wide avenue of expressions of influence in ethical decision making. Next, we began by sorting meaning units into like-groupings based upon shared properties. We originally composed 16 tentative themes or categories, but after letting data sit for a period of time, rethinking and reviewing original meaning units, we began to resort units and change and combine categories to make more sense of the data. We were in the axial coding phase, “making connections between a category and its subcategories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990: 97). This phase entailed placing meaning units within a category into subcategories by seeking greater definition of detail among their shared properties. For example, rather than just determining a set of factors belonged to university experiences, we defined these further—like those tied to university service, jobs, and residence experiences. Our result: five detailed categories, each composed of a handful of comprehensive subcategories. Next, we moved into the selective coding phase.

During selective coding the central category surfaced by placing findings into a narrative account (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). At this point, we adjusted and polished categorical relationships among the five categories. To remain grounded in participant perspectives, initial findings were shared with students for feedback and conceptual elaboration. As a result, the member check produced minor adjustments to the model. The authors met multiple times, discussed the work, shared perspectives, raised and answered questions, and reworked the paper over an eight-month period.

6.4 Trustworthiness

Research rigor and triangulation of methods are some of the hallmarks of the grounded theory methodology. We achieved research rigor by adhering to a set of well-accepted methods outlined by Strauss & Corbin (1990). We employed this rigor help guide development of our primary research question, gaining the theoretic sensitivity needed to garner an informed approach to relevant issues, construct the research design, interpret various forms of data, and compose findings that contribute to theory building. We also applied triangulation of data collection means to obtain data robustness (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Table 1 consolidates research methods contributing to research trustworthiness.

Stage	Means
Collection	Interviews; observations (physical layout, class activities); artifacts (website, student handbook, policies, and demographic data)
Analysis	Coding notes; member check; procedural rigor
Findings	Peer debriefing; field notes; thick, rich descriptions; theoretical sensitivity

Table 1. Research trustworthiness: methods for all stages of research

7. Findings

The five major categories playing a prominent role in influencing business student ethical decision making within university life are *Internalized Ideals and Beliefs*, *Institutional Influences*, *Influential Stakeholders*, *University Experiences*, and *Academic Context*. Each category represents a set of interrelated subcategories displayed in Table 2. While some of these general themes have already been linked in literature to student ethical decision making, we both validate and elaborate these constructs and show how they relate to the student’s decision making process. Table 2 answers the first supporting research question by providing a holistic pattern of inextricably linked factors that influence ethical decision making.

Student perceptions of influences to ethical decision making exposed the kinds of factors important to them. Emerging from their stories was a dynamic process of reciprocal engagement and reasoning with ethically related properties when faced with a decision. At the core of this process exists evolving internalized ideals and beliefs that work in conjunction with four other categories of influence. A form of co-evolution, this interaction represented a continuing shift in meaning and understanding by those parties involved (Dey & Hurtado, 1995/1999; Weidman, 1989/1999). Figure 1 presents the university environment influence model for undergraduate business student ethical decision making.

Data supporting the second question, “How do specific factors influence the student?” are found in the narrative that follows.

Internalized Ideals & Beliefs	Institutional Influences	Influential Stakeholders	University Life Experiences	Academic Contexts
<i>University based context</i>	Christian environment	Faculty	Service experience	Academic pressures
Values	Religious events	Administrators	University jobs	Group work
Institutional ethics expectations	Formalized instruments	Sport coaches and teams	University residence	
<i>Imported into university life</i>		Friends and peers		
External family considerations				
External job considerations				

Table 2. Factors influencing the ethical decision-making of business students

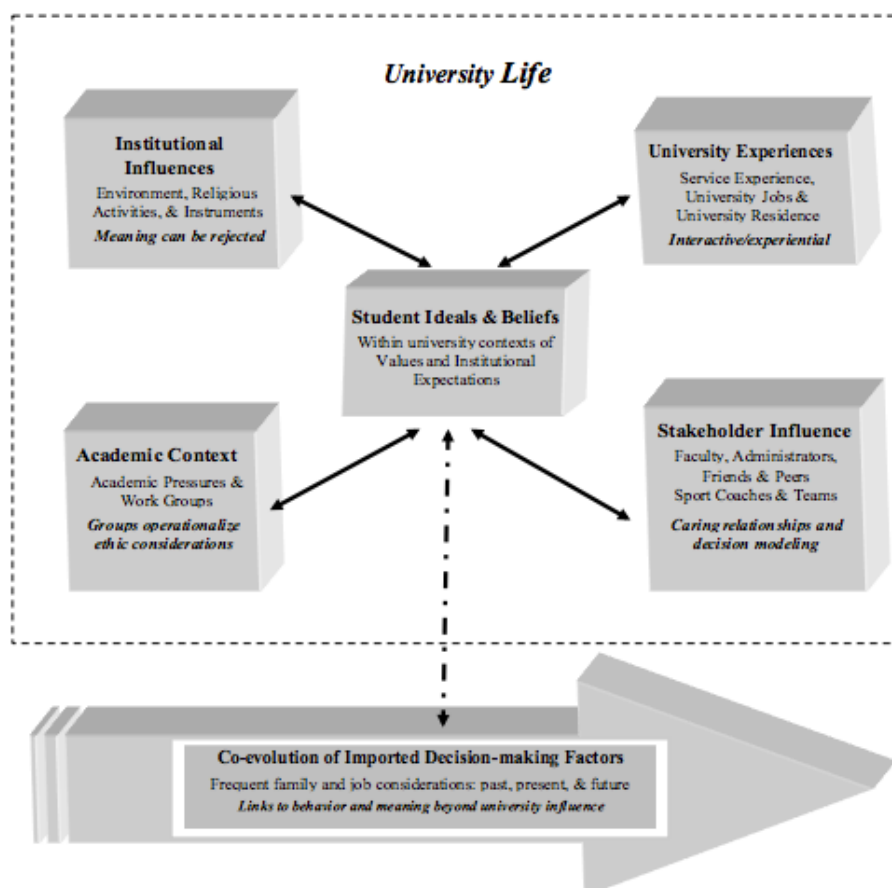


Figure 1. University influence model for ethical decision making by undergraduate business students is an ongoing relationship where both students and influencers change over time.

7.1 Student internalized ideals and beliefs

Student ideals and beliefs are at the core of student decisions and can be broken into two groups. The first group of ideals and beliefs exist and evolve within the university based context and the second grouping involves those imported from external sources during university life. The primary difference, from an institutional perspective, is that the first group might be shaped strongly by university input (structure and content), whereas the external sources, less so. The first group of ideals and beliefs are based upon university experiences. They are about the students themselves and “their” university—who they are as a university student and what they expect from their institution. In many ways this experience is very personal, yet at the same time it involves shared commonalities among fellow students. Meaning cannot be removed from a university context of three to four years of co-evolution with the institution, where they are shaped by the school and the school is shaped by them (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Weidman, 1989/1999).

The second group of ideals and beliefs—those imported into university life, are linked to on-going family and off-campus job considerations. During their university decision making process, students refer to these two sets in terms of reflection on past, present and future consideration. Students say they play an active, evolving role in student meaning making. They are imposed upon campus based meaning without control by university agents.

7.1.1 University-based context ideals and beliefs

7.1.1.1 Student values. Students clearly recognized a select set of values most important to their decision making; these values included *honesty*, *integrity*, and *trust*. Students also implicitly or explicitly expressed why these were important. Dimensionally, many simply cited them as part of their identity—as a part of who they were or an embedded belief. For example, one claimed that, “I value honesty. That influences my decision to be ethical. I expect honesty because I am honest.” Others elaborated how values were important to relationships. One explained that, “[My] decisions consider who it affects, and how it affects me.” A second student stated that “Trust is [a] very important value. I want people to be able to trust me, and me be able to trust them.” One more explained, “Honesty—people being able to trust you with information, and having that reputation of being trustworthy.”

Students also expressed intrinsic constructs related to the outcome of ethical behavior, such as self-respect, fulfillment, joy, and others. For example, one said she wanted to be ethical because of, “The joy I get from knowing [what] I did was right.” Another insightfully elaborated on life after university, explaining:

I have a pressure of life after my schooling is over with. I want to know and have the satisfaction of knowing I didn't cheat and lie my way through college. My life isn't defined by now, but by the things I want to accomplish later—those pressures of doing well after college.

These and other expressions displayed reasoning that incorporated expressions of values important to ethical decision making, ranging from what was important to them personally, to recognizing values important to their social role—the *morality within relationships*.

7.1.1.2 Institutional ethics expectations. Students also articulated perceptions and concerns of institutional understanding when describing influences to ethical decisions. While students did not establish a direct, causal link to specific ethical or unethical acts, they clearly related their expectation of university

behavior as an influence in their decisions. These perspectives included expectations of university *rule-enforcement*, *fairness*, and *ethical behavior* by both institutional agents and peers. Students attributed feelings of the degree of fairness to instances where violations were either resolved or not resolved, or the way infractions were dispensed (often involving the type or degree of punishment). For example, some felt that the institution did a “bad job discussing and handling dress code.” One said the school should be “tougher.” Another observed that, “Violations of dress code result in little discipline.” When punishment for unethical behavior is meted out, one student summed up the general feeling that, “Everyone should get the same punishment.” Unfortunately, this did not align with what many students believed, one saying “Some students get away with things for being who they are.” In other words, the university should respond *when*, and in *ways* students believed they should. This is important, as Tyler (2005a) points out that when organizational members do not believe institutional leaders make fair decisions, members are more likely to make decisions based on self-interest. Participants held high expectations for their peers. As individuals, they believe the student body did not actively consider ethics in decision making and had problems resolving ethical issues. For example, one student exasperatedly declared that, “I believe the majority of students do not resolve ethical issues well.” She reasoned that, “I think many students do not consider ethics because they are focused on what they want and what will benefit them.”

Expressed dissonance between student expectations and their perceptions indicate a possible need for institutional sense making on the nature of policy, student development, and the fulfillment of university responsibilities. Also, by incorporating their peers in ethical expectations, participants underscored that student-body cultural norms are expected to be congruent with ethical institutional behavior. This aspect was one of the most punctuating aspects of *institutional ethics expectations*. Implications are twofold. First, that leader sense making, which addresses institutional reasoning for policy, should also address the enforcement and variation in punishment, and might bring student mental models into closer congruence. Secondly, engaging students in ethical decision making and resolution of ethics-related issues, as well as raising their moral awareness as a collective, will foster a more ethically centered student body.

7.1.2 Decision-making factors imported into university life

Business university students recognized that they bring fundamental values, experiences, and expectations to university life. While we made no inquiries of family or experiential backgrounds, and repeatedly focused on university-related influencers in ethical decision making, participants inserted references to external influence throughout the interviews. Specifically, students import ideals and beliefs tied to *family considerations* and *job considerations* while attending the university and these influence their ethical decisions. The origin of these internalized ideals and beliefs were clearly expressed as external to university, but imported into university meaning throughout undergraduate life. Participants frequently linked this input to ethical decision making involving ongoing relationships, as well as past and current job experiences, and thoughts about future employment needs. Unlike the other factors in our model, the institution has little ability to shape the impact of such external influence. This realm of influence might be the most challenging for the university to manage.

7.1.2.1 Family considerations. Family considerations included those beliefs and ideals nurtured in the past as well as those

holding current relevance in family and social relationships external to university life. These represented religiously affiliated and other values embedded in upbringing and childhood experience (e.g., respect, kindness, compassion, dignity, and honesty). Often they were regenerated by continued interaction with the family while attending school, or they continued to develop during the university experience. For example, one student highlighted dignity, explaining, "...this developed through my schooling at [the university] as well as my personal life." Another explained that honesty was important to decision making, some of which was based upon "...how I was raised." One student noted that family-based considerations were important to university decisions: "My family influences my decisions because it reflects on them." For many, students were concerned about how their family would be affected by their ethical decision making while attending the university. Continued interaction with family reinforces existing values or shapes evolving values.

7.1.2.2 Job considerations. Job considerations were also important for ethical decision making. Some interviews attributed past and current experiences to developed values and necessities, while others included remarks on future needs such as job references or life-long contacts. Ethical decision making was predominantly influenced by concerns for risks to future opportunities, loss of earning potential, the ability to achieve job-related success, as well as a general concern for their future life experience. Students tied ethics behavior to future relationships, recognizing the danger unethical behavior posed on job references. Interestingly, while one student expressed feelings that impending pressure to seek employment could be helpful, the process of selling oneself to an employer was counter to ethicality.

7.2 Institutional influences

The university system defines and constructs institutional influences. Meaning, essential in decision making, has the potential to be imposed by institutional forces, rather than emerging from a process of actor collaboration; it might be accepted—even welcomed and compatible with student expectation—or rejected as some students did when articulating the rejection of certain rules. In this case, students recognized implicit, informal institutional aspects, as well as the more explicit policies, rules, and rituals. Important institutional influences to student ethical decision making materialized as three distinct subcategories: (a) the Christian environment (institutional expressions and behavior), (b) mandatory religious activities (expressed cultural values), and (c) formalized instruments (rules and policies).

7.2.1 Christian environment

Institutional environment plays a distinct role in student ethical decision-making. By and large, the Christian environment is expected and sought by students in this study. That it is "imposed" is a matter-of-fact for most students, and they hold certain anticipations for requisite institutional behavior. In this study, the university environment was composed of two tightly entangled properties. One property contained student perceptions of university value and behavior congruence, that is, validation that the university represented itself as expected. In this case, participants believe that Christian values were exuded by the university. Students acknowledged elements such as the incorporation of religious affiliation, organizational values and assimilation of employees sharing Christian beliefs. For them, it enabled or strengthened ethical decision making. One explained, "The Christian environment and affiliation shows

me that this university strives for the best." Another student expressed congruence saying, "The standard that every faculty and staff has to be Christian show me that they care about their faith."

A second property emerging from participant realities was cognitive recognition that engagement with environmental elements enabled ethical outcomes. Further, students acknowledged that decision making was directly affected by assorted types of engagement with university elements and personalized individual outcomes. Evidence reveals how this influenced student ethical decision making considerations. One student explained, "The environmental culture makes it easier to not do something unethical." Another clearly recognizes and welcomes this influence saying, "Pressures to go to church and live a Christian life help me."

7.2.2 Religious activities

Many participants noted that university religious activities played an important role in ethical decision making. A chapel exists on university grounds and actively touches the student's ethical life. One revealed, "Chapel is an event that helps me do the right things." Another stated that, "Chapel keeps me on the right track." The university includes many religiously affiliated activities and events, and a number of students cited how they directly affected their values. For example, one student remarked that, "Campus worship and on-campus worship events help me stay fueled for integrity." While mostly accepted, there is evidence that not every facet of institutional expectation was embraced. One participant flatly complained that, "[The university] must not expect everyone to be enthralled with chapel. Not everyone here is a Christian, and they need to stop nagging everyone about conduct in chapel. It promotes rebellious attitudes." Another student objected that, "In my personal case, I am a Catholic. I do not think I have to follow another [denomination]." The common thread that ties these events and activities together are shared Christian values and expressions. While intertwined with the university environment, they by themselves do not represent the entire essence of institutional context, but clearly one strongly associated with other more ambiguous environmental elements.

7.2.3 Formalized instruments

Research participants identified formal instruments, such as the rules and policies of the university, playing an important role in ethical decision making. There was a majority consensus that in some manner these instruments were influential, one saying, "All sources [that influence my decision making] in some way relate to rules—codes, policies, etc." Another student believed that, "Rules from whatever source [influence my decision making]." And a third stressed the overall impact of these instruments, saying "The school's values and codes...set the ethical tone for the whole university." Particular institutional instruments cited as playing a strong role in university life included the institution's dress code, integrity policy, and the student handbook. For example, one student stated the handbook was important in "... making sure I know the rules so I can follow them."

The dimensions of meaning for why some of these instruments are important to students range from self-sustainment to acquiring knowledge to meet university expectations, to utility in the context of academic work, and to a need for enforcement or role-modeling to fulfill job-related roles.

7.3 Influential stakeholders

Stakeholders influential to student ethical decision-making included (a) faculty, (b) administrators, (c) sport coaches and teams, and (d) their friends and peers. While these members were not surprising influencers in the life of the university student, it was the relationships developed outside the classroom that were cited as the most powerful.

7.3.1 Faculty

Faculty in particular played an influential role in participant ethical decision making. One student summarized quite simply, saying, "I ...think the faculty has great influence over its students." Students respected attributes such as faculty knowledge, experience, encouragement, and expectations. This faculty-student relationship was broad in nature—beyond the classroom, involving job-related and other contexts. For example, one participant, when asked what influenced ethical decision making, revealed that "Professors who've been my supervisors with work (there have been two). I respect and value their opinions and outlook on life." Students stressed that while faculty worked to attain a relationship of influence, unethical behavior was a quick way to lose credibility with them. Properties of strong faculty-related influence were attributed to: concern for students, role modeling, raising student moral consciousness, and student accountability.

Faculty gained strong influence, in part, by the perception of concern for students. Common examples included those such as, "Teachers who show they care," or, "Professors and staff show the hard work and care about students; this makes me care about my grades." Another student explained, "Faculty making sure I'm ready for the business world, while making sure I learn the material and keep up with classes." Students also noted the importance of role modeling in this relationship, one saying "Faculty lead by example."

Participants also observed that faculty actively raised student moral consciousness with ethics promotion, development, and the establishment of standards. One student explained "My professors...every day in class, they stress ethical behavior" and another, "The faculty of the College of Business influence my ethical decision making. They set high standards for ethical behavior." Finally, another important element of faculty influence was accountability—holding students to high standards. This was expected; one student stated, "My supervisors and professors are suppose to hold me to a higher standard." Another elaborated, "Professors influence me to make ethical decisions in my school work because they hold me accountable." As a result, one reported, "[Faculty] push me to be the best I can."

7.3.2 Administrators

Some students recognized the important ethical role of administrators in university life—one student contending that, "Administrators set the ethical tone for the whole university." Another stated influence stemmed from administrators because "...staff shows the hard work and care..." Participants also identified acquired influence related to administrators who hold others accountable as well—faculty, students, and other stakeholders.

7.3.3 Sports coaches and teams

University sport coaches and teams are an important source of influence to team members. They serve as role models, sources of personal validation, and sources of recurring relational obligations. These relationships are tied in part, to the athletic department—departmental codes and policies specific to

sports-team members. Students tied to sports teams recognized they represent a distinct class of students, inheriting additional obligations (and consequences) between the department and each other. For instance, looking at role-model relationships, one student noted that, "I follow [the coaches] examples of how they follow rules and treat people." Another student simply stated, "Sports teams are a part of influence. They are who we look up to."

7.3.4 Friends and peers

These two groups were heavily entangled—because participants seem to use them interchangeably, and because descriptions on the kind of influence were so similar that it was impossible to break them apart. Expectedly, participants noted the significance of friends and peers in ethical decision making. One affirmed, "Friends are a big influence [in] decision making. They are the people I am around the most, so they are a big impact." Other students acknowledged a kind of partnership in ethical influence relationships, with one explaining, "My friends influence me, and vice versa." Another remarked, "If I expect more of classmates, then chances are, they expect more of me as well."

Yet, students also recognized that friends could steer them in an unethical direction. For example, one noted, "Friends pressure you the most to do right or sometimes wrong." Another held a different, yet related perspective of peers, commenting, "I often reflect on [peers] so that I don't make the same bad choices." Participant remarks coalesced around dimensional influence outcomes ranging from steering, guiding, correcting, motivating, and developing ethical decisions.

7.4 University life experiences

University life experiences were another major factor cited by students in ethical decision making. Largely influenced through institutional mechanisms, these experiences are "lived" by the students. These experiences included those of (a) service experience, (b) university jobs, and (c) university residence.

7.4.1 Service experiences

Service experiences were represented in multiple ways—tutoring, serving community events, assisting university activities, and daily acts. In many ways this participative context grounds student relationships with others, raising moral consciousness and operationalizing moral consideration. Students describe collaborative outcomes as, "Helping the community with events makes me feel part of the community" and, "By serving others, [the institution] helps us realize how to give to others what you would want to receive in return." A third explained, that for her, "Tutoring allows me to help many students, and help them when no one else can."

7.4.2 University jobs

University related work also possessed high ethical expectations as far as students were concerned. Many cited university jobs as an experience requiring operationalization of ethics in the workplace—from both an employee perspective and leadership perspective. Experiences emanate from a relational context within work. In an employee role tightly linked to a relationship of confidentiality. One student explained, "My on-campus jobs—one has me grading student papers and seeing their grades." Sources of ethics consideration with operational needs in university job role, range across dimensions of influence by the expectations of others, representation as an agent of the organization, belief in caring for others, and seeing themselves as a role model for others.

7.4.3 University residence

University residence emerged as an ethical decision making influencer for a smaller number of students. While some students living on university grounds felt rules governing residences were too strict, it was still considered a tangible asset. One student noted that, "I am not from around here [and] would have no place to go if I got in trouble." Also, others note ethical sway stemming from attachment to fellow residence members, and also being located in a placed that reinforced ethical behavior. One student stated, "Residence life...helps me be ethical." Another claimed, that as a role model, it possessed influence since "Residen[ts] from my hall...are watching me and whatever I do, they will follow."

7.5 Academic context

Students found meaning in the university academic context. There was respect for educational opportunity and for class structure as a channel providing the impetus to finish course work and graduate. Also, participants felt they were influenced by various academically related units—such as the Center for Academic Success, the tutoring lab, and the library. In many ways these units served as catalysts for academic achievement. From interviews emerged two major academically-related considerations that influenced ethical decision making: (a) academic pressures and (b) working in groups. Academic pressures seem focused on self, whereas group work fostered student focus on the consideration of others, and emplaced an ethical reflection for student action.

7.5.1 Academic pressures

Academic pressures included striving for general academic success, completing homework/assignments, passing exams, class participation, and attaining grades. Some students referred to pressure of a general nature by saying, "My grades [are] a big pressure to make my decisions" as well as, "Class participation is a big pressure for me to be on top of the class." Others noted pressure as a productive factor. For example, one student stated, "Pressure from assignments and class work is good because I develop stronger work ethic..." Another said, "Completing homework also pushes my need to do the right thing—no cheating." Yet others expressed the pressure to be unethical, represented by the following perspective. "The pressure teachers put on you to complete all your assignments. This can sometimes pressure you into copying others work." Does this imply a curvilinear balance of pressure—from gently encouraging the ethical, to increasing pressure to such a high degree that it encourages the unethical?

7.5.2 Working in groups

Working in groups involved consideration of others in the pursuit of common goals, hence rising student moral consciousness. Team work and interaction created a relational bond between students. For example, one student remarked, "[Working in groups] makes me respect others people's outlooks more." Others explained the way in which this shared relationship created a sense of moral consideration. For example, one said, "Group projects help me realize my role and place in benefiting the whole team." Another explained, "Completing group work pushes me to maintain ethics as well as personal values." Finally one clarified by saying, "Working in class teams is the one that reflects me most because one unethical decision can harm the whole group."

8. Discussion

This study focused on revealing those factors students believed influenced ethical decision making and how this played out within the context of university life. Earlier, we noted influences to student ethical behavior found in literature—some of which seem to appear in our categorical titles (for example, beliefs). How does this seemingly related finding contribute to our discussion and the significance of the research? First, some factors noted in earlier research were not necessarily tied specifically to ethical decision making. Secondly, of those factors that are tied to decision making, ours is more detailed and placed within a model of interrelatedness to each other. These factors are broken into specific subcategories—each unique, as they represent a set of interrelated elements that cannot be broken out as a stand-alone factors. System processes act as wholes, not as single parts. For example, student beliefs influencing ethical decisions are based upon those they bring to the institution, those that flow in from external sources while attending the university (like jobs and other external relationships), and those of the university experience itself—these are *co-joined* and evolve together. Thus, this work contributes to building a more complete theoretic model of the factors that students believe influence their ethical decisions. Grounded theory generalizes findings to theory building—not as inferences representative of a particular population.

At the center of their ethical decisions, students refer to ideals and beliefs—many of which have co-evolved with other institutional elements, and where family and job considerations continue to merge into developmental processes throughout their university life. Through engagement with the environment created by the institution, student interpretation of the congruence between what the university "says" through stated values and policies, and what the university "does" (or does not do) has a direct impact on their ethical decisions, as does the observed behavior of stakeholders, university experiences, and members within an academic context.

This research opens the door to important aspects of business student influencers in ethical decision making. In turn, it offers opportunity for universities to more actively shape student moral identity by leveraging these conceptual elements collectively. For example, Moosmayer (2012) calls for an institutional-wide, purposeful effort to influence student values; he also addresses how other stakeholders fit into this endeavor. This, along with a larger scale plan is important. At the same time, our research counters institutional tendencies to favor moral behavior influence through formal instruments or punitive measures for their violation. Instruments such as policy and rules do play an important role in student sense making, yet reliance on these is simply rule-following and oftentimes considered to be morally limiting (Bird, 1996; Tyler, 2005b). Hence primary reliance on formal instruments poses limits to higher levels of moral development within universities, and risks backlash as detected in this study by student frustrations interpreting rules as too many or too unrealistic. Unwanted backlash can also be fueled by student perceptions of institutional member failure to ethically role model, hold others accountable, or provide time to establish professional relationships with students. We propose university ethics intervention measures move beyond academic integration of moral principles and dilemmas in the classroom (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), to one where *all* group activities are viewed as a set of relationships in which moral development is facilitated.

To maximize student moral development, we see three avenues for institutional movement: (a) creation of an institutional strategic plan to develop student ethical identity, (b) incorporation of factors that operationalize ethics development—beyond rules and punishment, and (c) promotion of enablers giving faculty and others moral influence in student development.

First, institutions must have a strategic plan to intentionally develop the internalization of an ethical identity in students, and align ethic factors to gain impact on student ethical decisions. They must move beyond piecemeal efforts not bound to a larger plan. Also, we noted what we believed to be student misunderstandings or lack of understanding of institutional expression (e.g., unfairness in punishment, reason for rules) that might be easily explained given the requisite time and effort by university leaders. This might mean that along with the “larger plan” that leader sense making and support structures could be directed toward student motives and rationalization, possessing important implications for university alignment of ethic influences.

Second, university contexts must engage student moral considerations with others to operationalize ethics—that is to raise development to higher levels. Evidence in this study points to powerful contexts of *working in groups* (i.e., academic or activities) and *holding supervisory roles* (university or external jobs) that help students think about others. Unchallenged to think of others, students focus primarily on their own interests and needs. Evidence within this study displayed many cases of student moral motive in relation to rule violation and consequence to themselves, making ethical reinforcement egocentric (i.e., if I cheat, I may not graduate). It is when students identify interpersonal responsibilities they begin to incorporate the relational function of ethics in a social context and raise their moral consciousness. For example, students recognized the value and importance of trust in groups to long-term outcomes, thereby linking behavior to second-order relational consequences (e.g., role-modeling for others, not letting the group down, etc.).

Third, faculty and friends hold the most influence regarding student ethical decisions. Important to note are student expressions that those institutional members displayed concern, and *enforced accountability*, and were therefore morally influential. This is congruent with recent literature pointing out the consequences of failing to do so (McCabe, et al., 2006). Not only does failing to enforce violations stifle individual ethical behavior, but it pushes the student collective away from aiding reinforcement of ethics instruments and collective cooperation. Another major role for faculty is to frequently reference student to the rights of both making choices and accepting consequences for those choices (Wilson, 2008).

This study offers a grounded theory elaborating dynamic relationships between university-based factors and business student ethical decision making; it contributes conceptual findings to a broader range of study than examining cause-and-effect relationships involving specific student infractions such as cheating or plagiarism. Instead, it places results in a complete context of university life and the influencers shaping ethical decisions.

9. Limitations and future research

The setting of this research was a religiously affiliated university and existing research states that these institutions may have an unfair advantage in moral legitimacy (Evans, et al., 2006). These universities are also believed to possess advantages in character development because they incorporate ethics-based activities that develop student moral awareness (Astin & Antonio,

2004). While that may be true in the sense noted by the authors, we point to an important counter-weight emerging from this study—the heavy reliance on rules. Our research revealed a large number of cases where students acted to comply with rules for reasons of self interest—to avoid punishment and consequences (e.g., loss of job opportunity, residence or diploma). As noted earlier, focus on rule compliance, common in religious institutions, does not equate to an optimal level of ethical decision making (see Kohlberg’s moral development model as cited in Reimer, Paolitto, & Hersh, 1983). We suggest that true ethical identity formation is better based on relationship to, and with, others. (I do something for or with others because I want to rather than because I have to; or I do something because it is the right thing to do because of relational obligation rather than only rule obligation.) This level of moral development requires applying reason to ethical principles in specific contexts which sometimes translates into behavior not guided by rules, or even that which might go against stated policies and rules in order to do the “right thing”. We wonder if these latitudes of behavior are generally not accepted in rule-based institutions. Furthermore, we ask if university members are typically more focused on compliance to rules, rather than ethical decision making and moral development? Further research in this vein is recommended.

In addition, while non-religious institutions may be limited in religious activities and rituals directed toward religious beliefs, this does not preclude integration of spirituality and other cultural activities that reinforce moral awareness and development—particularly in the context of groups. Future research might focus on identifying those spiritual activities, organizational rituals and ceremonies that are fruitful in producing higher levels of moral awareness and development.

10. Implications and conclusions

Seen as a moral enterprise of universities, it is the educator’s challenge to reinforce and develop higher levels of student moral development, and pull students away from tendencies to revert to egocentric perspectives and simple rule following. First is the implication that universities can raise student moral development by engaging students in structured academic, job, service, and social contexts that recognize ethical decisions and consequences. This comprehensive development process includes the identification of related ties whereby all institutional members actively nurture student recognition of relationships and obligations, the way ethics is operationalized in these relationships, and the resulting shared outcomes. For example, in service roles, recognized shared outcomes between student and those served could be structured as a formal activity involving both groups (e.g., ceremonies). Another example might entail group academic assignments related to decisions and consequences. Hughes (2009: 35) underlines the importance of this engagement:

Students will only develop ethical sensitivity, reasoning or practice through opportunities to consider the ethical implications of their own and others’ actions; to apply frameworks and processes to ethical decision-making and to reflect on and evaluate the basis of their own ethical choices in a range of authentic contexts.

Second, universities must integrate and actively involve relevant external agencies in what McCabe et al. (2006) refer to as ethical community building. Community building focuses on relationships among stakeholders in a form of continuous dialog that works through differences and produces common

understanding (Geva, 2000). In conjunction with development of student ethical identities, these communities exhibit neither apathy for others or dogmatic compliance to rules. For example, although we attempted to avoid discussion of beliefs and ethics external to the university experience, in the end we felt forced to integrate family and job considerations because students stressed their role in their ethical decisions; to do otherwise would ignore the important role both parents and job experiences play *during* the university experience. One focus point might include student internships—where business and other organizations also play a role in student development—a potential treasure trove for future research.

Third, the student body should become involved in limited institutional rule making and policy. If much of university efficacy is gained and retained through congruent institutional expression and requisite representation, this implies that ethical community building, done properly, would involve students in building rules, principles, and values congruent with their beliefs. This further implies students are more likely to follow through on, and aid reinforcement of, instruments congruent with their beliefs. Yet, at the same time, these instruments must also be actively supported by other university members, a shortfall already found in literature (Hanson, 2010; Kelley et al., 2005). So too, consideration for these instruments is that they not be used to the extent they supplant student decision making and development. And worst of all, as noted by Bowden and Smythe (2008), they can be actively rejected if viewed as instruments of management control. As business leaders, students will be expected to do more than rule creation and enforcement; they must understand and manage cultural norms and devise unique person-centered programs to minimize unethical activity (Gentile, 2010).

In conclusion, we expect that as the university increases the alignment of its agents and resources to the positive moral development of their students, business and society will receive a higher quality citizen and employee. Moral development necessitates healthy partnerships in a chaotic environment where creativity, entrepreneurial and leadership skills are improved to deal with challenging ethical environments where the mere compliance to rules is not sufficient to do what is right or make ethical decisions.

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Appendix

Interview protocol: ethical decision making by business students

1. What are the top three values that influence your ethical decision making as it relates to university life? Where do these values come from (i.e., personal, peer group, university, business college)?
2. What are the top three university-based agencies or groups that influence your ethical decision-making as it relates to university life? Consider why you do the right things on campus—who influences you? Why are they important to you?
3. What are the top-three university-based things (artifacts) that influence your ethical decision making as it relates to university life? How or why does it influence you?
4. What are the top three university-related tasks or events most associated with your need to do the right thing as it relates to university life?
5. What top three campus-related pressures influence your ethical decision making as it relates to university life? Are they pressures that encourage you doing the right thing or do the wrong thing? How? Why?
6. What are your top three concerns regarding doing what is right at your university?
7. What else do you think is important to mention about making everyday student ethical decisions? Why?

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