

## **The Ethical Behavior of Undergraduate Students at a Christian University**

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### **Abstract**

The purpose of this study was to measure the ethical behavior of students at a Christian University. The study is broad and exploratory in nature. The sample was gathered from a survey administered to Rinker School of Business Students attending Palm Beach Atlantic University, a four-year private Christian University located in West Palm Beach, Florida with an approximate undergraduate enrollment of 2,800 students.

The primary focus of the study was to determine if business students engage in unethical behavior and, if so, the frequency of that behavior. The survey measures behavior, not attitudes. The researchers believe behavior is a better indicator of future actions than attitude.

The study results indicate a significant percentage of the students are engaged in unethical acts. Male students are more likely than female students to act unethically in most of the researchers expected the survey results would show much higher level of commitment to the Christian Judea principles. The study results should be of interest to faculty and administration at all institutes of higher learning.

Are these unethical practices new to students since entering college or a continuation of actions practiced at the grammar and high school levels?

Educators have the unenviable task of trying to instill a higher level of commitment to ethical practices in a society that regards material wealth and stature as the mark of success, turns its head and ignores the behaviors used to attain social status.

Students know the difference between ethical and unethical actions.

This study offers insight to businesses to help human resources departments understand the propensity of college students to engage in unethical acts.

### **Limitations**

This study is limited with respect to the implications it has for the business world or for other colleges and universities. The student body is not directly representative of any group other than students enrolled in business classes at Palm Beach Atlantic University.

Students in other programs or in other schools might act in a different manner.

Participants in this study do not represent entry-level employees or managers. A problem that can occur in this type of survey is participants may give responses they anticipate the researcher will expect or view as socially acceptable (Grunbaum, 1997). Past performance is not a direct indication of future performance.

People change their ethical values over time from their experiences in both the educational and business setting (Cole & Smith, 1996). A person who commits an unethical action in the past will not necessarily repeat the action again.

Limitations in the study could have been created through the impreciseness of the survey's distribution. The study would have been more exact if every participant had a sufficient amount of time to fully contemplate his or her responses. Some students could have felt pressured to finish the survey quickly and still others might have been apathetic towards the survey. The distribution method did not account for people who did not want to participate. There is no guarantee that nobody took the survey twice. Additional information could have been useful to make further conclusions from the data. Class rank is the only information that provides an idea of length of time at Palm Beach Atlantic University. The rank is misleading because it does not delineate transfer students or students who took time off from college. Overall, the researchers believe the limitations did not result in falsification of results.

### **Future studies**

This study has practical implications that could eventually change school policy. Future researches should consider conducting a similar study with first semester sophomores and second semester seniors to determine if there is a change in ethical behavior and the determinant factors causing the behavioral change.

Valuable insight could also be gained by repeating the survey to these students when they are gainfully employed in the business world for two to three years.

Conducting the same study in a non-secular university and comparing the results would add additional creditability to the findings.

Another interesting study could investigate the effects on ethical activity of an ethics class by testing a group before and after participating in the class. Studies that can help determine the best ways to improve behavior and promote ethical activity are the most practical to solving real-world business problems.