Utilizing an Ethical Decision Making Framework in Student Affairs Practice

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In the student affairs profession, ethical dilemmas related to a variety of situations can present themselves to student affairs practitioners and prove problematic. While practitioners may face issues in which the ethically “correct” decisions and methods of resolving the issues seem obvious, others may be more ambiguous. As it is important for those working in student affairs to remain consistent in their work in order to serve students most effectively and fairly, they must approach each ethical dilemma they face in a uniform way. As such, it is imperative that student affairs practitioners adopt an ethical decision making framework and utilize it when faced with ethical dilemmas in their work. This paper will demonstrate how student affairs practitioners can employ an ethical decision making process by illustrating how Steinman, Richardson, and McEnroe’s (1998) seven-step model can be applied to a fictitious ethical dilemma involving a student affairs practitioner working in career services.

Identify the Problem

In the case of Lucas, a student affairs practitioner working in the career center for the engineering program at a large science and technology focused university, he and his colleagues organized an annual career fair attended by companies looking for potential interns and employees, an important event that contributes to the university’s national rankings. While a total of 230 companies initially registered to attend the career fair, a record number compared to past registrations for this event, only 192 companies actually attended the career fair, with this being a far from stellar attendance. Despite the fact that the event was considered to be a success by the students and company representatives that attended, as well as the career center staff, when asked to document the event, Lucas was instructed by his supervisor to record only the number of companies that registered for the event, rather than also including the number that
actually attended. As a result, the ethical problem that Lucas faces is that his supervisor has asked him to behave unethically by requesting that he document misleading information about a hosted event. This problem is compounded by the fact that the dean of engineering has requested information on the companies that attended the event so she can thank them for their attendance, and a press release highlighting the event is set to go out to the public as well. Consequently, Lucas struggles with whether he should follow his supervisor’s instructions and document the event as if all companies that registered were in attendance, or reveal that only 192 companies were present at the career fair.

Identify Potential Issues Involved

After identifying the ethical problem that he faces, Lucas must also identify the potential issues associated with it. One such issue involves the university’s national rankings as affected by the career fair. It is likely that one of the reasons that Lucas’ supervisor asked him to record only the high number of companies that registered for the event is due to her concern for the university’s reputation. Though referring to business contexts, Cohen (1993) states that “unethical behavior in the workplace occurs when management places inordinately strong emphasis on goal attainment without a corresponding emphasis on following legitimate procedures” (p. 343), and this reality certainly appears to play a role in the unethical directions that Lucas’ supervisor has given him. As she is immensely concerned with the way in which the career fair can contribute to the university’s national rankings and how these rankings can further affect the institution, she is less concerned with accurately reflecting the event’s turnout through documentation, and thus behaving ethically.

Another potential issue associated with the ethical problem that Lucas faces has to do with the fact that he is a recent graduate and new employee at the career center. As he is freshly
out of graduate school and most likely working in his first full-time student affairs position, he likely struggles with perceived inconsistency between what he was taught in his master’s program and what is expected of him by his supervisor. While his master’s program most likely stressed the importance of behaving ethically when working in the field, Lucas is being asked by his new supervisor, an individual who has authority over him, to behave unethically. As a result, there is incongruence between the values that Lucas was taught as associated with the student affairs profession and the message that his supervisor is sending him regarding the type of behavior that is acceptable in the particular office he works in (Cohen, 1993).

It is probable that while Lucas does not want to engage in unethical behavior, he also does not want to risk angering his supervisor to the point that his position in the career center could be jeopardized. Moreover, being a new employee, Lucas most likely also worries that if he chooses to behave ethically and defy his supervisor’s orders, there may be other consequences that could result short of him being fired. Onorato (2013) explains the connection between ethical leadership and bullying in the workplace, and given that his supervisor does not seem to emphasize the importance of ethical behavior, Lucas may worry that he could be the subject of unfavorable treatment if he does not adhere to his supervisor’s request.

**Review Relevant Ethical Guidelines**

After identifying the problem and the potential issues associated with it, Lucas must review the relevant ethical guidelines that pertain to his situation. As he is a member of the American Counseling Association and College Student Educators International, he must adhere to the *ACA Code of Ethics* and the *ACPA Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards*. Thus, he must consult each of these documents in order to determine which standards apply to his particular ethical problem.
In regards to the *ACA Code of Ethics*, many of the standards in Section H: Resolving Ethical Issues apply to Lucas’ ethical problem, as this section aims to highlight the steps one should take when faced with an ethical dilemma (American Counseling Association, 2005). Specifically, standards H.1.a., H.2.a., H.2.b., H.2.c., H.2.d., and H.3. are most applicable to Lucas’ situation. As standard H.1.a. states that all counselors are responsible for understanding and adhering to the *ACA Code of Ethics*, Lucas must consult with the code in order to determine whether following his supervisor’s directions would be unethical, as not knowing this information would not be a valid excuse if he is later questioned about his behavior (American Counseling Association, 2005).

In order to adhere to standard H.2.a., Lucas must take action if he determines that his supervisor is in fact behaving unethically. As standard H.2.b. maintains that informal resolutions with colleagues engaging in unethical behaviors are desirable, Lucas must attempt to resolve the issue with his supervisor first before trying to do so in a more formal way. If Lucas feels that his supervisor’s directions may cause an immense amount of harm and the issue cannot be resolved informally, he must adhere to standard H.2.c. and report the situation to formal authorities. If Lucas is unsure whether or not the situation he faces violates the *ACA Code of Ethics*, he should follow the directions laid out in standard H.2.d. and consult with his colleagues or other authoritative figures. Lastly, in the case that his supervisor is engaging in unethical behavior, Lucas must adhere to standard H.3. and cooperate with any investigations that may result through enforcing the *ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association, 2005).

In terms of the *ACPA Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards*, standards 1.1, 1.2, 1.4 of the first section, Professional Responsibility and Competence and standards 3.2, 3.3, and 3.6 of the third section, Responsibility to the Institution most specifically apply to Lucas’
situation. In order to adhere to standard 1.1, Lucas must conduct himself in a professional way and not behave unethically, as the student affairs profession stresses the importance of ethics in the workplace. As a result, if the directions that his supervisor gave him do conflict with the ethical standards of the student affairs profession, Lucas must not follow them. Moreover, Lucas must further uphold the ethical standards of the profession by “advocating the use of ethical thinking” (College Student Educators International, 2006) in his workplace and following standard 1.2, while also following standard 1.4 by continuously examining his own behavior and seeking consultation with colleagues when necessary.

In order to observe standard 3.2, Lucas must try and resolve the problem that he faces with his supervisor, especially if he feels that the values he subscribes to and those of his institution are at odds due to the directions his supervisor gave him. If this is the case, Lucas can try to enact change in his office, and if this does not work, he could voluntarily leave his position and search for a job at an institution that he perceives as being a better fit for him in terms of values and emphasis placed on ethical behavior. In attempting to communicate with his supervisor regarding the situation, he must observe standard 3.3 and ensure that he approaches her in a respectful way. Lastly, it is important for Lucas to point out to his supervisor that her desire to portray the outcome of the career fair in a misleading way could impact the career center’s effectiveness, thus adhering to standard 3.6.

Obtain Consultation

In determining how to deal with the ethical problem that he faces, Lucas must obtain consultation through various resources. One way that Lucas can do this is by consulting with existing literature regarding related ethical dilemmas in student affairs. Of course, as Lucas previously identified the respective ethical standards associated with his problem that are
indicated in the ACA Code of Ethics and ACPA Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards as dictated by Steinman, Richardson, and McEnroe’s (1998) third stage of ethical decision making, he can also review this literature. Moreover, Lucas can seek consultation with the colleagues that he worked with to organize the career fair. Understanding how his colleagues view the situation and the implications they believe to be applicable given the various courses of action that he could take could help widen his perspective and consider potential issues associated with his problem that he may have otherwise overlooked. Aside from his colleagues, Lucas can consult with a trusted mentor that is experienced in the field of student affairs and could offer him much needed guidance.

Consider Potential Consequences, Determine Course of Action

There are numerous potential consequences associated with different courses of action that Lucas must consider after he has identified his ethical problem and the potential issues involved, reviewed the relevant ethical guidelines, and obtained consultation with the literature and others in his field. While Lucas could tell his supervisor that he is not comfortable with adhering to her request to only report the number of companies that registered for the event, there are various consequences associated with this course of action. Although his supervisor could respect his decision and not press the matter any further, she could also pressure him to do as she says by alluding to the fact that if he does not, he will not have a good experience working in the career center. Another potential consequence is that his supervisor could not say anything regarding his decision, but could treat him unfairly compared to the other staff members who work for her. Of course, given that he is a relatively new addition to the career center, it is also possible that Lucas’ supervisor could fire him, citing him as incompatible with the office and its mission as the reason for doing so. In addition, by choosing not to adhere to his supervisor’s
directions, news of the unspectacular company turnout at the career fair could hurt the university’s national rankings and reputation while casting a negative light on the engineering program’s career center.

Aside from telling his boss that he is uncomfortable with her request and will not only document the number of companies that registered the career fair while ignoring the number that actually attended the event, another course of action he could take would in fact be to adhere to her request and do just that. By deciding to take this course of action, Lucas could face the consequence that the dean of engineering may find out that he was deceitful in misleading her about the number of companies that actually attended the event. While a colleague of his could reveal this information to the dean, either accidentally or purposefully, a company that received a letter of thanks for attending the event but was not actually in attendance could also contact her and reveal this information. This could lead to her being embarrassed for herself and the institution, as it would appear that issues related to communication affect staff efficiency, and she could thus insist that Lucas is fired. Of course, if the press release regarding the event stated that 230 companies were in attendance, but news was then released to the public that this was not an accurate figure, the university would not be portrayed positively. This could certainly result in either the dean of engineering or another administrative figure stating that Lucas must be fired.

Lastly, Lucas could adhere to his supervisor’s instructions and nothing could come out of this course of action. Neither the dean of engineering nor any other member of the campus or greater community could find out that Lucas documented the career fair’s turnout in a misleading way. However, Lucas could potentially have to deal with overwhelming guilt that he decided to take this course of action, and this may result in him doubting his effectiveness as a student affairs practitioner. He could also feel uncomfortable in his work environment and continue to
make unethical decisions in order to be considered a satisfactory employee of the career center, as Cohen (1993) explains that this is a very real situation that occurs in work environments that communicate the idea that results are of upmost importance and unethical methods can be used to achieve them. Of course, it is also possible that Lucas could choose to take this course of action and not face any subsequent guilt or discomfort in working at the career center.

Enumerate Consequences of Various Decisions

In enumerating the consequences of the various decisions that he could make regarding the ethical problem that he faces, Lucas must determine the best and worst consequences that could result from the decisions he could potentially make. The best outcome that could result from the situation would be that Lucas would tell his boss that ethically he cannot agree to document only the number of company registrations in the report of the event and thus provide misleading information to the dean of engineering, campus, and greater community, and she would respect his dedication to professionalism and ethical decision making as a result. The worst outcome that could result from the situation would be that Lucas either chooses not to document the event the way his supervisor tells him to and he is fired by her, or he instead decides to follow her orders and is fired by either the dean of engineering or another university administrator if his deceitful behavior is revealed. Falling in between these extremes are the other previously mentioned consequences that could result based on the decision Lucas makes, as aside from his supervisor simply accepting his decision to behave ethically and record both how many companies registered for the career fair and how many actually attended, none of the potential consequences are particularly favorable.

Decide on Best Course of Action

After identifying the problem and the potential issues involved with it, reviewing the
relevant ethical guidelines laid out in the *ACA Code of Ethics* and *ACPA Statement of Ethical Principles and Standards*, obtaining consultation with literature and individuals within his field, considering the potential consequences of various courses of action, and enumerating the consequences of various decisions he could make, Lucas must finally decide on the best course of action given the ethical problem that he has faced. As an individual who has been educated through his graduate program on the importance of adhering to ethical codes and understands that as a counselor in this area, he cannot behave unethically and still effectively do his job (Shallcross, 2011), he would likely decide to disobey his supervisor’s request to document misleading information about the career fair that his office hosted. In doing so, he would explain the reasoning behind his decision to his supervisor and express his desire to work to improve the success of future career fairs, recognizing their importance to the university’s national rankings and reputation.

**Conclusion**

As illustrated in this paper through the application of Steinman, Richardson, and McEnroe’s (1998) ethical decision making model to a fictitious scenario involving a student affairs practitioner who has been asked by his supervisor to engage in unethical behavior, it is vital for individuals working in student affairs to engage in a process of ethical decision making through the use of such a model. Doing so is critical in order to ensure that they have considered the various factors associated with each identified situation, obtained consultation with all available and appropriate resources, and noted the implications linked to each potential course of action prior to making any decisions regarding the matter. Through the employment of ethical decision making models, student affairs practitioners can approach ethical dilemmas in a uniform fashion and make more informed, fair decisions for all parties involved.
References


