

DAILY PRACTICE

Ethics in Leadership

PART 2

Readers who begin this series with Part 2, may catch up by reading [Part 1](#).

Commonplace Decisions

Cheating on tests and plagiarism are commonplace student decisions that injure the ethical culture of a school and may signal future misconduct as professionals. “Various studies suggest that we may be at the precipice of a culture of academic malfeasance, where a large number of students engage in various forms of cheating.” (Burke, Polimeni, and Slavin) Regardless of whether Burke et al overstate the facts, student misconduct is the most frequently discussed injuries to a school’s ethical culture. Rarely discussed is that deans and faculty can just as easily injure a college even if they claim to act for the best interests of students.

Deans and faculty are ever vigilant seeking educational opportunities for their students. A commonplace opportunity is to effect agreements with news organizations to provide students with current business information. A few years ago, Dean Harold Doty led the College of Business at the University of Southern Mississippi to require its students to purchase the Wall Street Journal. A good idea at first blush. And, Dean Doty was hardly alone. Many schools, and tens of thousands of students, participate in the Wall Street Journal Academic Partnership Program (WSJAPP)¹ or similar news products.

“Helping Students Heighten Their Moral Reasoning Abilities”

On the first day of class, I followed the routine of reviewing a course syllabus. When I reached the statement describing the College’s participation in the WSJAPP, students began grumbling. Curious, I asked, “What’s up?”

A student responded with her own question: “Why are we paying for something that we don’t use in class?” Others either chimed in with similar sentiments or vigorously nodded agreement. Since that was the second semester of participation in the news program, students had strong opinions and none of them seemed positive.

Given the unanimous dissatisfaction of costs without perceived educational benefits, it occurred to me that my students might be interested in assessing the decision—a relevant topic for the management accounting class. I knew a few details and thought a cost-benefit study was an opportunity to encourage them to support their beliefs with evidence instead of merely complaining about a perceived injustice.

My assumptions were that students would learn the reasons for requiring them to purchase the Wall Street Journal, that the benefits outweighed the costs, and that the faculty and administration did the right thing. These thoughts converged with a notion I had read in *Ethics Education in Business Schools* published by our accrediting agency, the AACSB:

“A particularly useful exercise in helping students heighten their moral reasoning abilities is to ask students to reflect on ethical decisions from their own experience and to analyze them using multiple perspectives. Throughout this exercise, it is especially critical for students to be fully engaged in these processes so that they aren’t simply mastering facts or theories...”

...to be fully engaged...

As a starting point for my students’ cost-benefit study, I assigned questions that, among other things, required a search of public information about the Wall Street Journal. It is one of the most respected sources of news and I wanted to make sure they understood its reputation. Students were also free to direct the investigation by asking, and seeking answers to, questions of interest to them. This was not an assignment with a well-defined beginning and end or predetermined answer, but was free flowing just as a professional might have questions about an issue of interest and seek facts and evidence. As it turned out, the case study took longer than I anticipated. Nevertheless, at the outset, since colleagues were involved in the decision to require all students to buy the Wall Street Journal, I advised the faculty and administrators about the cost-benefit study and asked for their suggestions.

“... from their own experience . . .”

One of the first items students identified was a public relations report posted on the College’s webpage. The public relations report claimed that “[s]tudents have been extremely receptive,” and “[i]t [the WSJ] has proven to be really successful.” My students said that they didn’t know who the author talked to, but it wasn’t them and it wasn’t anyone they knew. However, I was surprised when their dissatisfaction focused on the origin of the College’s participation in the WSJAPP. According to the College’s public relations report, our previous dean, Bill Gunther, who was visiting another school, observed a kiosk filled with Wall Street Journals and reported, “Now that’s what a business school should look like.” Students appeared united by a peer’s comment: “We’re paying good money for the WSJ we don’t read so administrators can brag about *looking* like a business school?”

Emotions were running high, so I reminded them that they needed to “use multiple perspectives” to analyze the decision, rather than focusing on their feelings. I instructed them to provide reasons and evidence that could be subjected to verification, public review, and opportunities for rebuttal by the decision-makers. Furthermore, during the ongoing cost-benefit case study, I assigned relevant reports from the WSJ to compliment topics covered in their textbook and included them in class discussions and on exams.

“Now that’s what a business school should look like.”

After Bill Gunther observed the kiosk at another school, a committee was formed with instructions to contact representatives of the WSJ. An email from the Committee Chairman, George Carter, updating the faculty, which I provided to the students, recounted that the

committee members compared the Wall Street Journal at \$19 per semester to alternatives that were “quite a bit more expensive.” Few details were given but students learned of an alternative program offered by the same news organization, a voluntary subscription that cost \$29.95 per semester. The Chairman Carter also neglected in his update that students could read the Wall Street Journal at the library, which was less than a block from the College. At the end of the Chairman Carter’s tedious email, students noticed a condition: free annual subscriptions are given to each faculty member, if the College requires all business majors to buy the \$19 option of the Wall Street Journal.

Students deduced a variety of conclusions from the facts they had discovered. A few students observed that the Committee’s focus was on unit cost and seemed to give only a partial picture—an individual student, per semester cost—much like a vendor marketing a monthly payment for consumer debt without revealing total payout. So, they searched the school’s website and identified the number of business College students. They then had sufficient information to calculate the total student cost of approximately \$58,000 per year. Additionally, a list of faculty found on the College’s website, and the retail subscription price found in a Wall Street Journal advertisement, allowed students to calculate total annual faculty cost savings of approximately \$14,000.