# THE STATE OF ETHICS EDUCATION

## SUMMARY

### What we teach:

Ethics education is a critical part of a higher education curriculum. The more than 2,000 faculty who responded to the *2016 EthicsGame State of Ethics Education Survey* have a strong commitment to teaching ethics, with a nod to accrediting bodies who require evidence of ethics within the curriculum. The stated learning objectives show that those who teach ethics strongly emphasize knowing particular codes of ethics, describing the role of ethical thought in a professional or academic discipline, and using critical thinking skills to analyze ethical dilemmas.

Much less emphasis is given to teaching learners how to respond to an ethical dilemma or justify a course of action. Faculty are committed to teaching critical thinking without a corresponding commitment to teaching core ethical norms. And so an interesting disconnect arises. How does one make a decision when those norms are in conflict or communicate the decision once it is made? For those who teach ethics, the question becomes: What is the ethical content—norms and principles—that provide the context for teaching critical thinking?

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### How we teach ethics:

Of those who responded, nearly every faculty member uses classroom discussion as the primary method for engaging learners in ethics education. The discussion is fueled by both lectures and analyses of case studies. A minority of faculty use interactive teaching methods such as roleplay, simulations, or debates.

In addition, most of the educators who responded fold conversations about ethics into their underlying course content. 40% of the respondents spend less than a tenth of their classroom time and assignments on ethics. Thus, faculty prefer the educational strategy of infusing conversations about ethics across the curriculum over offering standalone ethics classes.

*Finding an effective way to teach ethics is challenging. We're told we should teach ethics yet respect cultural differences. Relativism can only be taken so far until it becomes self-contradicting.*

*Survey Respondent*

### Why we teach ethics:

Fully 60% of the faculty are clear that including ethics education in the curriculum is required for accreditation, although the documentation required to evidence learning is varied. In addition, almost all faculty members who responded believe that ethics should be included in the curriculum. And, because they believe their learners don't have strong commitments to being ethical, faculty unequivocally believe ethics education is important.

**Why this matters:**

Much of ethics education is conflated with compliance—teaching people how to meet the requirements of the law. While learning the edges between what is legal and what is illegal—the ethical minimum— is important, that conversation doesn't prepare learners for changing norms or ethical excellence. Through ethics, educators transmit professional norms to the next generation. The bedrock of ethics education is formed by conversations about the interrelationship of individuals and their various communities and about what actions allow both individuals and the community to thrive.

However, learners will not be well equipped to be ethical participants in the larger community without a commitment from educators to both teach how to evaluate the various perspectives of ethical thought and to identify the best course of action—not just one that meets the ethical minimum. Furthermore, learners must develop the skill to have conversations about ethics. The ongoing question in ethics education is what ethical content needs to be taught in order for classroom efforts to lead to meaningful or lasting change in learners' beliefs or behavior.

## KEY FINDINGS

About 30 years ago, ethics education began a gradual transformation from a class taught by faculty in the philosophy department to an integral part of the professional curriculum. Ethics became particularly prevalent in business and health care classes, which were increasingly taught by those who were not trained ethicists. The business scandals of the early 21st century from Enron to Arthur Andersen to WorldCom led to the passage of new laws, such as Sarbanes-Oxley, designed to change ethical norms and behaviors. In addition, business and other professional schools were strongly encouraged by the accrediting bodies and the community as a whole to include ethics education as part of the professional curriculum.

*Ethical practices underlie the tapestry woven through professional practices based within any academic discipline. To expect these practices in employement, we must expect these practices during student preparations!*

*Survey Respondent*

As many others who have looked at ethics curriculum have found, the themes of ethics are varied and "much of the discourse that took place around applied ethical decision-making involved very little reference to theoretical ethical foundations of decision-making." The conclusions about inconsistencies in the content of professional ethics classes match our findings as faculty members self-reported the content and structure of their classes.

*EthicsGame's 2016 State of Ethics Education Survey* is the third in our longitudinal study, building upon two previous surveys in 2014 and 2012. We have found the results to be consistent showing stability in both the content and pedagogy of ethics education.

## WHAT WE TEACH IN ETHICS EDUCATION

The questions in the study matched the criteria of Bloom's Taxonomy with standard learning objectives for classes with an ethics component. The questions were designed to determine what ethical content was the most important for the faculty.

**Critical thinking:**

Using critical thinking skills to analyze a dilemma is by far the most important learning objective in this category, with 81% of the faculty respondents including this objective in their syllabi. Interest-

ingly, the least important objective was using a decision model to analyze a dilemma, with only 43% of respondents addressing this learning objective.

### Personal knowledge:

The greatest agreement among the respondents centered on knowledge about a particular code of ethics. 71% of respondents included a knowledge outcome focused on knowledge concerning a particular code of ethics in a professional or academic discipline, a 7% increase over the 2012 survey. 77% of the respondents wanted learners to be able to describe the role of ethical thought in their professional or academic discipline.

*Ethics is a foundational element in critical decision making. We all need to assess and gather the correct information on perspectives from all parties. One must also remember to use ethical principles of do no harm and do good as a compass in decision-making.*

*Survey Respondent*

### Personal knowledge:

60% of the respondents identified two other core learning objectives: describing one's personal values and identifying values in tension in an ethical dilemma. The second most common objective around application of ethical knowledge was demonstrating that the learner knew what it means to act ethically, with only 67% including this objective. That having been said, more included that objective in their teaching than in 2012. Through all of the levels of Bloom's Taxonomy, learning outcomes related to personal ethical knowledge and action remained strong.

### Traditional ethical theories:

The data also showed a corresponding decrease in teaching general ethical content whether with a knowledge based outcome or application, where 51% of faculty respondents include information about common ethical theories, down from 56% in 2012.

## HOW WE TEACH ETHICS

Over the past decade, faculty have been nudged to include more interactive methods of teaching in their classrooms, with best-practices literature encouraging faculty to use experiential approaches to education to enhance the learning experience. The study showed that the move to experiential pedagogy has not yet made an impact on ethics education.

### Classroom methods:

93% of all faculty respondents included classroom discussion as part of their ethics curriculum. 69% also included lectures and 67% included an analysis of case studies. About a third of the respondents used some form of interactive learning such as roleplay, simulations, or debates.
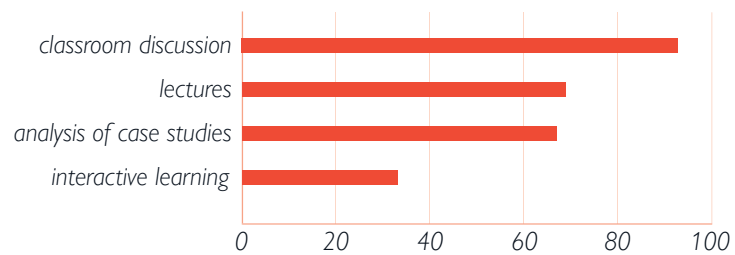


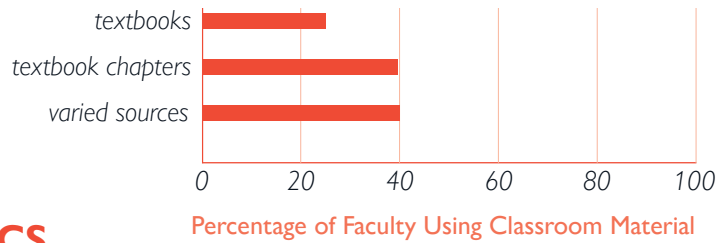Percentage of Faculty Using Classroom Method

### Classroom materials:

Only 25% of the respondents use textbooks, and another 39% use chapters from textbooks. Most gathered resources from more varied sources, such as journal articles, online resources, or published case studies. Given that 40% of the respondents spend about 10% of their classroom and 10% of their

out-of-class assignments devoted to ethics, gathering together materials from open education sources rather than having students buy textbooks makes sense.



Percentage of Faculty Using Classroom Material

## WHY WE TEACH ETHICS

### Required by accrediting bodies:

60% of the respondents were aware that teaching ethics in the overall curriculum was required by accrediting bodies. With the increase in awareness of accrediting requirements also came less autonomy in determining learning objectives—only 43% of respondents stated that they determined the learning objectives related to ethics education.

### Personal motivation:

Interestingly, only 27% of respondents stated that the reason that they teach ethics is because the content is part of the required curriculum. 46% believe that ethics should be taught in every class. Thus, the personal reasons for teaching don't appear to sync with the institutional reasons for including ethics in a professional curriculum.

*Ethics should be taught in every class. It is my experience that students might take one class on ethics or it might be mentioned on a day to two in class, but generally speaking, it is not encouraged ot be taught, instructors are not willing to take the time and effort needed to teach it effectively, or to model the behavior.*

*Survey Respondent*

## DATA SOURCES

61,535 invitations to participate in EthicsGame's third State of Ethics Education Survey were sent to faculty who are part of EthicsGame's list of customers, prospects, and ethics educators. Members of the Academy of Legal Studies in Business were also included. 2,307 faculty responded, giving a robust 4% response rate. The online survey required between two and ten minutes to complete, depending on the responses and branching.

The questions were developed by the team at EthicsGame. The foundational knowledge in ethics curriculum comes from the founder and CEO of EthicsGame, Catharyn Baird, who has spent more than twenty-two years teaching ethics and participating in numerous professional conferences. In addition, EthicsGame has reviewed dozens of syllabi and used that information to develop the questions. Robert Forrest, EthicsGame's Director of Research, honed the questions and completed the analysis.