

2012

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### Recommended Citation

Williams, H. James Ph.D. (2012) "Student Codes of Honor: Part of the Solution?," *Seidman Business Review*: Vol. 18: Iss. 1, Article 9.  
Available at: <http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/sbr/vol18/iss1/9>

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# Student Codes of Honor: Part of the Solution?

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In last year's edition of the *Seidman Business Review*, Williams [2010] shared perspectives on the state of affairs regarding business schools' perspectives on business ethics, including the levels of responsibility and accountability society should expect, given the limited level of "control" business programs have over the development of their students' ethical behavior. In the final analysis, Williams [2010] posits that business schools have appreciably more control over their environments and, therefore, are responsible for and should be accountable for creating appropriate cultures of ethics, so that students can begin to live—while they are students—the exercise of ethics society expects of them when they become business professionals.

In addressing the issue of responsibility of business schools regarding business ethics, Williams [2010] provides data that reflect that Michigan's state-assisted business schools<sup>2</sup>—as well as West Michigan Colleges and Universities—have done outstanding jobs of creating ethics courses and embedding ethics in other courses to create and enhance appropriate environments for students to learn and experience ethical business behavior.<sup>3</sup>

This paper addresses another aspect of the measures business schools are implementing to address the issue of creating environments to foster and promote ethical conduct on the parts of their students. Specifically, it seeks to flesh out the issue of codes of academic integrity and student honor codes in business schools at Michigan's state-assisted colleges and universities, as well as at West Michigan's colleges and universities. While the paper also provides a retrospective of one business school's students' grand success in creating a student honor code, it ultimately, at least effectively, asks whether student honor codes might be part of the solution.

## Codes of Academic Integrity

Academic integrity is the broad, general moral code of academia, including values of maintaining academic standards and, thus, avoiding instances of academic dishonesty, including cheating and plagiarism. The concept applies to both faculty and students. As such, virtually every institution of higher education has some explicit version of a code of academic integrity, at least for students. In fact, every college and university

surveyed to support this study (see Table 1, below) includes some version of a university-level student code of academic integrity. Typically, these student codes include a provision prohibiting academic dishonesty and providing sanctions (from failing of individual assignments to failing of courses) for those found guilty of the offenses. In fact, most academic integrity codes allow, in appropriate circumstances, for expulsions of students determined to be guilty of such offenses. These codes begin to establish a culture that promotes ethical conduct and behavior, at least as they relate to academic aspects of students' lives—including, of course, business students.

Unfortunately, those university-level student integrity codes rarely receive much attention by students, except, of course, the relatively few students who happen to become subject to them. Moreover, since these codes also rarely include a reporting provision to alert other students to violations and punishments, they often fail the broader potential to discourage future violations.

Academic integrity policies are typically created, maintained, and enforced by college and university administrators. On the other hand, *student honor codes* are typically created, maintained, and adjudicated by students. Research shows that when students play significant roles in developing and implementing honor codes they acquire a sense of ownership that makes the codes more real and tangible and that "peer pressure" causes their classmates to pay more attention to the code; this usually results in students exercising more ethical conduct. Indeed, according to Dr. Don McCabe,<sup>4</sup> an authority on academic integrity, serious cheating on both tests and written assignments occurs much less frequently in schools where *student honor codes* exist.

## Honor Codes

Two basic types of student honor codes exist: the traditional honor code, which often governs non-academic behavior, and the modified honor code, which usually focuses on addressing academic infractions and on education about academic integrity. The traditional honor code is usually characterized by three or more of the following: (1) student initiated and operated; (2) students handle all aspects of enforcement; (3) suspension or expulsion is typically the penalty for every infraction; (4)

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this article "Business School" and "School" are used generically, to include all incarnations of academic business programs at colleges and universities, whether clusters of faculty, departments, schools, or colleges.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, the Table in Williams [2011] should be updated to reflect that Michigan State University's Broad College of Business later reported that it offers two stand-alone ethics courses, as well as the courses in which ethics is embedded.

<sup>3</sup> The Williams [2011] Table 2 should also be updated to note that, since last year's publication, Baker College's School of Business reported that it offers one stand-alone business ethics course and discusses ethics in virtually all its business courses.

<sup>4</sup> Dr. Don McCabe is a Professor of Management and Global Business at Rutgers University. Over the last seventeen years he has done extensive research on college cheating, surveying over 150,000 students at more than 150 colleges and universities in the U.S. and Canada. He has also surveyed over 40,000 high school students in the United States during the last six years. His work has been published widely in business, education and sociology journals and he is founding president of the Center for Academic Integrity, a consortium of over 350 colleges and universities based at Clemson University who are joined in a united effort to promote academic integrity among college and university students. ([http://www.usma.edu/uscc/scpme/ncea/old%20ncea%20sites/2008\\_site/2008\\_Speakers/mccabe.html](http://www.usma.edu/uscc/scpme/ncea/old%20ncea%20sites/2008_site/2008_Speakers/mccabe.html).)

requires students to report violations; (5) requires a signed pledge for every graded assignment; (6) and each student must pass an honor code test or receive education about the code. [Dodd, 2010] The modified honor code, a more recent innovation, on the other hand, is often characterized by many of the following elements: (1) initiated and operated in a shared fashion among students, faculty, and administrators; (2) students usually possess the majority representation on adjudication panels; (3) faculty usually handle first offenses, and must report violations to administrators; (4) subsequent violations are considered by panels that include students and usually result in more severe punishments (often either suspension or expulsion); and (5) usually “requires” students to report violations, but with no penalties for failures to do so. [Dodd, 2010]

Irrespective of the type of honor code in effect, research supports the notion that serious test cheating and cheating on written assignments happen much less frequently on campuses with honor codes than on those campuses that have no honor codes. [McCabe, April 2002 and June 2002] Indeed, the impact of honor codes, both traditional and modified, is surprisingly strong on many campuses, suggesting that an ethical appeal to students—rooted in a sense of community responsibility—can help reduce cheating. [McCabe, April 2002] Unfortunately, however, among more than 4,000 institutions of higher education in the United States, fewer than 300 report having honor codes, of either type, at the university level, let alone at the business-school level. [Dodd, 2010] The apparent effectiveness of student honor codes and the desires of business schools to create environments of ethics and corporate social responsibility beg questions regarding the number of Michigan business schools that either have implemented or plan to implement student honor codes.

A survey of the 15 State-assisted universities across Michigan and eight West Michigan colleges and universities (see Table 1) revealed that 50 percent of the business schools responding<sup>5</sup> have implemented student honor codes (see Table 2). (That represents more than 36 percent of all the business units surveyed, including those that failed to respond.) These separate student honor codes provide additional guidance for business students, in addition to the university-level student codes of academic integrity. Moreover, the respondents indicated that the earliest of these separate honor codes was implemented during 2006. These business schools are to be applauded for their movement in a right direction.

In addition, “Students ... should play a major role in [honor code] ... development and implementation.” [McCabe, 2002, p. 38] In fact, the evidence also suggests that where students play a major role in creating honor codes, the codes are much more likely to create positive peer pressures and, thus, have a positive impact on the culture of ethics and appropriate conduct in the academic community. Table 3 suggests that Michigan business

schools understand the importance of student participation, revealing that 75 percent (12.5% plus 62.5%) of the responding schools reported that code development included student participation.<sup>6</sup> In fact, one School indicated that students developed the student honor code. That respondent, Grand Valley State University’s Seidman College of Business, self-identified and agreed to allow a retrospective of its student-created *Student Code of Honor*, (see Exhibit 1, below) ratified by the Seidman College of Business faculty on April 15, 2011.

**Table 1: Colleges and Universities Surveyed**

State-Assisted University	West Michigan College/University
Central Michigan University	Aquinas College
Eastern Michigan University	Baker College
Ferris State University	Calvin College
Grand Valley State University	Cornerstone University
Lake Superior State University	Davenport University
Michigan State University	Grand Rapids Community College
Michigan Technological University	Grand Valley State University
Northern Michigan University	Hope College
Oakland University	
Saginaw Valley State University	
University of Michigan – Ann Arbor	
University of Michigan – Flint	
University of Michigan-Dearborn	
Wayne State University	
Western Michigan University	

**Table 2: Business Schools with Separate Honor Codes**

Option	Number	Percentage
Yes	8	50%
No	8	50%
Total	16	100%

**Table 3: Primary Developers of Student Codes**

Option	Number	Percentage
Faculty	2	25%
Students	1	12.5%
Both Faculty and Students	5	62.5%
Total	8	100%

<sup>5</sup>Sixteen of the 22 business schools surveyed responded, resulting in a 73 percent response rate.

<sup>6</sup>While there was no requested reporting of the significance of student participation in the processes, the assumption is that student participation was very important to the process.

## Anatomy of the Creation of a Student Code of Honor

Grand Valley State University has a *Student Code* that, while being updated appropriately over the years, has been in place for its 50 years of existence. In addition, since the 2000–2001 academic year, the Seidman College of Business faculty routinely includes a reference to the University’s academic integrity policy in every syllabus, for every course, in an effort to increase student awareness and sensitivity to the issues of academic integrity and to emphasize that it is a priority for both the College of Business and for the University.

The College’s Business Ethics Center, which was created in 1997, has as its mission “to examine the role and influence of business in public life, to promote inquiry into ethical business practices and education, and to be a leading resource for business persons, students, faculty, and administrators who seek to understand the relationship between business, the common good, and a life well-lived.” Over the years, it has served both external constituents and faculty, staff, and students, encouraging and supporting the faculty’s rising concern with trying to create an appropriate environment and College of Business culture that prioritizes integrity and helps students become better equipped to move into the professional world with a firm understanding of, and commitment to, ethical business conduct.

A few years ago, a senior Accounting faculty member, with military experience, suggested that the College consider creating an honor code for students. He, effectively, challenged both the Dean’s Undergraduate and Graduate Student Advisory Boards<sup>7</sup> to begin a blog regarding the issue, to ascertain student sentiment regarding a Seidman College of Business honor code. These student groups concluded that a significant number of the College’s approximately 3,400 students (3,000 undergraduates and 400 graduate students) supported further exploration of the honor code concept. In fact, the student advisory groups brought the issue to the Dean as an item they wanted to pursue.

The Dean, who supported the notion passionately from the outset, agreed to facilitate the students’ considering an honor code, insisting that they, first, develop an appropriate understanding of honor codes and their potential impacts on students’ conduct and on the cultures of academic environments. The Director of the Business Ethics Center and the Dean’s Executive Committee (comprised of the College’s leadership team of department chairpersons, associate dean, and directors) agreed that the College should support the students’ leadership efforts.

At the end of the 2009 Fall Semester, the Dean sanctioned two independent-study courses (one graduate and one undergraduate) to allow small groups of students to collaborate in studying honor codes and planning a process for moving

forward the project.<sup>8</sup> The Director of the Business Ethics Center, a Philosophy Professor and long-time business consultant on business ethics, served as the faculty-member-of-record for the courses.<sup>9</sup> The Director facilitated the students’ code-development process: how to approach the project, including how to educate themselves about honor codes, how to communicate to, and receive input from, the College’s 3,400 students, how to best secure the Seidman College of Business faculty’s support, how to assure it satisfies legal standards, and how to have the honor code articulate with and support the University’s overarching *Student Code*.

The student leaders enrolled in the one-credit-hour courses,<sup>10</sup> which met only during the evening hours during each of three semesters, beginning with the 2010 Winter Semester. During the 2010 Winter Semester, the students researched and discussed honor codes and their effectiveness and began drafting the code; they invited the Dean to discuss what they had learned and the conclusions they reached. Very importantly, the students presented their idea of developing the honor code to the College’s Faculty Senate, securing approval to move forward with the process.

During the 2010 Fall Semester, the group continued fine-tuning the code, per se, and began developing the supporting processes, including assuring that the enforcement process articulates with the University’s *Student Code* adjudication process. The students presented their proposals to appropriate University administrators, including the Dean of Students and Legal Counsel. During the semester, the students hosted a number of Town Hall meetings and other meetings for students to discuss the code and its development. After appropriate education, the students conducted a student approval vote, via email: 88.75 percent of the Seidman undergraduate and graduate students who cast votes<sup>11</sup> supported the implementation of the *Seidman Student Code Of Honor*.

The students presented what they considered a finished product to the Faculty Senate during December of the 2010 Fall Semester, in anticipation of a ratification policy vote. The faculty, indeed, applauded the students’ work. On the other hand, individual faculty members challenged the aspirational aspects of the Code, noting that they could not realistically be enforced (e.g., the Code’s provision to “strive for continuous self-improvement”). The Faculty asked the students to re-think some of the aspirational aspects of the Code and, then, to present it again during the 2011 Winter Semester.

On April 15, 2011, the students presented a slightly revised final version of the Student Code of Honor. In response to the renewed challenges to their having retained the aspirational aspects, the student representative noted that the students

<sup>7</sup> The Dean’s Undergraduate Student Advisory Board and Graduate Student Advisory Board, in existence for eight years, are groups of approximately 17 and 14 students, respectively, who provide advice and counsel to the Dean regarding student issues in the Seidman College of Business. They also serve as “Ambassadors” for the Dean’s Office with respect to the respective student populations.

<sup>8</sup> During the three semesters of the project a total of 13 students participated in the courses, but never more than seven during any single semester.

<sup>9</sup> Two accounting faculty members also served as reference sources as the students required their input.

<sup>10</sup> The courses, of course, satisfied the different academic standards and expectations for graduate and undergraduate students, respectively.

<sup>11</sup> Unfortunately, only slightly more than 14% of the students cast votes.

## Exhibit 1: Seidman College Student Code of Honor

### SEIDMAN COLLEGE OF BUSINESS Student Code of Honor

The principles of truth and honesty are recognized as fundamental to a community of teachers and scholars. As such, the Seidman College of Business expects both faculty and students to honor these principles and, in so doing, to forge a lifelong commitment to ethical behavior.

To uphold and promote the highest standards of behavior in the academic and professional world, I hereby make the following pledge.

As a member of the Seidman College of Business, I shall

- conduct myself with the highest level of integrity,
- maintain accountability for my actions and encourage the same of others, and
- be open, fair, trustworthy and honest.

Additionally, I will strive for

- continuous self-improvement,
- intellectual engagement,
- global perspective, and
- advancement of sustainable business practices.

I shall not

lie, cheat, steal, or plagiarize.

I recognize that compliance with this Student Code, established by Grand Valley State University business students, is the minimum standard that must be followed to maintain good standing as a member of the Seidman College of Business. As a member of this organization, I will strive to reach levels of excellence that will serve as benchmarks of ethics and performance in the academic and business communities.



understand that the aspirational aspects defy enforcement, at least per se, and at least by “other” parties; nonetheless, the students think it is important that the Code include the aspirational aspects so that they can challenge themselves and each other to accept personal accountability to strive for the achievement of those aspirational goals. The faculty applauded their work, their commitment, and some even applauded their insistence on retaining the aspirational aspects of the Code! Indeed, on April 15, 2011, the faculty approved the ratification policy, which concludes with the following quote:

“As faculty members of the Seidman College of Business, we pledge to model standards of excellence in academic integrity and honor and to hold students responsible and accountable for upholding the Seidman College of Business Student Code of Honor. Therefore, we pledge to enforce the Student Code of Honor, in accordance with the boundaries of the existing *Grand Valley State University Student Code*.” [Vegter, 2001, p. 5]

In the final analysis, and in accordance with best practices, the new *Seidman College of Business Student Code of Honor*

reflects significant student leadership (in its development, implementation, and enforcement), speaks to consensus institutional values of integrity and social responsibility, includes appropriate proscriptions and ideals, assures fair and consistent adjudication, and requires central recordkeeping and reporting to the students. [Dodd, 2010] Moreover, the actual document includes definitions of terms included in the Code, an incident-reporting-and-enforcement process, the Faculty’s approved “Student Code of Honor Policy,” and an important message provided by the President of the University:

“As President of Grand Valley State University, it is my distinct pleasure to recognize and congratulate the students in the Seidman College of Business for creating and adopting their own moral educational compass in the form of this *Student Code of Honor*. I trust it will help them shape their lives, their professions, and their societies.

Please join me in applauding this special effort. This action will only enhance the current atmosphere that promotes intellectual character for our entire university community.” [Vegter, 2011, p. 1]

Of course, as McCabe correctly points out, “ [ultimate] success depends on getting students to accept responsibility for academic integrity, both their own and that of their peers. They do not necessarily have to monitor and report on their peers, but they do have to help create and sustain an environment where most students view cheating as socially unacceptable.” [McCabe, April 2002, p. 40] Student leadership in the Seidman College of Business vows to continue and to enhance that culture—with the *Seidman College of Business Student Code of Honor* as the cornerstone.

### Conclusion

Williams [2011] concluded by noting that, since Business schools have a very limited level of “control” over the values their students bring with them as well as over any positive values students may inculcate during their matriculations, business schools should focus on creating academic environments that provide opportunities for students to learn about ethics and to practice exercising their moral values. This limited study suggests that, across the State of Michigan and in this West Michigan community, business schools are moving the ball forward by implementing and reinvigorating separate student honor codes, which, in turn, encourage increased dialogue among faculty, staff, and students about ethical business conduct and communicates to students that integrity is a priority for the business schools and their universities. Honor codes may, in fact, prove to be part of the solution. Perhaps, then, business-student graduates may become even more resilient and less tolerant of unethical business conduct when they enter the work force. Enhancing the culture of integrity in business schools may provide even more; indeed, “...the greatest benefit of a culture of integrity may not be reduced student cheating ... it may be the lifelong benefit of learning the value of living in a community of trust.” [McCabe, April 2002, p. 41] ■



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