ABSTRACT. In a recent article in this Journal Grant and Broom reported on a survey which they conducted concerning student attitudes toward ethics. They suggest that while their findings are only preliminary, such surveys can help instructors and schools to determine what type of ethical training a person from a particular demographic background might need. Likewise they may very well help a student's future employer determine the ethics he or she has based on the type of institution he or she attended. However, it is my contention that there are a number of problems inherent in the process and the interpretation which Grant and Broom suggest. I discuss these problems herein.

Introduction

I read with interest Grant and Broom's 'Attitude Toward Ethics: A View of the College Student'. It was, in fact, a coincidence to find it since I had been thinking of how interesting it might be to survey college students, if you will, to test the ethical climate of today's colleges and universities. However, my suspicion was that I would have to survey a greater population than I was prepared to. For example, I teach at a college of which most of the students are business majors of some sort. Approximately 72% are Roman Catholic and about one-half of all students are women. If I was to survey these students I would have to take into account the limited demographic variables as well as to investigate a number of other relevant issues. My results would be very specific and, I fear, would be conclusive only insofar as my particular college is concerned.

However, Grant and Broom have done a study using three types of universities: "small" state, "large" state and private "religious". They present an ethical dilemma with three possible responses to it. The students’ responses are then analyzed according to various categories including, family income, father's occupation and type of university. Grant and Broom then, while admitting that their study is preliminary, claim, "Clearly, students with certain characteristics need certain types of business ethics instruction exposure. Additionally, employers could view potential employees ethical attitudes in terms of their demographic backgrounds".

While their intention might be good, I believe that there are many problems to be worked out in both the mechanics of the survey and in the manner it might be interpreted. It may very well be important to know the background of students in teaching ethics but one could very well argue, as I would, that there are basic theories of ethics to which all students should be exposed. There are various methods of decision-making which need to be learned and, in my experience, the processes of which few students are aware prior to education, regardless of their backgrounds.

I find it problematic to suggest that employers might or should hire a particular student because his or her ethics can be easily determined by the type of university he or she attended and/or his or her demographic background. Would it be just to hire someone based on his or her demographic background, including the type of school he or she attended, cultural background, and/or social and economic class?

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Problems

It is my contention that Grant and Broom begin with an interesting theory which is worthy of serious attention. Indeed, one's environment shapes one's ideas and attitudes and ethics is no exception to this. But are father's occupation, income and type of student's university the only considerations which should be made in determining a student's values? I think not. Mother's occupation, mother's income, peers, a student's work experience, personal income and university major are factors which ought to be considered. Ethics can be a result of diverse factors. Perhaps many people have ethical opinions but I would think that being able to make ethical decisions would be more interesting to employers especially since many of the dilemmas with which the potential employee will be confronted are unlike others in his or her experience. Additionally, students choose colleges and universities for a variety of reasons. Some are academic, but others concern economics and geographical location. It is possible to have a variety of students at a single institution. Biases have long existed concerning a person's economic background, class, religion and academic institution. Choosing potential employees because of such factors has often led to preferential hiring and treatment. It has often perpetuated stereotypes and myths about certain cultures and social classes. I find it problematic that potential employers would choose a person because his or her ethics is the same or like that of those at his or her institution. Other than committing the fallacy of division, it seems to be unjust by not treating people individually or equally or equitably.

Ethics background and ethics training (what might be important to future employers)

Even though a person's ethics is often closely related to his or her background, a person can learn to make ethical decisions and even change his or her ethics. At noted earlier, many people have ethical opinions and certainly what might be called attitudes. But this does not mean that a person is ethical or unethical. While a person's ethical attitudes might reflect something about his or her character, which might be important to the person's future employer, I do not believe that there is any evidence that a person can or will be able to make "good" moral decisions in light of this. It seems to me that an employer would be (and perhaps should be) more interested in the person's ability to think and make decisions. Likewise, I have never met a student who did not need some type of education in decision-making in general and ethical decision-making in particular. Although a good instructor takes into account the strengths and weaknesses of the student population when teaching a course, there are some things which must be taught objectively, I believe. Business ethics courses particularly explore the various dilemmas present in the corporate world and help train students to resolve them and similar ones which they might confront. If I am to use any relevant information from a student's background I should do it prior to his or her becoming a senior and about in enter the "real world". It is sometimes difficult to teach ethics and the decision-making process fundamental to ethics. But each student has a right to be exposed to the various possible avenues of ethical decision-making without discrimination.

Concluding remarks

When I first read the results of the survey conducted by Grant and Broom there was something about it which bothered me. After reflecting upon it I suppose that it affected me personally as well as professionally. I would hate to think that I would have received a different type of training, or even a different type of consideration for a job simply because my mother had a ninth grade education and my father an eighth. Although I know that these factors certainly were and, I am sure, continue to be relevant to some people who meet me and inquire into my background, I would no doubt feel discriminated against if those were to be the factors considered in hiring me for a job simply because my mother had a ninth grade education and my father an eighth. Although I know that these factors certainly were and, I am sure, continue to be relevant to some people who meet me and inquire into my background, I would no doubt feel discriminated against if those were to be the factors considered in hiring me for a job, especially if one were to assume that my ethics and decision-making abilities were in accordance with my parent's low income and the small college which I attended. Of course, one might argue, my later educational training would give me more credence as an ethical thinker. But doesn't this mean that I had the ability