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Abstract

Understanding ethical boundaries in student affairs work can be challenging and difficult to navigate for student affairs professionals. The purpose of this article is to examine the complexities of dual relationships and the ethical issues that may arise. As a result, the authors offer tools to (a) identify various perspectives in resolving ethical problems and (b) examine the issues using a theoretical model. The article includes a case study embedded throughout the article, a brief overview of ethics in the profession, and tools for ethical analysis that will assist supervising practitioners, graduate faculty, and graduate students under their supervision.

Understanding Ethical Boundaries in Student Affairs Work

Given the collaborative nature of student affairs work, professional and personal boundaries can become complicated and ambiguous. A student affairs professional may act in multiple roles in relation to the same person at the same time or over time. For example, a professional may be promoted to supervisor of a long-standing colleague or friend. A master's student upon graduation may become a professional peer of a former supervisor. Such multiple, evolving roles and relationships can blur professional and personal boundaries and raise potential ethical issues.

The purpose of this article is to examine the complexities of dual relationships and the ethical issues that may arise. As a result, we offer tools to (a) identify various perspectives in resolving ethical problems, and (b) examine the issues using a theoretical model. The article includes a case study embedded throughout the article, a brief overview of ethics in the profession, and tools for ethical analysis that will assist supervising practitioners, graduate faculty, and graduate students under their supervision.

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Claire is beginning her career as a first-year hall director at the same institution where she recently completed her master's degree in student affairs. In her position, she supervises two graduate assistants with whom she attended class last year. One of her supervisees, Jane, is a close friend from the cohort behind her.

The hall directors are asked to draft a new on-call policy to ensure 24-hour emergency contact, coverage, and support to resident students. Although professional staff previously covered on-call duty, the new policy, strongly supported by the returning hall directors, proposes to assign this duty to graduate assistant staff. The proposed policy would delegate multiple, consecutive, 24-hour, on-call duty assignments to the graduate students and require them to respond even if attending their evening academic classes. Claire is concerned about the effect this duty would have on the graduate assistants' studies and questions the ability of the graduate assistants to respond promptly to residents' emergency calls if a call is received during class. She is the only new hall director and is hesitant to voice her concerns openly.

Claire speaks privately with Bill, her former graduate assistant supervisor and current hall director colleague, about her apprehension. Bill advises Claire to focus on "what is best for her hall director co-workers." After all, he states, she is no longer a graduate assistant.

Claire discusses the proposal with her friend and supervisee, Jane. Jane shares her anger at what she perceives as another example of the professional staff reducing their workload at the expense of their graduate assistants, without consideration for their academic obligations. Jane presses Claire to object to the policy as a matter of fairness for the graduate assistants.

Finally, Claire consults with her former graduate program professor, Dr. Hart. On one hand, Dr. Hart fears that the new on-call policy compromises the academic responsibilities of graduate assistants. On the other hand, graduate assistantships are on the chopping block. Making too much noise about the "rights" of GAs might jeopardize funding for program students.

Claire's situation, like all ethical dilemmas, is a conflict for which no one resolution is completely satisfactory. The dual relationships she has with Jane and Bill are "slippery" for three obvious reasons. They may cloud her objectivity, others may perceive the dual relationships as reasons for favoritism, and the inherent power differential jeopardizes the autonomy of those with less power. Dr. Hart may struggle to be objective here, as she weighs her concern about the program against how students are treated.

When helping students negotiate these relationships, we might pose some questions to them: Are these relationships necessary? What is the capacity for both harm and for benefit? Can all parties end the relationship at any time? How will others perceive the situation? As Claire's mentor, how might we help her set professional expectations for herself and others? Can Claire serve her residents and the institution while ethically honoring her on-going relationships with colleagues and supervisees? Claire and her colleagues may be more effective in managing relational dilemmas if they use some ethical tools. While no one theory or set of standards provides the "right" approach, each may assist professionals in reflecting on the ethical dimensions and various perspectives embedded in such dilemmas.

Moral-Ethical Perspectives in Education Settings

Not only philosophical underpinnings but also our core beliefs and values inform our understanding of ethics. The distinctions across moral theorists such as Kohlberg and Gilligan are well documented. Kohlberg (1981) advanced a theory of morality that focused primarily on a universal concept of justice. Alternately, Gilligan (1993) wrote that moral decision making involved the sanctity of relationships over the sanctity of the individual. Still others (e.g., Liddell, 2012) suggested that moral maturity is the ability to practice moral

voices—care and justice—in decision making. In Claire's situation, advancing fairness may harm her relationships. However, Claire may not be aware of how her behavior and subsequent decisions affect others (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 1999). Rest and associates (1999) maintained that there are four psychological components of moral maturity: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character. As Claire thinks about the consequences of different actions, it is important to recognize the issues, make intelligent judgments, and have the motivation and courage to take action on moral issues (Rest et al., 1999).

On one hand, Clare's loyalty to her co-workers and department would align her with the new policy. On the other hand, her obligation as a friend, coupled with the influence her mentor may exert on her thinking, would have Claire working to protect the graduate assistants, putting friendships first. She is challenged to clarify her dual relationships loyalties and to assess the consequences of the various choices. Ultimately it will be her responsibility to have the courage to take action.

Ethical Standards in Student Affairs Work

Although there have been many individual pioneers in the student affairs field, the development of professional associations paved the way for graduate programs and curricula to support professional preparation. Today both ACPA (2006) and NASPA (1990) published standards for ethical professional practice. These standards are evident not only in the ethical codes of professional associations but also in the emergence of common competencies in higher education.

Unlike more regulated fields such as counseling or law, where the public trust is codified by laws and licensure, professionalism on the college campus is a voluntary pursuit. Despite a lack of standardized curriculum in preparation programs, conversations about standards of practice have occurred over the past 40 years, leading to the creation of the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) in 1979 (Komives & Arminio, 2011) and later to the Professional Competencies in Student Affairs (ACPA/NASPA, 2010). Collectively, these standards—ethical guidelines, CAS standards, and professional competencies—provide important frameworks for articulating professional expectations.

The professional codes of higher education associations are grounded in the ethical principles authored by Kitchener (1985), including respecting autonomy, nonmaleficence (doing no harm), benefiting others, promoting justice, and being faithful. Kitchener's framework of ethical decision making provides a helpful, hierarchical model, moving from the lower-level, external guidelines (professional codes) to a higher-level internal compass (personally-held principles and values). When conflict occurs at the lower level of the model, she suggests moving up the hierarchy.

In Claire's case, consulting the professional codes can provide valuable ethical guidance to her as she deals with her dilemma. She notices in the ACPA Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards (2006) "that conflicts among students, colleagues, or the institution should be resolved without diminishing respect for or appropriate obligations to any party involved" (p. 4). She sees that the NASPA Standards of Professional Practice (1990) suggests, "Members execute professional responsibilities with fairness and impartiality and show equal consideration to individuals regardless of status or position" (Standard 7). Claire interprets these statements to mean that in this situation, she should clarify her obligations with all parties (Jane, Bill, Dr. Hart, and her institution), respecting her personal and collegial relationships, but not be overly influenced by those relationships. She should focus most on the merits and drawbacks of the proposed on-call policy in her decision. Both of these ethical guidelines also strongly assert that student affairs professionals have obligations to support the development of students, which makes Claire question if graduate assistants are viewed

primarily as students or employees. More importantly, the proposed on-call policy should be evaluated in terms of the likely effect it will have on residence hall students in an emergency.

Using Ethical Principles in Decision-Making

In the event of conflict found in rules and codes, Kitchener directed us to examine the underlying ethical principles, which provide a general framework for naming the issues at stake. These general principles provide another useful tool for examining perspective, as they bridge from the external to the internal.

1. Do no harm (nonmaleficence): The most fundamental of our obligations, Claire should be encouraged to promote positive outcomes. Her supervisors should respect the well-being of the parties without exploiting their power and status. What will be the outcome of this policy on residents, graduate students, and others with less status?

2. Benefit others: This ethical principle guides us toward understanding what is possible in the context of what we know (and should know) about the outcomes of our work. How do we balance benefiting many against harming a few? In this case, Claire is encouraged to consider the potential for the greatest good.

3. Respect autonomy: Rational decision making and adequate information are required for self-determination. However, mental state (e.g., impairment) and age influence this competence. When Claire and her coworkers promote autonomy, they are fostering empowerment, independence, and freedom of choice.

4. Promote justice: Promoting dignity, respect, and fairness does not necessarily require Claire to treat all people the same, but it does require an extension of fairness, openness, and impartiality.

5. Be faithful: All parties involved in this dilemma would do well to audit their duties and obligations, which are keeping our word to others, telling the truth, honoring promises and confidences, respecting others, "being professional," and being true to the institution's expectations. Claire has multiple and competing duties. She needs to stay true to her duties and work to cultivate trust among all individuals affected.

The outcome of using these five ethical principles to analyze Claire's situation is evidence that the dilemma cuts across competing principles. Claire should examine how this policy aligns with her own professional values as related to the principles. She should also weigh the needs and desires of her department colleagues with those of the graduate assistants and undergraduate residents. Claire cannot simply argue that the policy is unethical because it overburdens the GAs, nor can she attempt to repeal the policy because of her friendships (namely her friendship with Jane) with the affected individuals. She must balance the needs of a variety of individuals and considerations, reflect on her personal and professional affiliations, and preserve fidelity to her responsibilities to the resident hall students. A beneficial resolution cannot be achieved without attention to both individual and institutional perspectives.

Toward Individual Moral Agency

Although an understanding of the more general principles is helpful in decision making, it is not enough. When guidance cannot be found in the broad ethical principles, Kitchener (1985) suggested we get comfortable with a personal ethical theory that helps define a sound moral compass—tools to help professionals answer to themselves and stay true to their personal ethical codes. Having a personal moral or ethical theory, coupled with reflective habits, can provide a compass of consistent reasoning when trying to resolve higher-level ethical conflicts.

Bowen, Bessette, and Chan (2006) took a similar stance when they argued that graduate programs should not be teaching a particular set of values but rather should teach the process of deconstructing ethical issues by "analyzing and understanding behaviors and teaching respect for the perception of others" (p. 5). As a result, practicing reflective, insightful, and self-critical examination serves an important aspect of moral agency.

Learning Ethics Along the Way

This call for professional socialization undergirds the importance of graduate programs to teach ethical principles, codes, and processes for decision making. With professional codes, principles, and values in mind, how can supervising practitioners and faculty support professionals-in-training such as Claire, particularly as she and her classmates are learning the rules and expectations as they go? We offer some suggestions here.

Clarify and Reinforce the Rules

Helping professionals-in-training understand what their peers, supervisors, institutions, and students expect of them is a fundamental aspect of their apprenticeship and learning. Institutional policies direct Claire's next steps. Claire would benefit from a staff discussion about how institutional rules are influenced by ethical foundations. Coverage of specific expectations and responsibilities to the institution should be integrated in her new staff orientation and on-going professional development.

Clarify and Articulate Values

A major developmental task for young adults is to identify and act upon deeply held beliefs and values (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and all professionals, regardless of their experience or longevity in the field, can help others negotiate the informal ethical curriculum we develop in our relationships with students. New professionals like Claire should be encouraged to reflect on their personal values and the ways they "bring their values to work." This reflection is an important step toward professional integrity.

Be Someone Worth Emulating

It is an old adage that students learn to be ethical by watching ethical elders. Palmer (1998) advocated for a personal involvement in teaching—on both the parts of learner and teacher—and suggested that effective teaching requires us to integrate our identity and our integrity into our practice. Doing so requires deep knowledge of ourselves and others, and the kind of personal reflection that can lead to transformation.

Being a self-aware educator has benefits for teaching and learning because new professionals and graduate students frequently cite the importance of role models in their professional growth. Claire would benefit from consulting with a trusted colleague, whom she might ask, "What would you do?" as she attempted to ask Dr, Hart in her consultation with him.

Develop Habits of Reflection Such as Active Listening

True ethical growth may come about in the context of a caring relationship, in which professionals listen to students and protégés deeply, while gently challenging them to resolve dissonance and cognitive conflict about particular situations (Liddell, 2012). These conversations can guide individuals toward more contemplative practice and support them through resistance, defensiveness, and self-justification, all of which can become obstacles to ethical learning.

In summary, ethical behavior is not only a competency (ACPA/NASPA). It is also a reflection of values, codified in the agreed-upon standards of our field, which are internalized, practiced, and designed to safeguard the welfare of those affected by our work. The regular practice of these values helps develop integrity, as we work toward more consistency between our inner lives (our thoughts, beliefs, and values) and our outer lives (our choices and behaviors). It is the responsibility of us all—faculty, supervisors, and professional colleagues—to assist in creating environments where ethical questions and values are routinely examined in our work with each other.

The student affairs literature frequently cites the importance of values and ethics in our work. In an interview with author Thomas (2002), Jon Dalton said,

> The core values I have prized most in my professional work are integrity, respect for others, and compassion. Integrity is honesty in action, faithfulness to one's word, and consistency in word and action. I think it is the bedrock value of effective student affairs leadership. (p. 64)

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