

Chapter 17

Creating a Sustainable Program for Ethics in Student Affairs: A Look at Climate, Assessment, and Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Ethics is an important thread within higher education student affairs. Creating avenues for intentional, sustainable dialogues and consistent education for employees, one Ethics Officer at a four-year public university in the Northwest embarked on understanding the ethical climate to improve how student affairs professionals interact with students. The goal of this mixed-method design study examined the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of its division administrators about ethics, the ethical climate of a university student affairs division, and the design of an ethical training curriculum for division employees. This chapter reviews the current literature about ethics in higher education, organizational ethical climates, industry standards, and gaps in performance, while providing insights and ideas about best practices.

INTRODUCTION

The economic downturn has affected every sector of the economy, and because of current economic pressures from state budget shortfalls, there are new demands for state colleges and universities to do more with fewer resources. Accordingly, the

current economic environment warrants public universities to demonstrate their value and integrity to the public. In an effort to work within the constraints of the new rules, one university in the Northwest designated an administrative position within the Student Affairs division as *Ethics Officer*, to ensure awareness and adherence to laws,

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professional standards and policies; with a particular focus on the development and empowerment of top administrators of the division.

The state for this study requires that all state employees are subject to the *Ethics in Public Service Act* (Chapter 42.52 RCW), which covers how state employees should conduct themselves ethically during business hours. Additionally, many professions have their own professional standards and code of ethics, which are also expected to be followed by professionals. It is important for professionals to understand that “the formal codes of the profession and the standards of the field that guide our work as educators is a critical part of ethical decision making” (Hornack, 2009, p. 56). Equally important to formal codes and standards is the thorough understanding of each individual personal code of ethics and standards of practice. “Understanding of institutional mission and values is important” (Hornack, 2009, p. 56). All three components are paramount and intersect when making ethical decisions in practice.

Universities, like other agencies in the public eye, are accountable to the public for stewardship of resources, experiences of students, quality of the academy, and good citizenship. It is important to practice good, ethical, decision-making; appropriate and caring treatment of others; and good leadership. For individuals working in student affairs, ethical decision-making is foundational to daily work with students.

This goal of this chapter is to examine the knowledge, skills, and attitudes of the university’s division administrators about ethics; the ethical climate of a university student affairs division; and design an ethical training curriculum for division employees. This chapter will review the current literature about ethics in higher education, organizational ethical climates, assess industry standards, and identify gaps in performance, while providing insights and ideas about best practices. The multi-part, mixed-method design study resulted in new curriculum of a three-hour

employee ethics workshop designed to educate, empower, promote dialogue and add sustainability to ethics within the division.

BACKGROUND

Ethics and Student Affairs

College students are a valuable resource and their education is important for society. Caring for their learning and the environment in which they learn is an important task. Student affairs work, which tends to the needs of college students in an abundance of ways outside the classroom, is foundational to the mission of educating the next generations. Student affairs professionals administer housing, imminent medical and mental health needs, financial aid, academic advising, student activities and governance, and a myriad of other co-curricular programs and services essential to college life. Assuring that these services and programs are provided sensitively, with thoughtfulness and integrity makes for a learning experience that promotes student development.

Importance of Ethics and Ethical Climates

Studies propose that ethical climate and ethical behaviors of employees are related. According to Peterson (2002), there is a connection between the ethical climate of an organization and unethical behaviors. Organizations that have a code of ethics are in a better position than those who do not when it comes to internal ethical behaviors. Additionally, supervisors and administrators are able to affect the ethical climate of organizations, where unethical behaviors may be prevalent (Peterson, 2002).

Martin and Cullen (2006) state, “more than ever before, firms must provide evidence of their adherence to ethical principles and guidelines” (p. 175). Ethics involve what ‘professionals know’ and what ‘professionals do’ as they make deci-

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