

Running Head: SHOULD ALL DISTANCE EDUCATION

Should All Distance Education (DE) Students Be Required to Take a Mandatory Ethics Class as
an Entry Level Course to All Programs?

by

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Abstract

Ongoing decline of ethical values is a growing concern in distance education. This paper will examine if the implementation of a required course in ethics education at an entry level track to all program areas in distance education institutions or organizations can help remedy the situation. Research will be conducted focusing on key questions and considerations justifying or opposing the requirement. Upon completion of the research findings and examination of data, a position statement along with key arguments will be presented in relation to the topic question, “Should All Distance Education (DE) Students Be Required to Take a Mandatory Ethics Class as an Entry Level Course to All Programs?”

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Should All Distance Education (DE) Students Be Required to Take a Mandatory Ethics Class as
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Ethical Issues – A Growing Concern

Ethical value issues in the area of academic dishonesty are growing concerns in distance education classes. Academic dishonesty relates to student behavior on how information pertaining to copyright, privacy and intellectual property is understood, handled and managed. According to a US Census Bureau report, it was found that eight out of ten who use the internet during school activities are unlawfully downloading files, duplicating unauthorized software and plagiarizing. Most of these students are unaware that this constitutes wrong behavior (Kruger, 2003). Informal polls indicating 75 percent of campus students admitting to academic dishonesty is causing an increased concern among faculty members teaching online (Gearhart, 2001). Spinello (2003) stated that the cyberspace is out of control with online frauds, privacy hacking, illegitimate copying of files; such activities have resulted in major social problems on the internet. There are security measures which have been taken to curb fraud each time it happens, but it would be very difficult to stop every activity.

Foster (2004) in the Chronicle of Higher Education reported on how more than half of American institutions spend quite a major portion of their information-technology budgets on security because of malicious attacks on campus networks. Actions taken on implementing of security measures include hiring information-security officers, educating personnel, faculty and students by holding training seminars, creating better and secured network systems. Surveys indicated that such activities are expected to continue and is a concern in the coming years. Students and faculty need to be educated about security issues (Carnevale, 2004; Olsen, 2004).

One should consider alternative solutions to help reduce the problem. Though this may not be a total answer, but one of the possible solutions is that distance education institutions can get involved by educating all learners about ethical values. The purpose of education can bring about awareness and understanding about ethical issues. A deeper look into what kind of educational implementation of an ethics course can be beneficial with tangible outcomes. Hass (2005) acknowledged, "One of the main goals of ethics education should be to encourage' students to recognize social responsibilities within their profession. Ethics education is more than studying the code of professional conduct, but rather a process whereby individuals become more consciously involved in making ethical decisions." She also affirmed that, while a course in ethics may not bring about unanimous agreement on behavior, it can help offer guidance for sound and consistent ethical decision.

Focus Questions Supporting Argument

This paper will examine the need for a required mandatory course in ethics education as an entry level course to all program areas in distance education institutions or organizations. Research will be conducted focusing on a set of key discussion questions and considerations justifying the requirement. The discussions consist of the following: (a) Will students taking an ethics course help with the decrease of academic dishonesty? (b) If research has been conducted, what have the results show in relation to the previous question, (c) What would be the potential outcomes or goals if the course is being offered? (d) Who would be involved with designing the curriculum and what are the types of ethical topics which should be covered in the course? (e) What are the benefits of offering the course as an entry level course as opposed to a final course as an exit examination to graduation? (f) How should administration justify the need of an additional mandatory course in the curriculum to their students? and finally (g) If the course is

being offered, what are additional steps an institution can ensure that what is learned from the course will be applied later.

Focus Questions on Opposing Arguments

On the other hand, there are many written articles which offer suggestions and ideas how to incorporate ethical values into the classes. These articles do not indicate the need for a mandatory course. Suggestions such as educating students during course teaching by using ethical terms such as copyright and license agreements, intellectual property, plagiarism, ethical policies and piracies (Snyder, 2004), setting ethical behaviors as an exemplary example to students in the education environment (Vincent & Miche, 2003) or setting of institutional policies (Gerhart, 2001). Again, how effective are the ideas as opposed to offering a mandatory course at an entry level? Next, do instructors have the time to discuss such issues besides having to focus on course content? Third, how can instructors implement the above suggestions effectively as an additional component in their courses? Fourth, would teaching ethical lessons relating to subject material or setting an exemplary example offer a better and practical approach for implementing ethical values? And finally, will the use or implementing of policies sufficient enough to help instill ethical awareness?

Findings and Analysis of Research Data

Based on the focus of the above discussion questions, the following list of research findings are comments and statements made by various research and articles by authors and institutions that supported the need for a formal ethics course as well as other possible solutions. The subject area of ethical studies may vary depending on the course type, but that is not the focus for the discussion. Most important are the results or outcome of what happens when the subject the study of ethics is implemented into a course curriculum.

(1) *Now is the time for ethics in education (Hass, 2005)*. Hass (2005) in her research findings states that many studies have indicated that ethics education does have positive impact upon students. Ethical values were taught as an introductory part of an accounting curriculum. Classes which omitted the ethics component due to time constraints did indicate that the students lacked competence in ethics related to case study examples used in teaching business ethics. Survey findings from several respondents feel that “exposing students to common ethical dilemmas and methods of resolution should be an integral part of accounting education (Hass, 2005)”. Though Hass did not address the need of an ethics course as a stand alone, it did emphasize on the need for faculty and administration to have faculty training sessions and funding faculty curriculum development in ethics. Administration and faculty members need latest updated information about policy issues governing copyright an intellectual property information pertaining to various subject areas.

(2) *Ethical awareness for the classroom: A framework (Fraedrich, 1990)*. “An early study done by Buchholz of AACSB member schools suggested that many business school deans and faculty believe that ethics is an important area but not one necessarily taught most effectively as a separate course. Their recommendation was that courses in "values" should be required. In addition, the report encouraged the introduction of elective courses designed to expand on the public policy/business environment area” (as cited by Fraedrich, 1990). Fraedrich also stated that faculty members functioning as ethical role models are needed. Faculty members also need to understand ethical and moral values and key constructs related to the subject that is being taught. These values must be practiced by faculty members as students can

learn from observed behaviors. Also, further recommended solutions such as including topics in the ethics course such as information on cultural aspects, societal views and opinions and understanding the importance of corporate or organization codes of conduct as well as decision making procedures and consequences for various case scenarios. This article offers a variety of practical suggestions and solutions on building ethical awareness for the classroom which is required not only as a standalone, but must be reinforced in other area of studies as well as an ongoing practice for ethics.

- (3) *How Ethics Should Be Taught (Kimm, 2003)*. “Michelle Buck commented that ethics should be woven into the fabric of all courses, rather than existing on its own in a single course” (as cited by Kimm, 2003). Ethics must be taught in all subject areas and staff, faculty members and administration must set a 24-hour ethical behavior model in the educational environment so students can learn.
- (4) *Use of ethical dilemmas to contribute to the knowledge and behavior of high school students (Vincent & Miche, 2001)*. Ethics must be integrated into school curriculum, because of diminishing of ethical values being taught at home and churches (Vincent & Miche, 2001). Studies conducted by Vincent & Miche indicated students with ethical studies showed significant behavior improvement (2001). In addition to the various teaching methods and implementation of ethical policies (code of conduct), the authors also suggested the need for instructors as role models and problem solvers to ethical issues as they are the ones who impact the future of the community.
- (5) *Discussing Cyber Ethics with Students Is Critical (Kruger, 2003)*. Kruger (2003) stated that “Teachers cannot always depend on parents to instill cyber ethics because

parents may not know or follow the rules either”. He also reported that researchers have found that it is never too early to introduce the topic of cyber ethics. Several suggestions include teaching by example can bringing students to awareness about the importance of adhering to the copyright symbol, respect of intellectual property giving credit where is needed, and utilizing cyber ethics website resources (example, playitcybersafe.com) for teaching. Kruger’s article does not address the need for a mandatory course but does imply a critical need to discuss cyber ethics issues with students due to increase of cyber crime activities.

(6) *Ethics in distance education: Developing ethical policies (Gerdhart, 2001)*. One of the possible solutions to instill ethical values in a technology environment suggested by the U.S. Justice department is to set up a policy model on ethical values for students (Gerdhart, 2001). Hallam (1998) shares examples of misuse and abuse of the Internet which includes activities such as “harassment, defamation, and infringement of intellectual property rights” and affirms that “these breaches of ethics may occur unintentionally and often because users are unaware of policies that may be in place”. Also, a report from the U.S. Department of Justice stated that moral values learned from homes and reinforced in onsite environments cannot take place in online environment unless educational institutions make efforts to implement some kind of ethical policy in their curriculum (as cited in Gerhart, 2001). This paper offers quite a number of practical policies. The focus of the article was only on instilling ethical values as policy measures.

(7) *Cyber-Ethics: Pirates in the Classroom Snyder (2004)*. In this article, Snyder suggested that students can be educated by faculty (a) addressing economics of

piracy, (b) discussing legal and practical consequences, and (c) using key terms like intellectual property, copyright, licensing agreement, and piracy in the course rooms. The focus is about creating an awareness of ethical values in a teaching environment.

(8) *Why we teach leadership & ethics at the Naval Academy (Clemente, 2000)*. Example of an implementation of a required ethics course “Moral Reasoning for Naval Leaders” is offered as a distance course for officers and sailors. This course was implemented as a result of an account of a following activity, “after the academy’s reputation was tarnished by a string of ethics scandals -- more than 70 students were caught cheating on an electrical-engineering exam, for instance, and a midshipman and several former students were caught running a stolen-car ring (Arnone, 1991).” Captain Clemente (2000), one of the Naval Academy instructors for the ethics course commented, “Our ethics course is a critical survey of the major moral theories in the Western tradition, each of which has had something to say about what makes actions right and about the source of the authority of morality.... The ethics syllabus reflects a military case-study oriented approach to the presentation of the course material that parallels the standard approaches to teaching professional ethics in other professions such as medicine, law, and business. The extensive use of a variety of cases drawn from actual situations is intended to assist midshipmen in understanding the practical applications to military life of the moral principles and ethical theories examined during the course”. This supporting example of how an organization implemented a required course in ethics because of unethical issues which took place is something which all educational institutions must consider. Due to the various aspects and examples which need a variety of discussions (theoretical principles) and awareness

as well as practical applications, a long term course covering the extent of the material is needed.

(9) *Improving Professional Ethics (VanZante and Neal, 2005)*. This recent article, written by VanZante and Neal (2005) offered (a) an account of the process development and revisions of recommended ethics courses to be approved by the Texas State Board of Public Accountancy and (b) the need for proper selection of ethics instructors. The report reflects the need for education institutions to implement courses into their curriculum followed by test assessments as well as careful consideration on content as well as qualifications of experienced instructors teaching the course. Example of content included ethical conduct through reasoning and the teaching of core values of profession such as integrity, objectivity and independence.

Position Statement

Upon completion of the research findings, examination and analysis of data for the above key ideas from various authors, the position statement to the question, “should all DE students be required to take a mandatory ethics class as an entry level course to all programs?” would be a definitely a supporting one, but the course must be supplemented with follow up implementations. See Table 1 containing the summary and analysis of discussions with position views to each argument question.

Table 1 showing a summary of supporting and non supporting arguments based on research findings. Position statements are also included.

Focus Questions Supporting Argument		
Questions	Summary findings from authors/researchers	Position Statement based on analysis of findings
(a) Will students taking an ethics course help with the decrease of academic dishonesty?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vincent & Miche's research supported the need for ethics education. • Research studies indicated positive impact (Hass) • Research indicated that there are organizations which are making efforts and have already implemented ethics into their curriculum (VanZante & Neal, Clemente). Several accounting and business institutions require that their students take an 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A course in ethics will definitely help in ethical and moral values. A specially allocated time spent during the course can help instill various aspects and help answer any questions or concerns pertaining to ethical decisions. • If ethics is not important as a course, one must consider the question on why are there organizations taking time and effort in making sure that such courses as well as assessments are being offered.

	<p>exam for ethical competencies prior graduation.</p>	
<p>(b) If research has been conducted, what have the results show in relation to the previous question?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research showed significant improvement (Vincent & Miche) • Students lacked competence in ethical understanding and application (Hass) • Ethics course has not been effectively taught as a stand-alone (as cited by Fraedrich) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vincent and Miche's research clearly indicates increased students behavior. • The navy would not have implemented required ethical courses if there are not promising results • A course should be implemented but with careful preparation for it to be effective
<p>(c) What would be the potential outcomes or goals if the course is being offered?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Decreased ethical issues, better student behavior (Vincent & Miche) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proper planning for an ethics course will reap positive results. Practice of ethics during course of studies (role play or case study examples) can help equip students to deal with real world scenarios

<p>(d) Who would be involved with designing the curriculum and what are the types of ethical topics which should be covered in the course?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration and faculty must be involved (Hass); All Distance Education institutions (Gerhart) • Ideas include discussions on ethical terminology and its definitions, cultural aspects, societal views, and opinions, understand the importance of codes and policies, resolution methods, decision making procedures along with acceptance of legal and practical consequences (Fraedrich, Kruger, Snyder) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration, faculty and students can share ideas • Curriculum must include the following discussions which related to the field of study (1) ethical terminology and its definitions, (2) cultural aspects, societal views, and opinions, (3) understand the importance of codes and policies, (4) resolution methods, decision making procedures along with acceptance of legal and practical consequences
<p>(e) What are the benefits of offering the course as an</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical values can be implemented, practiced 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethical values if implemented as an

<p>entry level course as opposed to a final course as an exit examination to graduation?</p>	<p>and applied throughout other courses as well</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research does not indicate when the course should be taught or there are any benefits. However, examples from Hass' research and Clement's article indicate an early introduction of ethics courses. 	<p>introductory level course be implemented, practiced and applied throughout other courses of study as well</p>
<p>(f) How should administration justify the need of an additional mandatory course in the curriculum to their students?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Findings from research materials did not address the specifics of this question. However, suggestions from research findings strongly indicate that ethics must be taught. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administration and faculty must share concerns and needs. One of the ways is to utilize research and statistical data which indicates increase of cyber crime activities. This can help justify the need for a course.

<p>(g) If the course is being offered, what are additional steps an institution can ensure that what is learned from the course will be applied later</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional faculty training and funding for support (Hass) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Faculty must be conscious about applying principles learned from the course in other classes as well. • Administration must provide resources for faculty awareness of new ethical development, example when dealing with new copyright laws, etc.
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Focus Questions on Opposing Arguments

Questions	Summary findings from authors/researchers	Position Statement based on analysis of findings
<p>(a) How effective is setting ethical behaviors as an exemplary example to students in the education environment</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research did not indicate results but many authors supported a model behavior by instructors (Hass, Fraedrich, Kimm, Vincent & Miche, Gerdhart) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Setting an example may be applicable to certain situations, but not always relate to specific subject matter. • Sometimes there is a need for instructors to be aware about ethical

		<p>issues regarding intellectual property and copyright issues due to ongoing changes in law. Hence the need for training. Then the instructor is able to function as a role model.</p>
<p>(b) Do instructors have the time to discuss such issues besides having to focus on course content?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructors did not have time to include ethical related matters into course material. (Hass) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Often times, instructors have too much to cover in subject or course material.
<p>(c) How can instructors implement the above suggestions effectively as an additional component in their courses?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice using ethical definitions during class lectures such as copyright, intellectual property, licensing agreement, piracy, etc (Kruger, Snyder) • Ethics must be woven into all courses and not offered as a stand alone course (as cited by Kim) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The use of ethical definitions and expressions along with practice can function only as a reinforcement tool for ethical awareness if it is continually being applied during the course of the study.

<p>(d) Would teaching ethical lessons relating to subject material or setting an exemplary example offer a better and practical approach for implementing ethical values?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Articles and research findings did not specifically indicate results of any findings pertaining to this matter but suggestions of implementation were put forth by various authors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This would definitely function well if the study ethical principles relate to the subject matter. The use of case study scenarios with the practice of ethical applications can help students deal with decisions or confrontations.
<p>(e) Will implementing policies sufficient enough to help instill ethical awareness?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gerdhart's article discusses the importance on why and how distance education institutions must develop and practice policies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing policies are good measures, but students must understand what the implications of these policies are. • All distance education institutions considering including in their programs a mandatory course in ethics must

		<p>also include a section on policy discussion related to their institution.</p>
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There are many ethical issues which can be covered in an ethics course. Lyndale (2004) states, “Teaching ethics is not a panacea for the ethical problems of our society, but it can help students to learn to reflect on ethical issues in a more self-critical and open-minded way.” The required course must contain constructive content which can help ensure that ethical values learned is practiced and applied in other situations. Again, the key points here are the mandatory aspects as well as the course being offered as an entry level.

Based on the studies, and current situation of increasing unethical cyber activities, a mandatory course should be implemented in all programs. There must be a starting point to instill an ethics course whether or a student is aware of ethical issues. If every institution were to implement an ethics course with the awareness of cybercrime activities and its consequences an early stage, students not only can protect themselves from the dangers from others, but learn the detrimental consequences of cybercrime activities affects others. Also, instructors can continue implementing and review ethical studies in other areas of studies without having to take additional time to introduce new ethical terminologies and policy issues to their students.

There are many ethical issues and topics that can be discussed and covered seen from the above analysis. Hence, a time frame of at least a term or semester’s course is needed taught by qualified and experienced instructors.

Distance education institutions must strongly consider adding an entry level course on ethical awareness of cyber issues for all students. This is not an easy implementation. There may

be students, for example those who are taking only one or two courses for personal enrichment purposes who may oppose to the idea of taking an ethics course. Institutions facing implementation issues should consider offering an assessment test for new admitting students or find other alternatives the need of ethical studies or work on a case by case basis. Administration have to justify the importance of having a required ethical course just as it is important to having the need or pre-requisites for computer technical knowledge prior to taking a distance education course.

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