How Effective is Ethics Education?

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Limits on the Effectiveness of Ethics Instruction

• Ethical foundations have already been formed before the student takes an ethics class (by religion, parents, culture, etc.)
• Instructional time is limited, especially when compared to other influences on one’s ethical perspectives
• Ethics classes are typically designed to expose students to multiple ethical frameworks (rather than teach “right” and “wrong”)
• There are strong situational pressures in the workforce that may encourage or reward unethical behavior (career prospects, financial incentives)
Some Intended Outcomes of Ethics Education

• Knowledge – greater appreciation for a variety of ethical perspectives
• Preparation for Work – exposure to ethical dilemmas that one may encounter in the workplace
• Attitude Change – influence perceptions regarding what is ethical or unethical
• Change Specific Behaviors – make sure they don’t engage in specific practices (varies by profession)
• Change General Behaviors – make them more ethical overall (in a wide variety of ways)
Our Research:
What Influences The Extent to Which the Business Ethics Course Changes Students’ Attitudes and Behaviors

• In general, there is relatively little influence on attitudes and behaviors directly attributable to taking the business ethics course.
• However, the amount of influence does vary across students. That is, it does have an influence on some students.
• Effectiveness may vary according to:
  – Intelligence (more effective for those who are more intelligent)
  – GPA (more effective for those who have higher GPAs)
  – Religiosity (more effective for those who are less religious)
  – Machiavellianism (more effective for those who are low Machs)
• Can Teaching Ethics Actually Make People Less Ethical?
  – High Machs
Where Do We Go From Here?

• Keep trying
• Determine which methods of instruction are most effective
• Be realistic:
  – Recognize that it will work better for some students than others
  – Understand that it will not end all undesirable behavior
  – Realize that the effect size may be relatively small