Integration of Business Ethics Education:
Do Perceptions Among Professors and Students Differ?

In a study of the integration of ethics in an MBA program at an Atlantic Canadian University, we found evidence of discrepancies between students and professors with regards to their perception of the integration of ethics into the curriculum. In addition, there was variability found among some of the students taking the same course. Possible reasons for these discrepancies are explored. Most students participating in the study felt that ethical coverage was inadequate. Implications for business faculty and administration are discussed.

Although many business schools have been espousing a greater commitment to integrating ethics education into their curriculum, the extent of this integration is open to debate. Studies that have dealt with whether or not ethics is actually being integrated into business curricula have been minimal (Berl & Shannon, 1997). And those studies that have been done typically survey faculty and/or administration (e.g., Imagine, 2003). It is difficult to determine if business ethics is, in reality, being integrated across the curriculum unless the individuals that are involved in the learning experience firsthand, that is, both the professors and students, communicate their experiences.

One of the best sources of information regarding ethics being integrated throughout the curriculum, then, is the student body itself. Exploring the perceptions of business students is important for several reasons. First, as Berl & Shannon (1997) state, “[i]f, as required by the AACSB and indicated by the research in this area, ethics and ethical issues are being discussed in business classes, students should be aware of these discussions” (p.1060). According to E. Brian Peach, an associate professor of business, “if we really get serious the [AACSB] accreditation review process should ensure student sampling to measure the extent to which students perceive an ethics emphasis” (quoted in Frederick & Swanson, 2003, p. 21). In our study, we asked business students directly about the ethical content of business courses they had recently completed. At the same time, we focused on the professors’ perceptions of the extent to which they felt they had integrated ethical considerations into the corresponding course.

The Role of Ethics in Business Education

Growing attention to business ethics is evidenced by the proliferation of publications, courses, conferences, and awards that deal with the ethical aspects of business. In addition, there has been an increased call by managers (Marshall, 2002), the public (Kidwell, 2001), regulators (Elmore, Rezaee, Szendi, 2001), academia (Casado & Vallen, 2000, Adler, 2002), professional associations (Burke & Carlson, 1998), and government (DiBattista et al., 1997) for increased importance to be placed on business ethics. There has been a corresponding call by employers, accrediting bodies, students, and other stakeholders for greater importance to be placed on business ethics education. The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the accrediting agency for North American business schools, has called for the inclusion of business ethics education in business schools since 1976 and business schools are currently required to have ethical content in
their programs in order to be accredited (Madison, 2002). Frederick & Swanson (2003) have described how business educators throughout the world have recently called on AACSB for stricter standards for business schools with regards to business ethics education. In Canada, The Canadian Centre for Philanthropy has recently initiated a program that recognizes the importance of teaching corporate social responsibility in order to prepare students to be leaders in today’s business world (Imagine, 2003).

It has been suggested that the teachings of business programs may be one of the reasons behind the recent level of misconduct and malfeasance in the business arena (DiBattista et al., 1997; Loe & Weeks, 2000; Waddock, 2003). A short-term focus on maximization of shareholder value and finding ways for business people to ‘win’ in a hypercompetitive business environment are some of the main foci of current business education programs. Some have suggested that business school curriculum includes subtle assumptions that to be successful in business sometimes you have to do unethical things (Kumar, Boryck, Nonis, & Yauger, 1991). Scholars have also argued that current management education does not convey to students the impact that their actions have on various internal and external stakeholders (Adams, Carley & Harris, 1998; Mahin, 1998, McPhail, 2001; Loe & Weeks, 2000; Waddock, 2003). While there are systematic pressures for ever-improving (financial) performance and (market) growth, there continues to be little or no attention to ecological issues and ethical concerns (Waddock, 2003).

Although there is probably a combination of interacting complex factors contributing to recent business scandals (Madison, 2002), it is necessary to consider the possibility that the teaching of business schools and the lack of ethics education is a contributing factor to the unethical attitudes and behaviour of business people, at least to the extent that many of these programs do not foster ethical behaviour (Adler, 2002; Clark, 2003; Gioia, 2002; MacFarlane & Perkins, 1999; Tyson, 2002). A longitudinal study carried out by the Aspen Institute involving approximately 2000 MBA business students from various business schools found that over the term of their program there was a weakening of moral character and an increase in the number of students who believed that their main responsibility as business people would be to the company’s shareholders (Gioia, 2002).

At the same time, ethics education has been identified as a medium that has the potential to be part of a solution to the recent plethora of business scandals. A study conducted by DiBattista et al. (1997), of almost 700 undergraduate business students, indicated that “students who had been exposed to ethical issues in a course were more likely to believe both, that ethical behavior is, and should be, positively associated with successful business outcomes” (p. 205). A growing number of scholars are arguing that ethics education should be a significant part of business education in order to increase students’ awareness of ethical considerations and to allow students to learn analytical, critical thinking, and moral reasoning skills that will more effectively prepare them for future roles in the business environment (e.g., Byerly, Dave, Medlin, 2002; Casado & Vallen 2000; DiBattista et al., 1997; Gautschi & Jones, 1998; Gioia, 2002; Izzo, 2000; Kuhn, 1998; McPhail, 2001; Mahin, 1998; Nasher & Ruhe, 2001; Oddo, 1997; Park, 1998; Swanson & Frederick, 2003; Tyson, 2002, Waddock, 2003).

There is also evidence that students are requesting that business ethics be taught in business programs. The results of a study conducted by Byerly, Dave, & Medlin (2002) of business students indicate that students had “a generally positive attitude toward the inclusion of ethics issues and awareness in courses” (p. 357) and “felt that the knowledge gained from such coverage will benefit them in making future career choices, in making tough decisions, and in dealing with future management responsibilities”(p. 357). In addition, a recent study of 2515 undergraduate business students from 50 universities in 29 different states found that 83.4% of the students
surveyed agreed with the statement: “I believe that all business students should take a formal course in business ethics” (Peterson & Albaum, 2003).

Integration of Business Ethics

Many business schools are choosing to integrate ethics throughout the curriculum instead of making a separate ethics course mandatory (Berl & Shannon, 1997; Imagine, 2003). It has been suggested that the integration of ethics in various business courses is needed if students are to be able to incorporate business ethics across business disciplines and to recognize the related interconnectedness (Oddo, 1997). Moreover, Gioia (2002) argues that ethical considerations are important across all business disciplines. Without integration, students often do not carry over the ethical principles and skills learned in a business ethics course and students are not given the opportunity to practice these skills in multiple and varying areas of study (Oddo, 1997).

Several reasons have been suggested as to why some professors are not integrating ethics into business curricula. Firstly, some business educators may not feel that it is their responsibility to integrate ethics into their courses. Kuhn (1998) suggests that some faculty feel that ethical considerations are learned outside the academic realm. Still others do not feel equipped, knowledge-wise or resource/materials-wise, to teach ethics (Oddo, 1997).

A recent study of Canadian MBA programs found that most universities are at least espousing an increased emphasis on the integration of corporate responsibility (CR) into their MBA curriculum. Of 26 MBA programs, 31% reported having a mod-high to high degree of integration of CR-related issues while 69% reported having a low to moderate degree (Imagine, 2003). The identification of whether a discrepancy exists between the perceptions of business educators and students regarding the extent to which business ethics is integrated into a given course is critical in determining if the message of business ethics is being conveyed to students as intended and as espoused.

Context and Methodology

The context of this study was an MBA program at a School of Business in a Canadian university. An elective course entitled “Ethical Issues in Business” was offered 4 times over the past 10 years, 2 of these offerings were in a summer session. A course entitled “Social Issues in Business” was offered 5 times over the past 10 years. There has never been a mandatory ethics or corporate social responsibility (CSR) course offered in this program. Three years ago the MBA Director and MBA Council called on faculty teaching in the core program to integrate ethics/CSR into their courses.

Research was conducted through structured, open-ended, personal interviews (King, 1994). Interviews were conducted during fall 2003 with 10 professors who teach core MBA courses and 31 MBA students who had completed one of the corresponding core courses during the 2002/2003 school year. Interviews averaged 20 minutes in length. There were 2 - 4 MBA students interviewed to correlate with each of the 10 professors that were interviewed. That is, each student interviewed had completed the course in which the professor had taught the previous year. Interviews resulted in 70 pages of transcribed text. The interview questions for both professors and students were formed around the following topics: the meaning of business ethics, the role of ethics in business and education, and the inclusion of ethics in the corresponding courses and in the current business curriculum. Only professors who had taught a mandatory MBA course the previous academic year were contacted. Students were contacted through e-mail
via the MBA Society. In addition, course outlines and self course audits of participating faculty members, as well as MBA council minutes were content-analyzed for business ethics/CSR.

The text was analyzed to identify themes and patterns that emerged. Some questions were grouped together in order to explore the issue of the differing perceptions between students and professors with regards to ethics being integrated into the curriculum. Information gathered during the interviews was categorized using the following themes: meaning of business ethics, role of ethics in business and business education, variability, marginalization of ethics, extent of coverage, and barriers to ethics education. Some of these themes are explored in the following section. Approximately 23% of the transcripts were coded by both co-authors. The co-authors agreed upon 82.5% of the coding of this section of the transcripts, thereby increasing inter-coder reliability (Weber, 1990).

**Results and Analysis**

Professors are referred to as P1, P2, P3…P10, and students as S1-1, S1-2, S2-1, S2-2, ….S10-3. For example, S1-1 and S1-2 are the students who have taken the relative course from P1.

**Assessment of Current Coverage of Ethics**

There was overwhelming support by both faculty (9 out of 10) and students (30 out of 31) for some kind of inclusion of ethics in the business curriculum. Twenty-seven students felt that ethics should be integrated throughout the curriculum and thirteen students felt that business ethics should be integrated throughout the curriculum as well as offered in a stand-alone course. Although 7 professors indicated that business ethics should be integrated into the curriculum, in 9 out of the 10 courses addressed in the study, there was at least one student in the relative group that indicated ethical coverage in the course was inadequate. Twenty-one out of 31 students indicated that ethical issues were not adequately addressed in the relative course. There were also remarks made regarding the ethical content of the MBA program in general.

…[I]f the administration here does think that ethics, the true sense of ethics, not just did you plagiarize or not…if they think that that’s somehow integrated into the curriculum already, then I would say it’s not good enough (S9-3).

The apparent marginalization of business ethics education was communicated by students through the frequent use of phrases such as “a little bit”, “just one time”, “a few times”, “it touched on”, “an aside”, “a side note”, “didn’t repeat it”, “vaguely”, “maybe one or two discussions”, “a very small part”, “didn’t touch”, and “when it is convenient”. In addition, professors used comments such as “that particular class” and “a bit once in a while” to communicate the extent to which ethics was included in their particular course. Consider the following quotes of a professor and student from one particular course:

I just make a general statement with questions in the first half of the session [authors’ italics]. Later on as I speak I don’t ever come back to this issue [of ethics] again (P8).

It was in the beginning of the course that we had a bit of the context, the setting, and it was there that he did mention something about ethics, but again not long enough for it to hold in my memory. See I’m a strong believer in ethics, yet we haven’t really been taught ethics and we haven’t really
studied it and we haven’t looked at the dilemmas around it. And I think that’s why I’m choked up for words because I haven’t been thinking about it or thinking of how it plays into my beliefs and into the business world - because we rarely touch on it in school (S8-1).

P1 made the following statement with regards to a class discussion on a film that was used to try to address some ethical issues,

The only problem with how I did it is subsequently we didn’t have enough time to have the discussion on it and I know some people, you know, found the film a bit tough to take and others felt that we should have discussed it further. But unfortunately my curriculum - because it was a long film, we moved on to other things.

Another student described how “other courses focus on fundamental knowledge – like finance, probably they won’t talk about ethics” (S7-2).

There was little mention of specific pedagogical examples of how ethics was integrated into the curriculum. A few students mentioned cases and student presentations. Two professors indicated that the topics that included business ethics were included on the course outline, but there was no specific mention of the term “ethics” on the outline.

There were some barriers that were identified as constraints on professors with regards to integrating ethics into their courses. These barriers are similar to those found in the literature and included perceived and actual competence of professors in business ethics, time constraints, and resource constraints. There were also some other philosophical barriers, including the perceptions that teaching ethics is seen as preaching, that ethics is “all relative” so there is no need to teach a course in ethics, that students’ values are already set by the time they reach the MBA level of university education, and that there is little to no value in teaching ethics.

There were varying perspectives regarding the definition of business ethics by both students and professors. Business ethics was viewed as being multidimensional, as most participating faculty and students suggested that there was not one facet that constitutes business ethics, but rather a whole range of aspects.

Variability in Perceptions of Ethics Coverage
Variability in perceptions of the integration of ethics was found to exist between professors and students, and also among some students taking the same course. The findings are presented in such a way that the perceptions between the professor of a course and the relative students are compared along with a comparison between the students themselves who have taken that particular course.

Group 1
The two students in this group had very different perceptions regarding ethics being integrated into the relative course. For example, S1-1 stated, “Theoretically I have a better understanding of ethical issues and what they entail in an organization. Practically, I’m not sure what I would do in any number of circumstances.” S1-2, on the other hand, described the “high practicality of the teachings in this course”. S1-1 indicated that the course did not address ethical business issues adequately, whereas S1-2 indicated that the related coverage was more than adequate (“It was discussed to a great extent”). These two students had similar definitions of ethics and both seemed to have a strong belief in the importance of ethics education in the curriculum. The
professor indicated that he/she mentioned ethics throughout the course and addressed it specifically in one class.

**Group 2**

P2 indicated that he/she does not integrate ethics into the course. The responses from all students seemed to support this as all students felt that coverage of ethical issues in the class was not adequate. S2-2, S2-3, and S2-4 recalled some ethical issues being brought up to a minimum extent while S2-1 did not recall these issues and/or did not consider them to be ethical issues. It is possible that the issues were not specifically brought up as ethical issues as P2 stated, “We talk about issues that are hot topics in the area of business ethics. I’m not sure that they are really issues of business ethics…” Therefore, in this case, there were issues that some students viewed as ethical in nature, but the professor did not necessarily share the same perspective.

**Group 3**

In this case, there was some discrepancy between the students’ and professor’s perception of ethics being integrated into the curriculum and also some differences among the students. P3 indicated that he/she spends one class (i.e. 3 hours) on various issues that could be considered ethical, but does not integrate it throughout the term (“integrate ethics minimally”). S3-1 recalled this particular class dealing with ethics and identified various issues that the professor had mentioned. However, S3-1 indicated that ethical issues were also brought up throughout the term (“the prof placed strong emphasis on ethics throughout the term” and “ethical coverage was adequate”). It is possible that S3-1’s definition of ethics that included “perceived accepted organizational standards” might include issues that the professor does not consider to be ethical in nature. In contrast, S3-2 did not recall ethical business issues being addressed in any particular class (“I don’t think that the course talked about ethics in business explicitly”). There is always the possibility that this student missed the class which was identified as addressing ethical issues.

**Group 4**

There appeared to be a significant discrepancy between the perceptions of the students and the professor in this case. P4 stated, “…pretty much at each stage in the course, we talk about issues of ethics…”. He/she also indicated that he/she uses a full case and presentation on ethics dealing with ethical theory, real life examples, problem resolution, and critical thinking exercises. However, the responses of the students indicated otherwise. All three students mentioned that ethical business issues were not integrated into this course. S4-2 and S4-3 indicated a particular issue that was mentioned in passing and S4-1 indicated that it was addressed at the beginning of the course. S4-2 and S4-3 indicated that ethical business issues were addressed inadequately.

S4-1 indicated that he/she might not have recognized issues addressed in the class as being ethical, but as being “common sense”. S4-3 stated that there was an ethics section that the class was supposed to cover, but it was never dealt with due to the cancellation of some classes. Therefore, it is possible that the ethical presentation, case, and related exercises were in this one class and it was never covered in that term. This would explain, to some degree, the discrepancy between perceptions. This does not explain it fully though as P4 indicated that ethics is addressed throughout the entire course. The definition of business ethics was not very different among students and professor.

One issue that was brought up by P4, S4-1, S4-2, and S4-3 during the interviews was that of plagiarism. P4 indicated that he/she emphasizes plagiarism. He/she believes that if students are not held accountable for their actions in this regard and told why such action is inappropriate then this behaviour will be carried into the workplace. All three students indicated that plagiarism was focused on in the course.
Group 5
P5 indicated that he/she does 1 or 2 cases during the course specifically dealing with ethical dilemmas and stated that these issues arise in basically all topics throughout the course. Each student indicated that ethics was addressed through cases and class discussions. As well, each student could recall specific examples that were brought up in a class in this regards. However, S5-1 felt that often ethical issues were brought up as “a side note”.

Group 6
The discrepancy between the professor’s perception of ethics being integrated into the curriculum and the impact of discussions varies from student to student in this group. P6 indicated that he/she does not explicitly refer to ethical business issues. S6-1 only recalled a brief discussion of an ethical business issue that was initiated by a student and S6-4 stated that “ethics was mentioned in a class or two, but not to any great extent”. On the other hand, S6-2 and S6-3 indicated that various ethical issues were addressed. Although S6-3 recalled specific examples of ethical issues, S6-2 could not recall the issues that arose. Also, S6-3 indicated that such considerations were “inferred” not explicitly stated. S6-1 and S6-2 mentioned that the course was very technical in nature. S6-1 and S6-4 described ethical coverage as being inadequate, while S6-2 and S6-3 indicated that coverage was adequate. S6-2 added that he/she did not believe that ethical issues needed to be included in that class because of its technical nature.

Group 7
In this case, there was also somewhat of a discrepancy between the professor’s perception of ethics being integrated into the course and the relative students’ perceptions. P7 indicated that business ethics was not integrated throughout the term of the course, but it was included as a topic outlined in the course objectives and was taught as one unit in the course. “So you know we spent probably about three hours talking about it, but it wasn’t well integrated into the rest of the course”. S7-1 indicated that ethics was not dealt with very much and S7-4 indicated that it was probably discussed, but neither student could recall an example that was dealt with in class. Both S7-2 and S7-3 indicated that they could not recall ethics being brought up in the course at all. S7-1 actually stated that “it wasn’t anything like a full class that really stuck out in my mind.” If the students missed the classes during the one week in which ethics was covered, this could explain the discrepancy. However, it is unlikely that all four students missed class the same week. Another point of interest is that P7 indicated that this particular class dealt with scenarios, ethical business dilemmas, how individuals made choices and decisions, and the values behind the dilemmas. This is in direct contrast to a statement made by S7-1 who indicated that the course did not deal with how one would make decisions in a particular business situation. It appears that although there was a unit on business ethics it was not recognized as such by the students. S7-1, S7-2, and S7-3 indicated that the coverage of ethical business situations was inadequate in this class while S7-4 indicated that it was close to adequate.

Group 8
There was some discrepancy within this group with regards to ethics being addressed in the course. P8 stated, “Although I don’t put it as a big element, I do mention this topic in the first meeting of class. Just one time.” S8-1 did recall ethics being brought up briefly in that one class, which matches the perception of the professor. He/she could not recall the context of the lecture, but did indicate that it was not “drawn up in real examples”. “It was lecture…Someone might have added a comment, but that would have been it” (S8-1). S8-2 and S8-3 did not recall ethics being addressed at anytime in the class. So although the professor’s perception of ethics being integrated into the curriculum matches that of the students in that it was not done to any
extent, even the one mention of ethics did not reach every student. It did not seem to make much of an impact as S8-2 and S8-3 could not recall it and S8-1 could not recall the context of it. All three students indicated that ethics coverage was inadequate.

**Group 9**

According to P9, a class or two was spent on business ethics and it was the focus of those classes. “It was [a] chapter, one week that was the topic” (P9). All of the relative students remembered ethics coming up at some point during the course, but felt that it was not addressed extensively. “It didn’t come up too often…” (S9-1). “We didn’t touch so much on ethical issues in the course” (S9-2). “I think it was talked about a little bit in the general lecture format of the class, but not a lot” (S9-3). As well, each student indicated that this was mainly done through cases, that is, there would be some ethical aspect in a case along with other issues and relative class discussions occurred. S9-1 recalled certain topic areas and a specific case example, S9-2 could not recall the context of the ethical discussions, and S9-3 recalled some topic areas, but not a specific case example. This matches the perception of P9 as he/she mentioned that ethical issues were one of the aspects in some cases used. All but one student felt that ethical coverage in the course was inadequate.

**Group 10**

There was some discrepancy among the students in this group and with the professor. P10 indicated that he/she addressed ethical issues “sometimes”. S10-1 and S10-3 recalled that the professor mentioned it a “little bit” with S10-1 indicating it was “once -maybe twice” during the course. S10-1 recalled one topic area in which it was mentioned. S10-3 indicated that it was done as more of an “aside”. S10-2 did not recall P10 bringing it up at all. This discrepancy is possibly due to the fact that S10-2 indicated that he/she does not “have a grasp” on business ethics and therefore may have not perceived the message conveyed by the professor. All three students recalled ethics being included in a group presentation by some of the students in the class and could also remember the context in which it was done. The presentation topic was the students’ choice, but it was chosen from among a list of topics provided by the professor. S10-1 and S10-2 indicated that ethical coverage was inadequate while S10-3 indicated that it was adequate, although he/she made the qualification that there could have been more ethical content in the course.

**Discussion and Implications**

The results of this study indicate that the students in this program are requesting ethics education as part of their business education. All but one participating student indicated that ethics has a place in the business curriculum. As well, although students were not able to view an outline of the contents of a stand-alone ethics course, the fact that more than half of the student participants felt that such a course should be mandatory implies that students are taking business ethics education seriously. However, our findings also imply that the message of ethics is either being lost or marginalized in this program. The results of our study raise several questions regarding the integration of ethics into business school curricula. First, to what extent is ethics actually being integrated into and across the curriculum? Second, why are the ethical issues that are being conveyed by professors not reaching all of the students?

We will first explore some of the possible reasons for the discrepancies between students and professors, and among students regarding ethics being integrated into a particular course. First, students and professors could have different ideas of what is and is not an ethical issue. For example, one student referred to a discussion of discrimination and to him/her there is a basic
value of human dignity at stake and he/she felt that the professor in this case was incorporating ethics into the discussion. On the other hand, one professor saw advertising to children as a controversial issue, a scientific issue, a social issue, but not necessarily an ethical issue, whereas some of the students saw this as a specific ethical issue. Also, if, as was the case here, students feel that ethics is of little value in certain courses, this could influence their perception of the integration of ethics. Some students referred to the “more technical courses” and “fundamental knowledge” as being somehow amoral and not requiring any ethical discussion.

Our findings revealed that some students are receiving the message of ethics while others are not. If professors do not explicitly indicate when they are addressing ethical issues, some students might not pick up on this inclusion. For example, one professor stated, “I don’t teach them ethics by telling them now today we are going to talk about business ethics.” In addition, one student stated that “I received those messages whether or not everyone in the class was able to receive them...” The context of an ethical issue may not be received by all students due to varying levels of maturity, language or cultural barriers, understanding of the business area, or understanding of ethics. Just as students vary in their level of maturity, cultural backgrounds, and work experience, so too do they vary in their understanding of ethics, especially when there is no common foundation established in the program as a basis for discussion. For example, one student said, “I really don’t have a grasp on this one…on business ethics.” Because some students do not have a foundation and grounding in business ethics, professors need to better explicitly set the context for ethical discussions so that all students can make the link. Although a stand-alone business ethics course could provide this, it is still beneficial to set a context for the ethical issues and decision making in each core course.

At the same time, business school faculty, like students, have different levels of ethical awareness and ethical thinking skills. Some faculty come from very technical and specialized educational backgrounds. Even with PhDs, some faculty have very little grounding in philosophy, and fewer have an educational background in ethics. As one professor commented, “…I never learned ethics when I was a student so it’s something that we will have to kind of cope with and learn what to do” (P10).

Both professors and students could also have different ideas of what integration implies. Does integration imply throughout one topic or throughout the entire course? There can be implicit vs explicit integration of ethics throughout the curriculum. In some cases, ethical issues were explicitly mentioned in course outlines and class discussions. In other cases, these issues were more implicitly covered. At first, it was surprising to see in some cases that students in the same class had significantly different views regarding the integration of ethics into a course. However, if ethics is only implicitly integrated, perhaps some students – those with stronger critical or ethical thinking skills or those having more work experiences in which they have encountered ethical dilemmas in business – will recognize an ethically-based discussion more readily than other students.

The variability between professors and students may also be partly explained by the pedagogical approach that is used by faculty members. Even when students said ethics was integrated adequately, many could not recall examples. Ethical issues are better dealt with in an experiential learning environment. Students may not see the ethical relevance of a discussion if the course is framed in a technical, passive way with little chance for students to think critically. Alternatively, if the class is more student-centered, the students can raise ethical issues and help the professor to integrate ethics into class discussions.
Another possible explanation for some of the discrepancies between professors and students might be that for various reasons professors are over-assessing the level of ethical integration in their course and/or students are under-assessing the professor’s level of integration. However, it is important to recognize the subjectivity of responses by both students and professors. Likes and dislikes and egos, among other things, could bias results. However, our research approach has overcome some of the limitations in other studies that have focused only on one perspective, of either the faculty/administration (e.g., the 2003 Imagine study) or that of the students (Byerly et al., 2002) because we matched professors and students for a specific course. Future research could look at larger samples as self-selection bias could also have been present due to the voluntary nature of the study (Zikmund, 2003). That is, students and professors with particular interest in or strong opinions about the subject at hand may have been more likely to participate in the study.

Ethics education appears to be marginalized in this MBA program. Although, nine out of ten professors indicated that they believe that ethics education has a role in the business curriculum, the degree to which it should be included varied among professors and students, as well as between professors and students. The fact that 21 out of 31 student participants stated that ethical coverage was inadequate seems to indicate that ethics is not being integrated to the extent that students perceive it should be present. Moreover, when professors do not spend the time that they initially indicate will be spent on business ethics, students perceive that the professors and/or program in general do not place much importance on business ethics. By not mentioning ethics at all or by giving little attention to the topic, professors may be inadvertently conveying the message to students that ethical business considerations are not important enough to warrant a focus in the business curriculum, or in business in general. Additionally, if professors espouse the value of ethics, but do not address ethics throughout the course, the importance of ethics will probably not reach the students.

Even if faculty are not trained or well versed in business ethics theory, they can still integrate ethics into a course (Oddo, 1997). As other scholars have suggested, simply bringing newspaper clippings to class and initiating a class discussion can help students realize that business situations are filled with complexities, ethical issues, and various viewpoints which have to be considered in order to make informed decisions (Burke & Carlson, 1998, Adams, Carley & Harris, 1998). By offering the topic as a possibility for course projects or presentations, students can take up the lead, as did one of the groups of students reported in this study. In addition, if ethics appears in the course outline, even if students miss a class they see that it is covered and legitimized as a relevant topic.

Time constraints, both in individual courses and in the program in general, was one of the most common barriers to ethics education that emerged. Some professors communicated that the amount of time available to address ethical business issues was limited due to the amount of other material that they had to cover. These perceived time constraints appear to be one of the main reasons why ethics is being marginalized in these courses. Some professors felt that they could not better integrate ethical discussions into their classes because a foundation for ethical discussion had not been laid elsewhere in the program. If ethics education is going to be integrated throughout the curriculum, it is possible that the effectiveness could be further increased if a required stand-alone business ethics course was required. We suggest that program managers, directors, and faculty members must challenge assumptions surrounding the criticality of some of the other material that is currently being prioritized in business school programs if they seriously want to include ethics in the business curriculum and communicate the importance of ethics to their students. If the program is so packed full that it does not allow for a mandatory ethics course and professors do not have the time to adequately address business ethics in their
courses, the question becomes, “does the program seriously intend on including ethics in the curriculum”? The implication is that faculty and administration must re-evaluate their educational priorities and determine where ethics education lies in their list of priorities. Finally, it appear that resources have to be allocated to teach the teachers how to better integrate ethics into their courses.

References


