



ETHICAL ISSUES IN EDUCATION MARKETING

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, government and private institutions of higher education are applying business principles and practices to education to satisfy the needs and desires of education's "customers" and other interest groups on the one hand, and make it financially successful and self-sustaining on the other.

However, higher education has a place of a unique importance in every society for its very existence, smooth functioning, and economic prosperity. Therefore, it is necessary that the business practices of educational institutions are ethical and consistent with their primary mission of making education fair, just, and accessible to individual members of the society, as well as beneficial to the society as a whole. This paper presents the findings of the first phase of a two phase research project designed to critically examine the current educational practices for their ethics and their desirability in the interests of their participants and the society at large.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education holds a place of unique importance in all societies. While education is similar to other services in some respects, education of its citizens is critical for a society's very existence, smooth functioning, and economic prosperity. This is especially true for poorer countries since education may be one of the few affordable ways for them to compete effectively in the world markets and bring economic wellbeing home.

That is why most governments do everything possible to raise all necessary resources and do not spare any expense in promoting and sustaining quality educational institutions and make them equally accessible and affordable to all their citizens. Such governmental role is especially critical when and where operating educational institutions is not a profitable enough a venture to attract private initiatives.



Since early 20th century, management science has made a major impact on all aspects of our lives. Management science has made great contributions by enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of organizations, while marketing has proved itself to be very effective as an art and science of persuasion. Consequently, management and marketing have changed the way governments, and business and nonbusiness organizations operate across all societies in the world.

Realizing this great potential of management and marketing, educators and higher education institutions have started conceptualizing education as a business in service marketing. Increasingly, government and private educational institutions are employing business principles and practices and developing strategies to satisfy the needs and desires of their “customers” and other interest groups on the one hand, and make education financially successful and self-sustaining on the other.

On this background, the unique status of education makes it important to critically examine the various marketing and business practices of educational institutions to ensure that they are ethical and consistent with their primary mission of making education fair, just, accessible, and beneficial to individual members of the society, and turn them into an educated, skilled, and productive workforce for the benefit of the society as a whole. (Katz 2009; White 2009; Stote 2012)

ETHICS

Ethics (Murphy et al 2005) can be defined as the moral principles and values that govern the decisions and actions of individuals or groups and serve as guidelines /criteria for what actions are good/right/just v. bad/wrong/unjust when faced with moral dilemmas.

Prior to 1960s, American business culture operated on the concept of “caveat emptor” i.e. let the buyer beware (Kerin, Hartley, and Rudelius 2013). In 1962, the Consumer Bill of Rights proposed by President John F. Kennedy codified the ethics of exchange between buyers and sellers in the form of 4 fundamental rights of the buyers: right to safety, right to be informed, right to choose, and right to be heard. Since then, these rights



have been the foundation of American business and have been enforced through legislation, governmental agencies, and voluntary compliance by businesses.

TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF ETHICS

Ethics is often considered as a desirable goal to promote in all business and nonbusiness activities in the society. It is supposed to promote fair dealings, reciprocity, and general well-being of individuals, and long-term sustenance and flourishing of the society as a whole. However, howsoever desirable it may be, ethics is not considered as the most critical element in the functioning of a society, and there is a general feeling that the world can survive if ethics must be compromised in a few instances. Such tolerance toward unethical practices emerges out of the feeling that the injury caused by lack of ethics is often minor in both psychological and financial terms and that the injured party can easily survive it as a little bump in the road. More importantly, there are always some more important countervailing reasons that justify why ethics may be sacrificed to a certain extent.

This ambivalent attitude of societies toward ethics is best expressed and explained by the two conceptualizations or philosophies of ethics: Deontology or Moral Idealism and Teleology or Moral Utilitarianism.

DEONTOLOGY OR MORAL IDEALISM

Deontology takes an idealistic approach to ethics that is most relevant at an individual or microscopic level. It considers certain individual rights and duties as supreme (of supreme import) and considers having moral means and intentions as the prerequisites to justify an act as ethical regardless of its outcome. For example, such a view of ethics would consider “Telling the truth” as an absolute must in all circumstances irrespective of whether or not it hurts someone.

This perspective of ethics uses two principles as the criteria to judge morality of an act: the rights principle and the justice principle.



The “Rights Principle” demands that to be considered moral or ethical, an act must pass the tests of universality and reversibility. Universality requires moral acts must be based on principles that anyone and everyone could act on. Reversibility requires that moral acts must be based on reasons that can be used by one and all to act towards others. In other words, to be considered reversible an act must pass the test of: “Do (and Don’t do) unto others as you would have (and not have) them do unto you.”

The “Justice Principle” demands that to be considered moral or ethical, an act must be consistent with the three guiding principles of justice: distributive justice, retributive justice, and compensatory justice. Distributive justice requires that resources are distributed according to the needs of individuals. Retributive justice requires that the punishment is proportional to the wrong doing. Finally, compensatory justice requires that the injured party is restored to his or her original position.

TELEOLOGY OR MORAL UTILITARIANISM (Wilson 1989)

Teleology takes a utilitarian approach to ethics at a social or macroscopic level and uses Society as the unit of analysis. It considers the ultimate results as of supreme import and the sole determinants of the morality of an act and irrespective of the means used. In other words, it emphasizes the attainment of the greatest good for the greatest number of individuals in the society to justify actions regardless of means used and their consequences for a few. Economics of capitalism is founded on this philosophy (Kerin, Hartley, and Rudelius 2013). As such many business people use this philosophy in making their business decisions.

This view of ethics would consider approving vaccines for general use to prevent spread of diseases in the society even though the vaccine may harm a few of its uses. It would consider increasing highway speed limits to make transportation faster and more economical even though it would increase fatalities and cost a few lives. And it would justify wars and killing a few to create peace and save many more lives.



CHOICE BETWEEN THE TWO PHILOSOPHIES OF ETHICS

What approach one takes to determining the morality of an act critically depends upon his/her role or nature of involvement in the situation, past experiences, and current vulnerability to the consequences. Or simply stated, the approach depends upon whether or not the decision maker is making the decision as an affected individual or as an objective policy maker for the society as a whole.

OBJECTIVES OF THIS STUDY

This paper presents the findings of the first phase of a two-phase research project designed to identify various common practices in higher education that deserve ethical scrutiny, and critically examine their ethics and their desirability for its various interest groups and for the society as a whole.

The first phase study involved conducting detailed in-depth interviews of select members of various target audiences and interest groups—students, teachers, and citizens at large. The paper presents the critical dimensions of the education business identified through these interviews that deserve scrutiny. The dimensions and issues so identified can be classified into categories such as: design and administration of educational programs and courses, organization of recipients into groups, classes, cohorts, or just individuals to be dealt with directly, etc., delivery of knowledge and skills through lectures, labs, and online communications, attendance policies, grading mechanisms and the contents of the final grade transcripts, etc. Detailed enumeration of these dimensions of scrutiny is given below.

IMPORTANT EDUCATIONAL ASPECTS AND PRACTICES THAT REQUIRE ETHICAL SCRUTINY

1. Tuition, Financial Aid, Scholarships

- Setting tuition at a high level on purpose, and then discounting it by offering liberal scholarships, free tuition, in-state tuition, financial aid, on-campus jobs to make it attractive to students
- Offering help and incentives to the needy at the cost of other paying students
- Bundling other products as text books, computers with education into an all-inclusive tuition



2. Defining the Mission

- Education as a marketing activity, Educator as the marketer, and Students as the Customers
- Who are the real customers of education?: Students, employers, or the society at large
- Who are the various role players: receivers, carriers, buyers, and users of education

3. If students are the primary customers, should educational institutions:

- Accommodate all needs of students
- Base instructors' pay and promotions on student performance and satisfaction
- Allow students to learn whichever way they prefer and facilitate it by doing whatever necessary
- Accommodate students' varied learning styles in and out of the classrooms

4. If students are the subjects to be trained, should educational institutions:

- Let the instructors decide how the courses are taught and how students must learn

5. If employers and the society at large are the ultimate customers, should educational institutions:

- Design the educational programs based on the employers' inputs and requirements
- Prepare students for specific productive jobs
- Prepare students to learn and do a range of jobs

6. What is(are) the purpose(s) of Grading: student motivation, enhancing student effort, or accomplish desired learning and competence?

7. What should the grades reflect/represent:

- Student motivation and the effort made to accomplish the end result (study, attendance, punctuality, assignments, continued effort to do better, etc.)
- Evaluation of the end product – the actual learning, knowledge and skills of the graduate
- Value Added = Learning accomplished while in a program Knowledge

8. Basis of Grading

- Should tools, designed to avoid discouragement/disappointment, actively motivate, and even satisfy students, and keep them happy, be a part of their final evaluation and grade?

- Inputs/Effort v Output/Outcomes

- Strict v Flexible rules e.g. Allowing late submissions, make-up exams etc w or w/o penalty (to accommodate slackers)

- Forgiveness e.g. best 3 of 4 tests (to accommodate slackers)

- Exact point system vs. Letter Grades (same grade for a range of performances)

9. Grading and Reporting Multiple Attempts

- Report all grades v Last Grade only
- Compute the average of all grades v Count last grade only



10. Grade Transcript and Certification

- Should the educators be required to reveal the composition and weights assigned to various inputs to the final grades?

11. Building a Class of Students to Learn Together

- Is it ethical to teach students of substantially different abilities together?

Students all levels of abilities and preparation in one class vs. Separate Sections for students of vastly different abilities

- Are the quality and level of teaching influenced by the best, average, or worst students in class?

- Are the grading standards influenced by the best, average, or worst students in class

12. What is the ultimate purpose of higher education? Prepare students for specific jobs, or prepare them to learn what is needed in various jobs throughout their lives?

These qualitative issues and dimensions would form the basis of a more structured investigation in the second phase.

The second phase of the research would involve using the qualitative information obtained in the first phase to develop a survey instrument and administer it to representative samples of the interest groups for a structured investigation of their views on the ethicality of various practices in education marketing. The findings should enable educational institutions and educators to identify problem areas, prioritize them, and develop strategies to deal with them effectively to insure that business and marketing practices used in education are consistent with and supportive of its principal mission.



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