

Pygmalion Effect: An Issue for Business Education and Ethics

Michael S. Lane
Dietrich Schaupp
Barbara Parsons

ABSTRACT. This study reports the results of a survey designed to assess the impact of business education on the ethical beliefs of business students. The study examines the beliefs of graduate and undergraduate students about ethical behavior in educational settings. The investigation indicates that the behavior which students learn or perceive is required to succeed in business schools may run counter to the ethical sanctions of society and the business community.

Most business educational programs at least pay lip service to business ethics in their curricula, and some require students to take one or more courses on this subject. Although some researchers question the value of business ethics in the curriculum (Hoffman and Moore, 1982) along with students' interest in the topic (Beltramini *et al.*, 1984), little research has been done on the perceptions of students regarding the ethics of their own behavior in business programs.

Instead of encouraging and reinforcing ethical behavior, the business program may present students with choices that unwittingly stress "winning is everything." Coupled with the pressure to succeed academically in order to achieve career and goals, the student may succumb to these forces and exhibit behavior that, in general, would be condemned by society as "unethical" in a business environment.

Michael S. Lane is Assistant Professor of Management at West Virginia University. He is the coauthor of 'An Integrated Approach to Curriculum Design/Redesign', Journal of Education for Business (1986), and 'Corporate Goals and Managerial Motivation', Mid-South Business Journal (1985).

Dietrich Schaupp is Professor of Management at West Virginia University.

Barbara Parsons is Assistant Professor of Commerce at Fairmont State College.

There is a continuing interest in business ethics (Lane and Schaupp, 1985; Beltramini *et al.*, 1984; Pressley and Blevins, 1984; Bellizzi and Hasty, 1982; and Arlow and Ulrich, 1983). A cursory survey of popular publications reveals that society remains concerned about ethical business practices.

A review of the academic literature indicates conflicting results as to the value of ethical education as a determinant for ethical behavior. For example, a survey of former MBA Students at Dartmouth College revealed that students felt a positive influence from a management ethics seminar taken ten years earlier (Purcell, 1977). Another longitudinal study of the impact of an ethics course on student ethical perceptions, however, reported an initial overall improvement in ethical scores four months after the course, but a decline after four years reverting back to the initial low scores measured before students took the course (Arlow and Ulrich, 1983). The authors concluded that a single course in ethics may not influence students' ethical values.

In a study examining the possible relationship between one's business values and educational background Baumhart concluded the following:

Awareness about ethical problems and the ability to think and speak about them is improved by college, especially if it includes a course in ethics. But there is no evidence that decision-making is more ethical as a result of college courses (1968, p. 185).

A Brenner-Molander replication of the Baumhart study resulted in similar conclusions (Brenner and Molander, 1977). Furthermore, when students were asked to identify the single most important influence on their ethical behavior, only 9% indicated education.

The literature suggests, then, that a business curriculum incorporating ethics may heighten the

awareness of students regarding ethical problems and their ability to think and speak about them, at least in the short run. But there is little empirical evidence to suggest that ethical behavior and decision-making are enhanced through ethical education. It may be that students are affected more by their general experiences throughout the entire business program than by a single business ethics course.

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine students' perceptions of the ethical aspects of business programs. The study also explores whether undergraduate and graduate students' ethical perceptions differ.

Method

The data were gathered from three accredited business programs at two different institutions. The graduate sample consisted of 176 respondents from a single university; the undergraduate sample numbered 159 students approximately equally divided between two institutions. The graduate sample consisted of three business-related majors: Master of Business Administration, Master of Professional Accountancy, and Master of Industrial Relations. The two undergraduate samples were drawn from a four-year program at a large state university with an enrollment of 15 000 and from a two-year program at a smaller "commuter college" with a student body numbering approximately 6000. Data were gathered by means of a 12-item questionnaire administered in a classroom environment. Demographic data were also collected from all respondents (see Table I).

The distribution of responses for the selected demographic variables was generally consistent with the population of the institutions point averages above 2.5 (71.8%). Not surprisingly, the majority (83.6%) were under 21 years of age.

The questionnaire used for this study was modified from one previously used by Pressley and Blevins (1984) to assess commonly held beliefs about what's necessary for advancement in the business world. The statements were reworded to apply to students in graduate/undergraduate business programs. An additional, "belief" question was formulated using the same format. The new question addressed the student's beliefs about pandering

to professors' opinions. Respondents were asked whether the statements were true of their programs frequently, occasionally, or infrequently. In addition to the 12 beliefs questions, a set of demographic questions were used. These were essentially the same as those used by Pressley and Blevins (1984).

For ease of presentation of the results, a simplified version of the original Pressley and Blevins questionnaire was developed and is shown on Table II. The simplified version will be used in discussing the results of the study.

Analysis

The method and analysis used in this study were the statistical techniques χ^2 and *T*-test. A summary table of results for the 12 belief items has been reproduced in Table III.

As Table III shows, the perceptions that respondents indicated having most frequently were: (1) "Winning is everything" (Over half of both graduates and undergraduates); (2) "Grades are *not* most important" (over half); (3) "Grades primary objective" (nearly two-thirds); and (4) "Pander to professor" (over half).

The belief items cited as most *infrequently* necessary were: (1) "Dirty tactics" and (2) "Set aside personal values" (both over 75%).

The fact that over half of the respondents, both graduate (59.2%) and undergraduate (53.5%) believe that "winning is everything" suggests that the drive to succeed, at least for this sample, is a formidable motivator. Neither χ^2 nor *T*-tests indicated statistically significant differences between the graduate and undergraduate samples.

The questions about grades yielded contradictory results. A majority of both the graduates (58.4%) and undergraduates (52.8%) felt that success is not based solely on grades (question 3) yet 57.5% of the graduates and 63.7% of the undergraduate respondents felt that grades are the single most important objective of their programs (question 4). The two are not necessarily contradictory, however. One can believe that making good grades (academic achievement) is the most important objective in an *educational program* while at the same time maintaining that one can succeed — and make good grades —

TABLE I
Demographic characteristics

	Frequency		Percent	
	Graduate	Under-Graduate	Graduate	Under-Graduate
Graduate Degree Programs:				
Master of Business Administration	129		73.3	
Master of Professional Accountancy	25		14.2	
Master of Science (Industrial Relations)	<u>22</u>		<u>12.5</u>	
	176		100.0	
Undergraduate Program:				
Two-Year Program	106		66.7	
Four-Year Program	<u>53</u>		<u>33.3</u>	
	158		100.0	
Age:				
18		22		13.8
19	1	17	0.3	10.7
20	1	57	0.3	35.8
21	7	37	4.1	23.3
22 to 24	79	17	46.5	10.7
25 to 34	76	6	44.7	3.8
over 34	<u>6</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>4.1</u>	<u>1.9</u>
	170	159	100.0	100.0
Sex:				
Male	90	92	53.8	58.0
Female	<u>83</u>	<u>66</u>	<u>46.2</u>	<u>42.0</u>
	173	158	100.0	100.0
Grade Point Average:				
Below 2.0		4		2.5
2.0 to 2.45	2	41	1.3	25.8
2.5 to 2.9	3	65	2.1	40.9
3.0 to 3.49	44	40	30.3	25.2
3.5 to 4.0	<u>96</u>	<u>9</u>	<u>66.3</u>	<u>5.7</u>
	145	159	100.0	100.0
Marital Status:				
Married	55	5	32.5	3.3
Single	<u>114</u>	<u>148</u>	<u>67.5</u>	<u>96.7</u>
	169	153	100.0	100.0

even when grades are not regarded as the most important aspect of one's *life*.

It is also interesting to note that both questions three and four indicated significant differences

between graduate and undergraduate responses ($p < 0.05$). Graduate students felt more strongly that success was not based solely on grades (58.4% versus 52.8%) yet they also felt more strongly that success

TABLE II
Questionnaire simplification

Question	Simplified Form
1. To progress, one has to develop the philosophy that winning is everything.	Winning is everything
2. The academic pressures of achieving in my academic program leaves one with an overdeveloped head and an underdeveloped heart.	Head before heart
3. One can succeed in my graduate/undergraduate program even if one's grades do not become the most important thing in one's life.	Grades most important
4. Even though one might say and believe that something like "student learning" is the primary goal of the university, one has to develop an attitude that making grades is the single most important objective.	Grades most important
5. One just about has to "sell their soul" in my graduate/undergraduate program to succeed.	Sell their soul
6. To progress in my graduate/undergraduate program, one will occasionally have to indulge in dirty tactics.	Dirty tactics
7. To advance, the attainment of a graduate/undergraduate degree has to come first, even before one's family.	School before family
8. One cannot progress in my graduate/undergraduate program without "stepping on a few people."	Stepping on people
9. All personal values have to be set aside in order for one to advance in my graduate/undergraduate program.	Set aside personal values
10. To succeed in my graduate/undergraduate program, one has to develop the philosophy that what does not relate to winning and grades, does not matter.	Winning
11. To advance in my graduate/undergraduate program, one must not only be prepared to aggressively move past those who stand in the way, but find it necessary to clear the path.	Clear the path
12. In order to succeed in my graduate/undergraduate program, one must pander to the wishes and values of my professors.	Pander to professors
Responses	Simplified Form
Always the case	
Almost always the case	
Frequently the case	Frequently
Occasionally the case	Occasionally
Infrequently the case	
Almost never the case	
Never the case	Infrequently

without good grades takes place less frequently than did undergraduates (20.8% versus 24.5%). More felt that grades were frequently the primary objective of the program (67.3% versus 57.5%), and a significantly higher proportion of graduate students felt that grades were infrequently the most important factor (15.1% versus 27.0%). One explanation for this disparity may be that the graduate students are a more heterogeneous group — all tend to be high achievers, and they may have less difficulty making good

grades. (Note that 97% of graduates had GPAs over 3.0 as opposed to only 31% of undergraduates.) Graduate students may also have a clearer sense of their career objectives, making grades a less important issue overall than one's life goals.

The results shown in Table IV show a complete breakdown of the responses to question 12 regarding "pandering to professors' wishes and values." The results suggest that 53.7% of the graduate students while only 15.1% of the undergraduate students

TABLE III

Questionnaire	Mean		T- Statistics	N		Frequently		Occasionally		Infrequently		Chi- Square
	Graduate	Under- Graduate		Graduate	Under- Graduate	Graduate	Under- Graduate	Graduate	Under- Graduate	Graduate	Under- Graduate	
						(Percent)	(Percent)		(Percent)			
1. Winning is everything	3.43	3.38	-0.371	174	159	59.2	53.5	24.7	35.2	16.1	11.3	4.939
2. Head before heart	4.26	4.20	-0.450	174	159	27.6	28.9	32.2	27.7	40.2	43.4	0.816
3. Grades are not most important	3.32	3.69	2.387**	173	159	58.4	52.8	20.8	22.6	20.8	24.5	1.094
4. Grades primary objective	3.44	3.11	-2.109**	174	159	57.5	67.3	15.5	17.6	27.0	15.1	7.044**
5. Sell your soul	4.833	4.78	-0.312	174	159	16.7	19.5	18.4	11.6	64.9	62.9	0.452
6. Dirty tactics	5.59	5.70	-0.840	173	159	4.6	4.4	10.4	14.5	85.0	81.1	1.262
7. School before family	4.75	5.27	2.879*	175	159	19.4	18.2	28.6	10.7	52.0	71.1	18.299*
8. Stepping on people	5.04	4.88	-1.003	176	159	13.1	18.2	22.1	18.2	64.8	63.5	2.092
9. Set aside personal values	5.61	5.44	-1.198	176	159	6.8	7.5	13.1	15.7	80.1	76.7	0.595
10. Winning	4.82	4.91	0.672	174	159	17.2	13.2	18.4	18.9	64.4	67.9	1.052
11. Clear the path	4.54	4.35	-1.1855	172	159	23.8	30.2	29.1	19.5	47.1	50.3	4.510
12. Pander to professor	3.44	4.84	9.401*	175	159	53.7	15.1	29.7	28.3	16.6	56.6	72.700*

NOTE: Mean scores were derived from the original seven point scale not the simplified three point scale.

There were no differences between the results using the different methods.

Kendall Tau-b = 0.626 sig. = 0.0048

Spearman Rho = 0.826 sig. = 0.0009

* sig. < 0.01

** sig. < 0.05

TABLE IV
Pandering to the wishes and values of professors

Answer Choice	Graduate Frequency Percent	Undergraduate Frequency Percent		
Always the case	17	9.6	3	1.9
Almost always the case	42	24.1	5	3.1
Frequently the case	36	20.0	16	10.1
Occasionally the case	52	29.7	45	28.3
Infrequently the case	12	7.2	32	20.1
Almost never the case	12	7.0	37	23.3
Never the case	4	2.4	21	13.2

report that they pander to the wishes and values of their professors frequently, almost always or always. Another 29.7 and 28.3 percent, respectively, felt they occasionally had to pander to the values and wishes of professors. Only four graduate students (2.4%) felt that they never had to pander to professors' wishes. Twenty-one (13.2%) of the undergraduates never had to pander to the professor's wishes. Chi-square and T-test analyses indicated significant differences between the graduate and undergraduate samples ($p < 0.01$).

It may be that so many graduate students responded affirmatively to this question because graduate students naturally feel that they are in a position inferior to their professor and feel that they must subscribe to the professors' belief systems to get ahead, even though this may not be the case. It may also be that graduate students interpret "pandering to professors' wishes and values" much more neutrally than might be expected, i.e., they associated these items with the professors' wishes and values with regard to learning the content of course material as it was presented rather than having the freedom to explore topics in a different way. Nevertheless, it is sobering to note that over three-quarters of the graduate students felt they had to pander to professors at least occasionally, strongly suggesting that graduate students do not perceive their business program classroom as a place for the free exchange of ideas.

The position of undergraduate students is not as neatly categorized. Undergraduate programs and classes are generally larger than graduate ones. Undergraduate students may be more detached from their professors. Undergraduates may perceive it as easier to blend into the crowd. Also the increased interaction required in graduate classes, through

class discussion, essay exams and papers may have affected the graduate students' responses. Finally, the graduate students may perceive themselves at greater risk in a graduate program, due to the nature of advanced degrees. It might be interesting to note if this perception increases as the level of degree increases.

From the standpoint of ethical behavior, Table III reveals that most students do believe certain limits are associated with the attainment of good grades in an academic program. For example, 85.0% of the graduate sample and 81.1% of the undergraduate sample felt that they infrequently had to engage in "dirty tactics." Likewise, over 60% of both graduate and undergraduate students felt that they did not have to "sell their soul" or "step on people" to achieve success in their educational programs χ^2 and *T*-test analyses indicated no statistical differences between the responses of graduate and undergraduate samples for these questions.

A statistically significant difference did emerge, however, between graduate and undergraduate students on the question dealing with "school before family" ($p < 0.01$). Over 50% of the graduate students and 71.1% of the undergraduate students felt that they infrequently had to choose school before family — a 20% disparity. The fact that 32.5% of the graduate students were married and the vast majority of the undergraduate sample was single (96.7%) may explain this difference. It appears that graduate students experience greater pressure to choose between family and books.

Discussion and limitations

The results of this exploratory survey indicate that the drive for success in an academic program may sometimes be at odds with ethical issues. In four of the 12 questionnaire items, over 50% of the graduate sample felt that ethical issues were frequently subordinated to the demands of academic achievement. In three of the 12, over 50% of the undergraduates felt the same way. Furthermore, while business schools have expended much effort in teaching and integrating ethics into the business curriculum, this study suggests that students believe "winning is everything" and that academic success in graduate school requires pandering to the wishes of their

professors. Although the majority of the sampled students felt that grades are not most important in assessing success, they do understand that grades are a primary objective in their educational programs. And a majority of students appear to believe that the professor controls grades. If, in fact students do pander to the wishes and values of professors, then pandering may be a means of attaining the primary objective, grades. Over 50% of the sample felt that grades are a primary objective and a similar percentage of graduate students reported frequently pandering to their professors' wishes.

This raises questions about the professors' role as a model for students and about the free exchange of ideas in the classroom.

It may be, of course, that students come into the business program with the habit of deferring to the beliefs and values of their teachers. It is possible that pandering is seen by students as a means of attaining grades, for students appear to draw lines concerning unethical behavior. Most students, both graduate and undergraduate, felt that they *infrequently* had to engage in behavior such as stepping on people, setting aside personal values, selling one's soul, or engaging in dirty tactics. Because the student's exposure to a professor is relatively brief, the "pandering" issue may reflect more on attaining a grade than compromising one's basic ethical value structure.

If, however, the learning environment condones or even encourages pandering, this may set the stage for similar behavior in business, with the heavy emphasis on "winning" and profit maximization. It may be that business colleges unwittingly contribute to the development of business behavior which is generally regarded as "cutthroat" and unethical.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to explore the ethical perceptions of graduate and undergraduate students in business programs. The results of the study imply that students have "value parameters" that define the boundaries of unethical behavior. The vast majority of students felt that they infrequently had to engage in dirty tactics, sell their soul for grades, step on people, or set aside their personal values in their educational programs.

However, an equally significant majority of

graduate students reported pandering to professors' wishes and both graduate students and undergraduate students expressed the belief that winning is everything and grades are the primary objective of their business education programs. Business programs, rather than reinforcing positive ethical perceptions and actions on the part of students may, in fact, have a negative impact on certain ethical actions and perceptions.

The preliminary nature of this study and its sample size precludes unqualified acceptance of these results without further study. This study has raised questions which need to be addressed in future research.

References

- Arlow, Peter and Ulrich, Thomas A.: 1983, 'Can Ethics Be Taught to Business Students?', *The Collegiate Forum*.
- Baumhart, Raymond, S. J.: 1968, *An Honest Profit: What Businessmen Say about Ethics in Business*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Bellizzi, Joseph and Hasty, Ronald W.: 1982, 'Business and Non-Business Student Perceptions of Questionable Advertising Practices', *Developments in Marketing Science*, Vol. V. 1982 Academy of Marketing Science.
- Beltramini, R. F., Peterson, R. A., and Kozmetsky, G.: 1984, 'Concern of College Students Regarding Business Ethics', *Journal of Business Ethics* 3(3), pp. 195–200.
- Brenner, Steven and Molander, Earl: 1977, 'Is the Ethics of Business Changing?', *Harvard Business Review* 55, pp. 57–71.
- Hoffman, M. W. and Moore, J. M.: 1982, 'Results of Business Ethics Curriculum Survey', *Journal of Business Ethics* 1(2), pp. 81–83.
- Lane, Michael and Schaupp, Dietrich: 1985, 'Ethics: An Issue in Graduate Education', paper presented in Boston at the September 18, 1985 meeting of the Association of Human Resources Management and Organizational Behavior.
- Pressley, Milton M. and Blevins, David E.: 1984, 'Student Perceptions of "Job Politics" as Practiced by Climbing the Corporate Career Ladder', *Journal of Business Ethics* 3(2), pp. 127–138.
- Purcell, Theodore, S. J.: 1977, 'Do Courses in Business Ethics Pay Off?', *California Management Review* 19(4), pp. 50–58.

*Management Department,
College of Business and Economics,
P.O. Box 6025,
West Virginia University,
Morgantown, WV 26506–6025,
U.S.A.*