Implementing a Required Ethics Class for Students in Accounting: The Texas Experience

*Issues in Accounting Education (February 2008)*

**OBJECTIVE:**

This paper presents a triangulated study of (1) syllabi of courses on the Texas State Board of Public Accountancy’s (TSBPA) approved list as of January 2006; (2) two follow-up surveys of course instructors and (3) unstructured interviews of selected members and staff of the TSBPA. The purpose of this study is to gather information concerning the content and pedagogy in college and university ethics courses for the CPA exam in Texas.

**METHODS USED:**

A 29-item survey for ethics instructors inquiring about their experiences with the ethics course was prepared. Based on the feedback received by these instructors, a revised survey was placed on a web server and emailed to 68 instructors listed by the board. A 53% response rate was achieved.

**KEY FINDINGS:**

- 53% of the ethics courses are taught by the accountancy department while 44% are taught by business departments outside accountancy.
- 97% of the courses taught by the accountancy department and 75% of those taught by the business department use a mixed-model approach while teaching business ethics.
- Examinations account for an average of 41% of the grade. Case analysis takes up 18% of the grade. 16% of the course grade depends on student papers and essays. Student participation takes up 14% of the grade.
- On a scale of 1 to 10, instructors reported a mean of 8.5 regarding their enthusiasm to teach the course.
- 72% of the respondents indicated that they had volunteered to teach the course.
- On a scale of 1 to 5, instructors gave a mean approval of 4.2 to group case studies followed by individual case studies and team presentations.
- 22% of the respondents believe that a separate course was the best way to teach ethics while 60% indicated that both a separate course and an integrated approach across the curriculum would work best.
- 57% favor housing the ethics course for accountancy majors within the accounting department while 27% feel it would be best to house such a course in the business school outside accounting.
- 64% agree/strongly agree that a separate ethics course for future CPA examination candidates is a good idea. 17% disagreed with this.
- 76% of the respondents feel that there is a 50-50 chance that their course will help prevent future unethical conduct.
- The Brooks text *Business and Professional Ethics for Directors, Executives and Accountants* was the most widely used book for the ethics courses.
39% of the respondents indicated that they have had no formal training or education related to ethics. 30% indicated six semester hours or fewer.

CONCLUSION:

The results indicate that the board as well as individual instructors have learned quite a lot about teaching ethics that could be replicated in other states. A vast majority of instructors use the mixed-model approach and nearly half of the approved courses are hosted outside of accounting departments, despite the fact that a majority of the respondents feel that the accounting department should host such courses.

Continued research and discussion about appropriate content and pedagogical methods should continue. Furthermore, future research should explore ways to measure the relative efficacy of different approaches in impacting ethical behavior. Also the commitment and enthusiasm of instructors counts a lot towards students who enroll in such ethics courses.

LINKS:

Full Survey/Study Document