



Special Issue: The Stand Alone Course in Business Ethics

Norman Bowie

University of Minnesota

Introduction

A choice that every business school must face is whether to include a stand alone business ethics course in its core curriculum. Two years of uninterrupted corporate ethics scandals have given new urgency to this question in the United States. A vigorous debate has developed in that country over whether business school accreditation should be conditional on requiring a business ethics course. This provides an excellent opportunity to take a fresh look at an old issue. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), which provides accreditation for business schools, has recently been reexamining the requirements for accreditation with special attention to business ethics. To date the AACSB has refused to require a stand alone course in business ethics but has reaffirmed its commitment to a requirement that business students be exposed to business ethics. The AACSB's position has been strongly criticized by prominent members of the Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management and the Society for Business Ethics. This special issue of the JBEE represents our effort to promote dialogue around this important matter.

The person who took the lead in challenging the AACSB to do more with respect to specific requirement for business ethics is Duane Windsor of Rice University's Graduate School of Management. This special issue begins with Professor Windsor's extended argument for a required foundation course in the moral, legal and political foundations of business. It should be noted at the outset that Professor Windsor is arguing for something much more than a narrowly defined course in business ethics. The Social Issues in Management Division of the Academy of Management has always focused on the broader context in which business operated and Professor Windsor remains true to that tradition in calling for a required course that addresses moral, legal and political education for future business managers. In making his case Professor Windsor is asking for a requirement for both undergraduates and graduates, that the course should come

at the beginning of a student's career, that it should be taught by specialists in the field, and that this required foundation course should be followed by "systematic infusion of the subject matters throughout the rest of the curriculum-core and electives". Professor Windsor's contribution includes specific suggestions for what should be included in such a course and provides examples of best practices.

Professor Windsor's article is extended and elaborated upon by Professors Laura Hartman and Edwin Hartman. They provide a detailed history of the recent controversy between the AACSB and its critics. In particular they challenge the argument of the AACSB that it does not require other specific free standing courses—in finance for example. As they point out the AACSB does not do this because it does not have to. Finance is essential. People have not seen business ethics as essential and that is why a required course is necessary.

Making the theoretical argument for a stand alone course in one thing. Getting such a course required in a business school in something else. In her article Professor Deborah Cohen makes a convincing case that it is the business school dean who must provide the leadership here. If he or she does not, getting a required foundational business ethics course simply will not happen—whatever the theoretical arguments on its behalf.

Should we succeed in getting a required stand alone business ethics course, what would it look like? There are, of course, several such courses in American business schools at present. The University of Minnesota has had such a course since the 1980s. Professor Heidi von Hoivik of the Norwegian School of Management describes her mandatory course on ethics and leadership. Significantly, Professor Hoivik has done extensive follow-up to see what effect her course has had on those business leaders who took it. Her questionnaire and the results are included in her article.

Finally, Professor Wayne Norman of the University of Montreal looks at foundationalism in a different way. He describes a University of British Columbia MBA core that has an ethicist as a full member of an interdisciplinary team. Professor Norman is addressing the issue of how ethics can be integrated into the core curriculum. The common argument against such an approach is that business professors in the functional core have neither the interest nor the training to consider ethical issues. However, by having an ethicist as a full member of the core curriculum team specifically responsible for delivering a significant ethics component in the core, this objection can be overcome. Professor Norman provides a list of advantages to this approach and a rich description of the actual process.

There is much more that can be said about requirements for a foundation in business ethics to be a business school requirement. We hope the articles in this special issue will stimulate further discussion and research.