THE ETHICAL DILEMMAS OF COMMUNICATING A UNIVERSITY’S JOB PLACEMENT RATE: LEGAL OBLIGATION OR MORAL RESPONSIBILITY?

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to investigate one area of ethical concern in higher education, specifically, the reporting of job placement rates. The research discovered such dramatic variations in the way job placement rates were calculated and reported that most job placement data become suspect. The ethical concerns of reporting job placement data are discussed in relationship to institutional policies and practices and student expectations.

INTRODUCTION

Ethical practices in higher education — at least on the surface, appear to be at the forefront of current professional dialogue. In the February 14, 1990 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, the chancellor of Southern Illinois University proclaimed that “ethics” may be replacing “assessment” as the priority for those who want to attract attention in higher education. By March 7, 1990, in The Chronicle of Higher Education, an education professor at Wayne State University pointed out that academics are more than willing to study ethical dilemmas of other professions, but self-examination is not as forthcoming. By July 11, 1990, The Chronicle of Higher Education was reporting that the morality of presidents, provost, and deans sets the institution’s ethical tone, all the while acknowledging the alleged academic ethical violations of accepting pay-offs, nepotism with pay raises, and sexual relations with students (Rothberg, 1990).

Proceed forward twelve years to the July 3, 2002 issue of The Chronicle Daily News that exclaims “a majority of college students graduate without learning to distinguish between right and wrong.” Students apparently are taught that “what is right or wrong depends on the differences in individual values and cultural diversity.” A follow-up or “point of view” article by De Russy (2003) appearing in the September 19, 2003 issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education suggests that higher education officials are renewing their emphasis in building ethical values in students by examining the ethical standards and integrity of the academy itself.

For many years, higher education has concerned itself with building character, establishing honor codes, and developing policies of academic integrity. The best example of this can be found in Templeton’s Guide to Colleges that encourages character development (1999). The John Templeton Foundation praises institutions for establishing programs that develop the ethical practices involved in developing students’ character. It is predicated on the student’s moral development. Yet, given this brief overview of what universities are providing for students—honor codes, alcohol awareness programs, freshman year experiences—the ethical challenges in higher education are beginning to shift away from the student, and onto the institution.

BACKGROUND

The book, Academic Ethics, by Hamilton (2002) describes how higher education officials and their entrusted professionals should agree to maintain high standards, restrain self-interest, and promote public service. Candace De Russy, (2003), cites several examples of behaviors that academe members should avoid—showing favoritism, improper use of funds, personal plagiarism and inappropriate sexual liaisons, for example. De Russy extended her concept of ethical behavior to include the responsibilities of the board of trustees. Specifically, De Russy stressed that the trustees should make
ethics a living tradition. However, with all this newfound emphasis on the policies and practices of ethical institutions, why the continued plethora of “ethical” research involving student behavior?

McCabe, et al. (2001) reviewed a decade of research on cheating in academic institutions. The author concluded that several forms of cheating have continued to increase over the past ten years, perpetuating an ominous trend that has intensified over the past thirty-years. Whitley and Keith-Spiegel (2001) agreed in principle with the previous issues related to the student research on academic integrity. They stress the need to develop a campus-wide ethos that encourages ethical practice by focusing on integrity. The research has continued and there are now thousands of articles or essays on ethical character issues and integrity development for students. However, there remains a paucity of research on the ethical practices of administrators employed in institutions of higher education. This helps to explain why in the July 11, 2003, issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, Jon W. Fuller, a 30 year advocate for private colleges and senior fellow at the National Association of Independent Colleges and Universities opines there “is a higher level of mistrust of higher education than I have ever witnessed.”

PROBLEM

The purpose of this research is to examine one area that should be a priority to university officials interested in securing and maintaining the public trust. Specifically, this research will focus on the published employment rates of recent college graduates. This pertinent piece of data is used in marketing and is quite often one of the first questions asked by parents and students alike when exploring college choice. In fact, this information is required by educational law to be reported. Moreover, there are sections within the law that describe how the job placement rates can be misrepresented (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

This “mundane” topic was chosen to illustrate how ethical dilemmas, no matter how small or trivial, can manifest themselves in the policies and procedures carried out by university officials. Since most institutions voluntarily report employment data or “placement rates” and others are mandated by federal statute, i.e., they accept federal monies, there should be no ethical problems, dilemmas, concerns or conflicts related to reporting. Moreover, published “placement rates” not only appear with a high degree of frequency in marketing brochures and university Web Sites, but they also appear in the professional literature. Baldwin (2000) reported on the departmental placement rates of a community college in Florida. In addition, Seppanen (1994) reported to the Washington State Board for Community and Technical Colleges the published job-related outcomes for graduates. The policy to report placement rates for some colleges may even be driven by internal mandates. Strict guidelines are established that set “appropriate” job placement rates, as in the example of South Texas Community College, which requires a standard of 85% placement rate of all graduates.

This renewed and intensified internal and external emphasis on job placement rates following graduation necessitates a focus on two general research questions. First, are university officials publishing their job placement data, and second, are university officials publishing the same data as it relates to job placement? Of critical interest is the collection and analysis of job placement data. Specifically, five questions or issues of concern are examined:

1. Who is responsible for collecting the job placement data?
2. What kind of job placement data are collected?
3. When are job placement data collected?
4. Where are the job placement data collected?
5. How are the job placement data tabulated and analyzed?

To summarize, this research addresses two areas of interest, driven by internal pressures (e.g. university standards) and external (e.g. U.S. Department of Education) influences. Two research questions, stated as null-hypotheses follow:

H1: There is no significant difference among universities with respect to reporting job placement data;
H2: There is no significant difference among universities with respect to gathering, analyzing, and reporting job placement data.
METHODOLOGY

For illustrative purposes, an ethical conflict is given meaning via an operational definition offered by Chonko and Hunt (1985). They stated that “an ethical conflict occurs when people perceive that duties toward one group are inconsistent with their duties and responsibilities toward some other group (including one’s self).” Ethical conflicts in this study derive from the process of a university reporting job placement data with parental reliance and expectations pertaining to the reported job placement data. For clarity and renewed emphasis, substitute the word “public” for “parent” and it becomes painfully clear that we are addressing one of the principal issues thought to be fostering public distrust of colleges and universities.

The study design and methodology are pragmatic and heuristic, not rigorous, according to most academic researchers. The nature of this study called for a more qualitative and humanistic approach to data collection. Specifically, the university participants were solicited through multiple electronic list-serves. The respondents were asked to discuss how they collected job placement data. For reasons of parsimony, we asked the participants to describe briefly the “who, what, when, where and how” questions in relationship to data collection and analysis.

Participants on the list-serve were college counselors/centers, career center directors and institutional researchers. For clarification, as academicians, we were more interested in establishing “quality control” measures in reporting placement data than detecting differences. All findings that will be discussed are serendipitous. Simply stated, this project started out as a practical way to ensure a standard practice and process of obtaining and reporting job placement data for a single university. However, what we found was a “minor” ethical dilemma confronting all institutions of higher education.

FINDINGS

Seventy-nine university officials replied via electronic-mail to an opened-ended questionnaire with five specific questions related to collecting and reporting job placement data. Fifty-eight percent of the participants were from private institutions. Fifteen percent of the participants were from a vocational or two-year community college and the remaining participants were from a public 4-year university or college. Fourteen states were represented.

The first research question examined if there was a significant difference between universities with respect to reporting job placement data. No significance was found. For clarification, all 79 respondents indicated that they report job placement data. Moreover, from anecdotal, self-reported information obtained, the respondents indicated that this information was disseminated through their Web Site, the intranet, promotional materials, and eventually released to private publishers like Kaplan College Catalog.

The second research question addressed the process and procedures associated with the collection, analysis, and reporting of job placement data among universities. Five questions were the focus of inquiry: Who is responsible for collecting the job placement data? What kind of job placement data are collected? When are job placement data collected? Where are job placement data collected? And How are the job placement data tabulated and analyzed? No predominant or standard process was found among university officials when it came to answering the “who, what, when, where and how questions” relevant to collecting, analyzing, and reporting job placement data.

When addressing the official responsible for collecting job placement data [who], 8% of the participants stated that staff, administrators, specific departments, or centers were often assigned the yearly task of coordinating the data collection. It appears that 27% of career centers were responsible for this task. Alumni offices and departments of institutional research, when combined, made up 31% of those responsible for collecting the placement data. However, 34% of the participants did not know exactly who was responsible or how the placement data were collected. From anecdotal responses, many respondents stated that they felt understaffed or ill-prepared to complete such a project.

When addressing [what] kind of job placement the student had obtained following graduation, 70% of the participants ask only if their recent graduates were employed, citing no specific job title. Another 16% asked their recent graduates if they were employed or in graduate school; 9% asked their recent graduates if they were employed in their major field; and 5% asked their recent graduates if they were even looking for employment. Moreover, 48% of the participants asked their recent graduates if their employment was full or part time. In anecdotal
responses, all liberal arts, 4-year private or 4-year public institutions were hesitant to give job placement data by department. However, it appears that all vocational, technical or community colleges provide such data.

When addressing the time frame of collecting data [when], 10% of the participants collected all job placement data at the time of graduation. Another 55% collected this information within six months of graduation. The remaining 35% gave a global answer best described as somewhere between the time of commencement and one year following graduation. From anecdotal responses, some respondents use an LAG survey approach (Life-After-Graduation), which is the sending of a survey one year following graduation and then again to the class that has been graduated for five years.

When addressing [where] the data were obtained, 56% of the participants stated only at commencement (survey or post card) collected from the student; 10% used a Web-based survey, collected from the student. The remaining 34% employed various combinations of the following: phone, letters, e-mail surveys or pencil and paper surveys collected from the student. Moreover, 31% of the participants resorted to asking faculty or staff members if they knew where or if their graduates were employed. Faculty or staff involvement seems to occur when no reply was obtained from the student. From anecdotal responses, most respondents felt uneasy using "secondary-source data" for analysis. However, many participants reported feeling "pressured" to either increase their "response rate" or "job placement percentage."

When addressing the method of analysis, that is, [how] the data were tabulated, five general methods were found. Sixty-six percent of the participants only used data from those who participated. For example, if 100 people completed a survey, and 95 people stated that they were employed, the job placement rate for the class of 700 was 95%. Three percent used the number of those stating employment in relationship to the entire graduating class. For example, if 70 people turned in a survey stating that they were employed, the job placement rate for that class of 700 was 10%. Another 4% of the participants used the combined outcome of employed or in graduate school to determine job placement rate. Two percent of the participants used only selective departments within the university and used the total number of potential participants. For example, if 100 surveys were mailed – and 90 were returned, the job placement rate for the class of 700 was 90%. Twenty-five percent of those responding had no idea [how] the data were tabulated. They "assumed" data were available on every graduate. Anecdotal comments strongly suggested that respondents "aren't exactly sure how to calculate the job placement rate."

Also, remember as reported earlier, that 31% of the participants resorted to asking faculty members or staff if they knew where or if their graduates were employed. This response was tallied as "if" a student had actually replied, although it does not appear that faculty or staff were asked to respond "if" they knew that a recent graduate was not employed. Further, anecdotal data and comments from 54% of the participants suggested a pressure to report high placement numbers because "parents expect to hear such." In addition, several participants alluded to, or referred to, other universities employing innovative interactive Web-sites that collect post-graduation data. In the end, 68% openly reported that they were severely understaffed to effectively collect and analyze the job placement data.

**DISCUSSION**

It is apparent that the majority of universities report their job placement rate. However, what does that job placement rate really mean? The definition varies and is subject to interpretation. It should be documented that all participants felt uneasy about the reporting of such job placement data and its meaning. Every respondent, either explicitly or implicitly, suggested that gathering such job placement information is cumbersome, time consuming, and an exhaustive exercise. Virtually every career center official exclaimed that they are diligent in collecting this data and reporting it accurately. However, once it leaves their office, they have little or no control over accuracy, interpretation, or disclaimers.

Throughout this research project, it was apparent that many respondents had ethical or moral concerns when "discussing" the reporting of job placement data. For instance, what does a job placement rate really mean? To the university, it means fulfilling the letter of the law. However, to the individual, it is the spirit behind the law that is important. Herein lies the ethical conflict. Do we as officials representing colleges and universities report what is required by law or do we address what the parents and students rightfully wish to know? Right or wrong, parents and students view the job placement rate as one indication of institutional quality. It could reduce the amount of cognitive
dissonance often experienced when making a choice to attend one university over another. Moreover, it could offer that sense of psychological security in knowing or hoping that college will be “worth it” in the end. In the final analysis, there may be several personal associations or implications assigned to a university’s job placement rate. The only thing for certain, given the findings in this research, is that no- or at least very few universities, could be legitimately compared with each other by using job placement data.

It is easy to discuss the ethical implications of a university official participating in, knowing about, or accepting a pay-off, nepotism, athletic recruiting violations, or inappropriate sexual relations with students. However, it is difficult to accept the ethical responsibility involved with the “mundane” issues. We, as members of institutions of higher education, tend to focus on the big, complicated new ideas confronting the world. But what about those simple acts of omission or commission, like forgetting or choosing not to publish or release job placement rates, or “manipulating” job placement rates that reflect favorably on your institution, and not the realities of graduation?

As an interesting ancillary point to this study, when did liberal arts colleges or 4-year public and private universities begin to feel the need to exaggerate their job placement rates? Do they not recognize that a quick glance at a college Guide Book that highlights the percentage of students entering graduate school per institution may reflect a glaring discrepancy? For example, how can you have 98% securing a job placement while 35% are entering graduate school? Some numbers simply don’t add up. Also, many vocational and community colleges offer job placement data but fail to correct for, or even mention the number of students already working while pursuing their degree or remaining at their job following graduation. All this discrepancy makes one suspicious.

Perhaps institutions of higher education would benefit from the lessons and processes adapted by other for-profit institutions. For example, Murphy and Lacznia, (1981), identified several areas in marketing ethics where research was needed and the process explained. They, as researchers, specifically asked individual marketing managers what their ethical concerns were. To date, no such question has been asked of career counseling centers or the professionals responsible for reporting job placement rates for universities. It may be easier not to ask such an ethical question if you are fearful of the moral answer.

**SUMMARY**

This research suggests that ethical issues in higher education manifest themselves in many forms. Some ethical issues are obvious and others are not so clear. The need for institutions of higher education to be the vehicle for great understanding, vision and ethical discernment is evident. Colleges do more than provide an educational opportunity or job placement, they build character and integrity, be it the person, the citizen, or the nation.

This study lacks the sophistication of a “tight or highly structured” statistical design. However, given the lack of empirical research in this field, it is reasonable to offer this study as exploratory research. Given that most of the ethical research appears to use case scenarios, this applied research is unique in assessing a current, real ethical concern. In the end, many “little” concerns could have been offered as an ethical issue for higher education, but those are future studies.

**REFERENCES**


*The Chronicle of Higher Education* (1990), "A Focus on Ethics in Higher Education," (February 14), B4
