

# INSTALLING AN ETHICS PLEDGE WITHIN K-12 ACADEMIA: A RESTORATION OF HUMANISM

By

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## ABSTRACT

*In May 2009, 33 Harvard M.B.A. Candidates proposed and published an ethics pledge entitled the M.B.A. Oath. It is a "voluntary student-led pledge that the goal of business managers is to 'serve the greater good.' It promises that Harvard M.B.A.[s] will act responsibly, ethically, and refrain from advancing their 'own narrow ambitions' at the expense of others" (Wayne, 2009, p.1). As of 2009, 450 of 900 graduates have signed with thousands of supportive fans on Twitter and Facebook. As of 2012, more than 6500 students support this Oath (M.B.A. Oath Website, 2012). In the wake of the Enron scandal, Wall Street disaster, and subsequent fiscal "Depression," students should view teachers and administrators as ethical beings. Any K-12 or college setting has always been a "sheltered entity," preparing students for the future but in a fashion that does not force them immediately into reality. This review of the literature will analyze the eight tenets of the M.B.A. Oath, while dividing them into three applicable areas: personal maintenance, accountability, and aiding student progression. The first two areas must be effectively monitored before progressing to the third: ultimately concluding that moral will and reason must align to the human connection (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008).*

*Keywords: Business Ethics, K-12 Academia, Humanism Education, M.B.A. Oath.*

## INTRODUCTION

In May 2009, a group of 33 Harvard M.B.A. Candidates proposed and published an ethics pledge entitled the M.B.A. Oath. It is a "voluntary student-led pledge that the goal of business managers is to 'serve the greater good.' It promises that Harvard M.B.A.[s] will act responsibly, ethically, and refrain from advancing their 'own narrow ambitions' at the expense of others" (Wayne, 2009, p.1). Then, a recent estimate showed almost half of graduates signing the oath (400/890 students) before their June 4, 2009 graduation with thousands of supportive fans on Twitter and Facebook (Fitzgerald, 2009). However, a recent estimate shows that now more than 6500 students support this Oath. The following abridged ethics pledge consists of eight tenets (Acharya et al., 2009, n.p.).

- I will act with utmost integrity and pursue my work in an ethical manner.
- I will safeguard the interests of my shareholders, co-workers, customers, and the society in which we operate.
- I will manage my enterprise in good faith, guarding

against decisions and behavior that advance my own narrow ambitions but harm the enterprise and the societies it serves.

- I will understand and uphold, both in letter and spirit, the laws and contracts governing my own conduct and that of my enterprise.
- I will take responsibility for my own actions, and I will represent the performance and risks of my enterprise accurately and honestly.
- I will develop both myself and other managers under my supervision so that the profession continues to grow and contribute to the well-being of society.
- I will strive to create sustainable economic, social, and environmental prosperity worldwide.
- I will be accountable to my peers and they will be accountable to me for living by this oath. (Acharya et al., 2009, n.p.)

While researching this ethics pledge, four questions derived from the aforementioned

- How would these tenets apply to K-12 academia?

- How would an ethics oath be monitored in the field of education?
- How do public vows connect to the objective presented in the classroom?
- How effective is this ethics pledge?

## Rhetorical Imperative

In the wake of the Enron scandal, Wall Street disaster, and subsequent fiscal "Depression," it is important that students view teachers and administrators as ethical beings. Any K-12 or college setting has always been a "sheltered entity," despite preparing students for the future, it does not force them immediately into a realistic environment of employment. For example, there is an imperative importance of books, rhetoric, and written literature in lieu of face-to-face work experience and networking. State exams and mandates dictate the outcome of teachers' probationary status, while superseding the human connection between administrators, teachers, and students. Additionally, areas of cross-curricular implementation or team teaching can lead to internal personnel strife and contractual union tension.

This assessment of the literature will analyze the eight tenets of the M.B.A. Oath, while delineating them into three applicable categories of assessment: Personal Maintenance, accountability, and aiding student progression. Subsequently, personal maintenance and accountability must be effectively monitored before the final category of aiding student progression can be achieved. The goal of human connection derives from the Kantian notion that, "The uniquely human capacity was a sense of conscience" (Johannesen, Valde, & Whedbee, 2008, p. 39). Conscience is comprised of moral will and moral reason.

## Review of the Literature

### *Federally-funded Ethics Centers*

Utah Valley University (UVU) (2009) constructed the Center for the Study of Ethics with federal-aid. Within its "Ethics and Values" course, the objectives are, (i) Discussion of ethics is important and timely, (ii) Interdisciplinary (work) is integral, (iii) Inclusion of a literary component (writing), (iv) Promotion of introspection and debriefing into classroom discussion,

and (v) Critical assessment (metacognition) (p.1). Additionally, the State of Utah issues an Excellence of Ethics award to students who show admirable personal and personal ethical standards. They define this as, "A [demonstration of] sustained commitment to understanding the human condition and working professionally and personally to improve ethics through professional leadership, community activity, and personal insight" (Utah Valley University, 2009, n.p.). The recipient is active in literary aspects of rhetoric: reading and writing, as well as, promoting programs that "Upgrade the ethical and moral fiber of the community" (Utah Valley University, 2009, n.p.).

Connecting to K-12 ethics since 1996, Utah Valley University asks students and employees to maintain high ethical standards by expressing ethical outcomes and teaching critical thinking. Academic stakeholders should, (i) Recognize ethical issues, (ii) Develop critical thinking, (iii) promote tolerance toward disagreement, (iv) Handle "inevitable ambiguities" in dealing with ethical problems, and (vi) Develop a personal code of ethics and sense of moral obligation (Utah Valley University, 2009, n.p.).

### **A Model of Organizational Integrity**

A Model of Organizational Integrity implements the pragmatic aspect to the ethereal, moral criteria. Johannesen, Valde, and Whedbee (2008) stated that an organization should solve problems "directly and reflectively" (p. 161). This is to be done with individual and collective objectives. There should be a commitment to supporting financial revenue throughout an entire project, accommodating any fiscal "surprises" that might arise. Often, administrators start a new project with an academic department before assessing fiscal funding for its completion. It is frustrating when teachers (or students) prepare a project but may not continue because of sparse resources or finances.

Johannesen et al. (2008) stated that interacting responsibly is another criterion of this Model of Organizational Integrity. Care and justice are paradigms that all stakeholders should follow within their environment. Most of the time, this must be taught when students are new to group work activities. Each student should have a role in which they

interact in one segment, but remain autonomous in another.

Modeling and maintaining personal integrity are other examples. Often, teachers are hypocritical of their requests of students. For example, teachers will be on their cell phone in the classroom, when students are not allowed to have them. The only circumstance in which cell phone usage should be permitted would be if the classroom had no phone or the school phone lines were "down." Any exception should be in writing and issued to the students and their parents. Consequently, the students must understand this discrepancy and know that the teacher is not breaking the same rule that they must follow (Johannesen et al., 2008; Soldati, 2007).

Students should view their teacher being fair to all students, even when a single student in a group does not reciprocate such behavior. All ethical models and objectives of the class should be reviewed at the beginning of the year. This would include quarterly updates of the behavioral policy and regulations within the classroom, as well as class and teacher expectations. Periodically, students need a review of these ethical models when there has been an infraction of such policies.

Sharing the organizational purpose with students is another example that Johannesen et al. (2008) and Soldati (2007) suggested. Covey (2004/1989) posited that an organization should write collectively to achieve this goal. On a school district level, people connect better to organizational mission statements when they have aided its creation and implementation. Locally, students' input on classroom policies and regulations would accommodate their accountability.

Often, one does not think about the relationship of connectivity between students and teachers or teachers and administrators. When managers (or administrators) fail to "walk the talk," distrust arises never to be reconciled (Soldati, 2007). It is not to assume that all administrators show ill-intention, but perhaps there is not enough time to do things properly; i.e., they rush to complete a task without thinking of repercussions or effects. When a school district has a high "turn-over rate" of administrators, one can assume that the leadership goals are based on short-term

criteria. Also, there has been little to no training in how to effectively deal with constant district change. This training is needed to permit more accurate communication (Soldati, 2007).

### **Ethics as business framework.**

The nature of promoting ethics from both a business and educational framework has been a cooperative effort. Losing sight of leadership and management stem from erroneously managing stakeholders' needs and expectations. This role, according to Seldon (2008), is "blurred." For example, the McDonald's Corporation has six stakeholder groups: "customers, suppliers, owners, staff, industry, and community" (p.1). At no point may one stakeholder group usurp the others. Maintaining uniformity between each stakeholder group has caused McDonald's to excel exponentially even during our current strained economic status.

360 Solutions, LLC (2009) offered this advice on accepting change in the workplace within their article, "When change goes wrong." It may be applied to a school district as well. First, "Change is not the exception ... but an ongoing, inevitable process. Poorly managed change in the workplace leads to stress which, in turn, creates poor job performance, more absenteeism, and increased employee turnover" (360 Solutions, 2009, p.1). Next, with almost 75% of employees naming their workplace as their cause of stress, about 45% admitted that their job performance was suffering consequently. Out of those 45%, less than 5% surveyed felt that their situation was dealt with properly (360 Solutions, 2009). This shows an abundant amount of miscommunication (or fear of communicating).

Finally, 360 Solutions (2009) offered five factors that influence behavior:

- Knowledge is the easiest factor for leaders to influence.
- Skills are a little more difficult to influence.
- Beliefs and attitudes are not easy to change.
- Environment is directly influenced by the organization.
- Purpose is the collective belief of organizational leaders. (pp. 2-3)

The company suggests handling the first factor by

“providing necessary training” and proper communication of employees (360 Solutions, 2009, p.2). At this level, employees will normally not resist change. During the second factor, employees make changes on their instinctive behavior. Time is the only essence that allows employees to connect practice and effort, so that skills can be changed. For the third factor, changing beliefs is exceedingly difficult because it requires the employee to “release their pattern of behavior” (360 Solutions, 2009, p. 2). On the fourth level, “Employee behavior should be rewarded or corrected as necessary.” Providing this will maintain proper behavior in the future (360 Solutions, 2009). Finally, in the fifth category, leaders need to promote a sense of purpose within their employees. They accomplish this by addressing self-esteem, security, and belonging (360 Solutions, 2009, p. 3).

### **Applying an Ethics Filter**

Allied with influencing behaviorism, applying an ethics filter to these criteria of self-esteem, security, and belonging connects to all academic stakeholders. The Ethics Resource Center (-ERC-) (2009) of Arlington, Virginia has devised the mnemonic PLUS (Policies, Legal, Universal, and Self) when applying this filter. When reflecting on Policies, one should ask, “Is it consistent with my organization's policies, procedure, and guidelines” (ERC, 2009, p. 1)? Often, there is no consistency between a school's district mission statement and its unilateral application. It is helpful that teachers and staff member (and even administrators) know the proper procedures and guidelines, but unfortunately, it does not always turn out that way. Often, there is little to no training on understanding the school or district handbooks.

The second filter was “Legal,” asking if the action or conduct is acceptable under the applicable laws and regulations. For example, any laws that apply to a Special Needs student within the Regular Needs classroom may not be disclosed to others, while serving as a hindrance to the child's best possible education. On the other side of Legal issues, all teachers should the standards of permissible conduct. Paradigms include: behaviors of teachers and administrators outside of the classroom and how it would potentially affect their probationary or tenure status.

Knowing exactly what is expected of teachers behaviorally and morally should be written overtly for all district members to review. All teachers and administrators have a responsibility to conduct themselves morally inside and outside the classroom.

When applying a Universal Filter, one asks, “Does it conform to the Universal principles and values my organization has adopted” (ERC, 2009, p.1)? Despite universal federal mandates, State Educational Laws vary per state. Subsequently, school districts are not all mandated to conform to universal standards (based on student population or school designation, i.e., Chartered, parochial, public, etc.). Finally, if a teacher or administrator is applying an ethics filter of “self”- one must ask, “Does it satisfy my personal definition of what is right, good, and fair” (ERC, 2009, p.1)? One should start with their conscience of delineating a moral act from an immoral one. Dependence on the human conscience may play a key role in self pre-determined assessment of ethical actions.

### **Conclusion: Aiding Student Progression**

“Striv[ing] to create sustainable economic, social, and environmental prosperity worldwide” is the seventh tenet of the abridged M.B.A. Oath (Acharya et al., 2009, n.p.). It is representative of both an individual and collective nature of responsibility. If students understand that these two components are equally important, then theoretically, applying the other tenets of the Oath would be easy.

A number of factors occur that make students view adults as less than ethical. These reasons include (i) Inconsistency found in various facets of actions and rhetoric, (ii) Verbal promises misaligned due to scarce resources needed to complete a project, and (iii) Not enough time to accurately prepare for the tasks that educators ask of them. Despite the number of schools adhering to an ever-pertinent character education curriculum and mission statement, it would seem too micro-managing (or perhaps, Orwellian) to assign a position of “Ethics Monitor” in school.

Therefore, it should be the mission of the district to assign the proper training in these M.B.A. tenets and cohesion to their district goals to the administrators and teachers. Expectations should be clear and concise as defined in stewardship delegation. Then, administrators should



enforce that teachers receive training to delegate ethics effectively to students. They should not monitor the individual on a compulsive basis, as long as periodically, they are working toward the end results, while remaining in alignment with the original task. Covey (2004/ 1989) stated that,

*Trust is the highest form of human motivation. It brings out the very best of people. But it takes time and patience, and it doesn't (sic) preclude the necessity to train and develop people so that their competency can rise to the level of that trust. (p. 178)*

These M.B.A. Oath objectives of ethical standards would ensure that students are valued for their ability based on two main levels: progression for themselves and their commitment to others. The ultimate goal of humanism is universally holistic because unilateral progression exemplifies two attributes: the teacher must not supply a constant behavioral stimulus, and should not micro-manage their students' subsequent reactions. Ethical standards that are presented by Johannesen, et al. (2008) clarify the importance of virtues within academia, and may be applied to the aspect of students' perception of the teacher. Three standards that are most applicable are,

- Do not ask your audience to link your idea or proposal to emotion-laden values, motives, or goals to which it actually is not related.
- Do not deceive your audience by concealing your real purpose, by concealing self-interest, by concealing your group you represent, by concealing your position as an advocate of a viewpoint.
- Do not advocate something in which you do not believe yourself. (p. 257)

### Recommendations and Implications

The eight MBA tenets apply to the field of education in more than one criterion. They can be categorized within three groups: (i) Personal maintenance, (ii) Accountability, and (iii) Aiding student progression. Under personal maintenance (accountability to self), the following tenets apply:

- I will act with utmost integrity and pursue my work in an ethical manner.
- I will safeguard the interests of my shareholders, co-

workers, customers, and the society in which we operate.

- I will manage my enterprise in good faith, guarding against decisions and behavior that advance my own narrow ambitions but harm the enterprise and the societies it serves.

- I will take responsibility for my own actions, and I will represent the performance and risks of my enterprise accurately and honestly. (Acharya et al., 2009, n.p.)

Under accountability to others, the following tenets apply:

- I will understand and uphold, both in letter and spirit, the laws and contracts governing my own conduct and that of my enterprise.

- I will be accountable to my peers and they will be accountable to me for living by this oath. (Acharya et al., 2009, n.p.)

Finally, under aiding student progression as an outcome, the following tenets apply:

- I will develop both myself, and other managers under my supervision, so that the profession continues to grow and contribute to the well-being of society.

- I will strive to create sustainable economic, social, and environmental prosperity worldwide. (Acharya et al., 2009, n.p.)

### Personal Maintenance/ Accountability to Self

These criteria of the Oath under Personal Maintenance can be applied by first defining "safeguard." Feeling safe must begin with the self before its affect can be projected onto students. Covey (2004) suggested the following examples of personal maintenance, (i) Despite the uniqueness of values, they are the foundation of everything accomplished; (ii) Next, set goals and identify roles; (iii) Plan weekly reflecting on goals and role identity; and (iv) Plan daily because task lists are installed realistically and systematically reviewed. Ideally, a personal mission statement is applicable before one can participate in an organizational one.

Additionally, when assessing an ethical reaction, Johannesen et al. (2008) reflected on these questions: "How does one feel about himself or herself after making this ethical choice" and "What would the reaction be from family members when they learned of this choice? Once

again, the conscience is the best guide when dealing with reactions. If feeling ashamed is part of the response, then an unethical action may have been conducted.

The individual in an educational setting must retain personal maintenance, inclusive of "whistle-blowing," despite negative comments, sentiments, and retaliatory efforts. J. V. Jensen's (1987) Ethical Tension Points in Whistleblowing (as cited in Covey, 2004) determines the restriction in which the individual assesses the appropriateness of whistle-blowing. Facing heavy and covert repercussions if the individual's identity is found (especially before academic tenure), personnel in the educational environment must also struggle with the ensuing paradigms

- Is the information secured properly?
- Am I accurately and fairly depicting the gravity of the incident?
- From where do my motives spring?
- When should I whistle-blow? During my time within the organization or after I have left?
- How will my action affect my future: freedom of expression, independent judgment, loyalty, fairness, courage, and cooperation within the group? (Covey, 2004, p. 169)

Sherron Watkins (Enron), Coleen Rowley (FBI), and Cynthia Cooper (World Com), the three female whistleblowers of the 2002 scandals, all had the following attribute: they were the sole income providers of their households, whose husbands stayed at home; i.e., they "gambled" on their only income as they exposed the immoral ethics of their work environment. Lacayo and Ripley's Time magazine article (2002, December 30) reported that they did not seek the limelight; but rather, had their memoranda and confidential letters exposed by another source. Also, they refused to talk to the media. Ironically, they did not serve the traditional gender stereotype, as statically more men have been whistleblowers than women (Lacayo & Ripley, 2002). These women, much like personnel in the academic realm, were able to assess their personal ethical maintenance by properly upholding the ethical standards of the profession. They were true to themselves while being

ethical in selecting their audience (Johannesen et al., 2008).

### Accountability to Others

After stemming from a solid base of Personal Maintenance, Accountability to Others showed that every member can act as a unit. Ethically, this would include local, state, and federal laws and contracts, taking responsibility for what is acceptable or not. The previously mentioned Loyalty Oath is one example. Also, it includes aiding colleagues in their path as well. Covey (2004) suggested ten reasons that managers do not display empowerment; however, these criteria may denote why teachers or administrators withhold empowerment

- [Teacher or administrator] is afraid to "let go"
- Misaligned systems
- [Teacher or administrator] lacks skills
- [Students] lack skills
- [Students] do not want to accept responsibility (Covey, 2004, p. 256)

Promoting stewardship delegation shows accountability to others. Covey (2004/ 1989) defined this type of delegation as, "Focused on results instead of methods. It gives people a choice of method and makes them responsible for results" (p.173). From the beginning of the assignment, it makes both parties have a mutual understanding of their task. Rosenberg (2005) stated,

The teacher who is mindful of [his] stewardship models discovery. [He sees] the world as a great book to be explored - writing in the margin as [he goes]. The intellectual steward recognizes and models for students that [each academic] area demands discipline, that rigor is the price to be paid for discovery (n.p.).

Criteria for stewardship delegation include (i) Identifying parameters within the individual's operation, (ii) Creating a clear, mutual understanding of what needs to be accomplished, (iii) Specifying outcomes and results, either good or bad, and (iv) Constructing an evaluation process and its accompanying standards. This includes specifying times and location when the evaluation will take place (Covey, 2004/ 1989, p.174).

When asking students to complete a project, the same

elements can be applied as the preceding examples of a business manager and worker. In an 11th Grade German class, writing an extended essay consisted of chronological, tangible objectives beginning a semester before the due date. First, students wrote a proposal of their topic for teacher-approval. Next, they researched a specific number of minimum articles on that topic. Then, they discussed and applied how a grading rubric connected to their project. Finally, students submitted a timeline of their work before the final due date. This update includes verifying a minimum page length every three weeks. Points were given for completing the accurate number of pages. Students had clear goals that eliminated angst during the final exam week when these projects were due. It was an excellent task of accountability to others and self, since they viewed their own language development progression from when the project commenced. Students took ownership for their work more easily with structured components of the assignment.

Finally, such a lengthy and complete project would not have occurred without clear and concise expectations. Students exhibited trust when the teacher showed that effective delegation does not include micro-managing. However, students were more concerned with the outcome as opposed to the process. In contrast, Covey (2004/1989) stated the other form of delegation is named "gopher," punning a manager's response to a worker as "go-for-this, or go-for that" (p. 173). This form of delegation focuses on methods, not the desired results. This end-product denotes irresponsibility of ownership for the intended results. While reflecting the transactional, behavioral-approach to communication and leadership, ethically, it would be more difficult to develop trust when there is no investment in the project. However, further research is needed to assess such delineation.

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