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### A Profile of the Ethical Professor: Student Views

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# A PROFILE OF THE ETHICAL PROFESSOR

## STUDENT VIEWS

Tara L. Kuther

**Abstract.** Two studies examined college students' perceptions of professors' ethical responsibilities. Students agreed that professors must demonstrate respect for students, teach objectively, and grade honestly, and they should not tolerate cheating or plagiarism. Results indicate that students expect professors to act with professionalism, to employ a vast base of content knowledge, and to show concern for student welfare. Many view professors as exemplars of scholarship and professional behavior. Professors must be cognizant of student expectations and should reflect on their behavior both in and out of the classroom.

Ethics education has been recognized as an essential component of the liberal arts curriculum because it encourages the development of critical thinking and fosters the values and standards that guide responsible behavior (APA 1992, 2002; AAC&U 1985; Baum et al. 1993; Fisher and Kuther 1997; Hobbs 1948; McGovern 1993). Proponents of the ethics across the curriculum movement recommend that ethics permeate all undergraduate courses to illustrate that it pervades all aspects of life (Ashmore and Starr 1991; Navarre 1994). Despite the

increasing attention to integrating ethics across the undergraduate curriculum, recent reports of the prevalence of cheating and plagiarism have led faculty to question the integrity of their students (Kleiner and Lord 1999; Sohn 2001). For example, it has been estimated that more than 80 percent of college students have cheated or plagiarized material at least once (Pullen et al. 2000). Why is academic dishonesty rampant?

Some scholars point to faculty's failure to "serve as exemplars of decent moral behavior" (Callahan 1982, 336), yet the scant data on this topic indicate that faculty rarely engage in unethical actions (Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope 1991). What are the ethical responsibili-

ties of faculty? The American Association of University Professors (1987) has outlined a statement of professional ethics, but the statement is not binding and often is not acknowledged (Birch, Elliott, and Trankel 1999). Ethics in academia rarely is broached in the literature. The few discussions of academic ethics to date tend to focus on sexual harassment, the rights of participants, teaching values to students, and scientific misconduct (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Allen 1993). The ethical obligations and ambiguities in teaching largely have been ignored (Kuther 2002; in press). Understanding how college students view their professors' actions may help delineate the professional role of teaching professors.

In a landmark study, Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Allen (1993) surveyed nearly five hundred Midwest and West Coast college students about the ethical nature of more than one hundred behaviors in which faculty might engage. Eighty percent or more of the students agreed that unethical behaviors on the part of faculty include dishonest grading practices (e.g., using a grading procedure that does not measure what students have learned, allowing how much a student is liked to influence grading, or giving every student an "A" regardless of the quality of work). Unprofessional interactions with students (e.g., insulting or ridiculing a student or flirting with students), unprofessional classroom practices (e.g., teaching while under the influence of

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drugs or alcohol, requiring students to disclose sensitive information in class discussions, or ridiculing a student in class), and professional dishonesty (e.g., ignoring strong evidence of cheating or including misleading information in a student's letter of recommendation) also were seen as unethical behaviors on the part of faculty. A decade has passed since the publication of their initial study; therefore, the present study provides an updated account of college student views of the ethics of faculty behavior. The present article specifically describes two research studies designed to provide information about how college students perceive the ethical responsibilities of professors. Part 1 examines students' ratings of the ethical nature of twenty-five behaviors in which faculty might engage. Part 2 gathers qualitative data to examine students' perspectives on eight behaviors in which faculty might engage.

### Part 1

Given current findings that cheating and plagiarism are commonplace among college students, as well as recent criticisms of the ethical integrity of professors (Callahan 1982; Pullen et al. 2000), this study provides an updated portrait of students' views of the ethical professor. Specifically, students rated the ethical dimension of twenty-five actions in which professors might engage.

### METHOD

Participants were 249 undergraduate students (72 percent female and 38 percent freshmen) enrolled in introductory and advanced courses in psychology at a public university in the Northeast. Participants completed a survey adapted from Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Allen (1993) that asked them to rate the ethical appropriateness of twenty-five behaviors. Participants responded on a five-item scale: (1) not ethical under any circumstance; (2) ethical under rare circumstances; (3) ethical under some circumstances; (4) ethical under most circumstances; and (5) ethical under all circumstances. The behaviors included academic honesty (e.g., ignoring cheating or plagiarism), student-professor relationships (e.g., hugging, asking for favors, accepting gifts), teaching (e.g., teaching

material that has not been mastered, teaching unprepared, using films to reduce work), drug and alcohol use (e.g., while teaching, in one's personal life), and respect for students (e.g., revealing confidential disclosures, ridiculing a student).

### RESULTS

Table 1 presents the mean, standard deviation, and skew for each item. The means indicate that students viewed most behaviors as not ethical under any circumstance or as ethical under rare circumstances. Several items were highly positively skewed, indicating high levels of student agreement on the unethical nature of each.

Table 2 presents student responses for each item. Ten behaviors emerged as particularly unethical (75 percent or more of students rated them as never ethical or ethical under rare circumstances): substance use while teaching (97 percent for

teaching while under the influence of alcohol and teaching while under the influence of cocaine or other illegal drugs); lack of respect for students (97 percent for insulting or ridiculing a student in his or her absence, 96 percent for telling colleagues confidential disclosures made by a student, 92 percent for insulting or ridiculing a student in his or her presence, and 78 percent for telling the class confidential disclosures made by a student without revealing the student's identity); dishonest grading practices (91 percent for ignoring strong evidence of cheating, 86 percent for allowing a student's likability to influence grading, and 88 percent for ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment); and nonobjective teaching (89 percent for criticizing all theoretical orientations except those personally preferred, and 88 percent for teaching content in a nonobjective or incomplete manner).

**TABLE 1. Mean, Standard Deviation, and Skew**

| Behavior   | Mean | SD   | Skew |
|--|------|------|------|
| 1. Ignoring strong evidence of cheating  | 1.43 | .83  | 2.21 |
| 2. Dating a student  | 2.13 | .99  | .68  |
| 3. Asking small favors from students   | 2.84 | .91  | -.05 |
| 4. Hugging a student   | 2.90 | .97  | -.10 |
| 5. Accepting a student's expensive gift  | 2.23 | .98  | .47  |
| 6. Teaching when too distressed to be effective  | 2.10 | .91  | .50  |
| 7. Ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment  | 1.47 | .78  | 1.72 |
| 8. Accepting a student's invitation to a party   | 2.53 | 1.01 | .20  |
| 9. Teaching material that has not been mastered  | 2.16 | .98  | .61  |
| 10. Accepting a student's inexpensive gift   | 3.18 | 1.14 | -.34 |
| 11. Teaching a class without adequate preparation that day   | 2.40 | .92  | .09  |
| 12. Teaching while under the influence of alcohol  | 1.13 | 1.00 | .51  |
| 13. Teaching content in a nonobjective or incomplete manner  | 1.63 | .77  | 1.34 |
| 14. Teaching while under the influence of cocaine or other illegal drugs   | 1.10 | .49  | 5.67 |
| 15. Allowing a student's likability to influence grading   | 1.49 | .81  | 1.68 |
| 16. Using profanity in lectures  | 2.64 | 1.00 | -.05 |
| 17. Using films to fill class time and reduce teaching work  | 2.38 | .94  | .37  |
| 18. Telling colleagues confidential disclosures made by a student  | 1.29 | .63  | 2.76 |
| 19. Failing to update lecture notes when reteaching a course   | 2.03 | .94  | .84  |
| 20. Criticizing all theoretical orientations except those personally preferred   | 1.50 | .74  | 1.46 |
| 21. Using cocaine or other illegal drugs in his or her personal (nonteaching) life                                     | 1.90 | 1.19 | 1.10 |
| 22. Insulting or ridiculing a student in the student's presence  | 1.31 | .72  | 2.70 |
| 23. Insulting or ridiculing a student in his or her absence  | 1.21 | .55  | 3.77 |
| 24. Becoming sexually active with a student only after he or she has completed the course and the grade has been filed | 2.66 | 1.31 | .30  |
| 25. Telling the class confidential disclosures made by a student without revealing the student's identity              | 1.85 | .99  | 1.09 |

**TABLE 2. Student Ratings of the Ethical Nature of Twenty-five Professorial Behaviors (Percentages Shown)**

| Behavior   | 1<br>Not ethical<br>under any<br>circumstance | 2<br>Ethical<br>under rare<br>circumstances | 3<br>Ethical<br>under some<br>circumstances |
|--|---|---|---|
| 1. Ignoring strong evidence of cheating  | 72  | 19  | 4   |
| 2. Dating a student  | 31  | 33  | 3   |
| 3. Asking small favors from students   | 8   | 25  | 40  |
| 4. Hugging a student   | 9   | 23  | 43  |
| 5. Accepting a student's expensive gift  | 26  | 35  | 30  |
| 6. Teaching when too distressed to be effective  | 29  | 39  | 20  |
| 7. Ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment  | 68  | 20  | 9   |
| 8. Accepting a student's invitation to a party   | 17  | 34  | 32  |
| 9. Teaching material that has not been mastered  | 29  | 37  | 20  |
| 10. Accepting a student's inexpensive gift   | 11  | 15  | 33  |
| 11. Teaching a class without adequate preparation that day   | 19  | 33  | 38  |
| 12. Teaching while under the influence of alcohol  | 92  | 5   | 20  |
| 13. Teaching content in a nonobjective or incomplete manner  | 52  | 36  | 10  |
| 14. Teaching while under the influence of cocaine or other illegal drugs   | 95  | 2   | 2   |
| 15. Allowing a student's likability to influence grading   | 67  | 19  | 12  |
| 16. Using profanity in lectures  | 16  | 26  | 40  |
| 17. Using films to fill class time and reduce teaching work  | 18  | 39  | 33  |
| 18. Telling colleagues confidential disclosures made by a student  | 78  | 18  | 2   |
| 19. Failing to update lecture notes when reteaching a course   | 32  | 41  | 21  |
| 20. Criticizing all theoretical orientations except those personally preferred   | 62  | 27  | 10  |
| 21. Using cocaine or other illegal drugs in his or her personal (nonteaching) life                                     | 55  | 17  | 15  |
| 22. Insulting or ridiculing a student in the student's presence  | 80  | 12  | 6   |
| 23. Insulting or ridiculing a student in his or her absence  | 84  | 13  | 2   |
| 24. Becoming sexually active with a student only after he or she has completed the course and the grade has been filed | 24  | 24  | 25  |
| 25. Telling the class confidential disclosures made by a student without revealing the student's identity              | 47  | 31  | 15  |

Students demonstrated more ambiguous perspectives (60 percent to 75 percent agreement as never or rarely ethical) with regard to several behaviors: excellence in teaching (73 percent for failing to update lecture notes when reteaching a course, 68 percent for teaching when too distressed to be effective, and 66 percent for teaching material that has not been mastered); student-professor relationships (64 percent for dating a student and 61 percent for accepting a student's expensive gift); and drug use in a professor's personal (nonteaching) life (72 percent).

Chi square analyses compared ratings by freshmen students and upperclass students for all items ( $\alpha = .002$  to correct for multiple analyses). Only two comparisons emerged as significant. Seventy-six percent of upperclass students viewed ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism as unethical, as compared with 54 percent of freshmen,  $P^2(3, N = 246) = 16.79, p = .002$ . Ninety-five percent of upperclass-

men and 81 percent of freshmen viewed criticizing all theoretical orientations except those personally preferred as unethical or as ethical only in rare circumstances,  $P^2(3, N = 245) = 14.72, p = .002$ .

## DISCUSSION

Students generally agreed that professors must not use alcohol or substances while teaching. They also are morally obligated to demonstrate respect for students by not ridiculing them or revealing confidential disclosures. In students' eyes, ethical professors teach objectively, grade honestly, and do not tolerate cheating or plagiarism. These findings are remarkably similar to those from a survey of faculty ratings of professorial ethics (Birch, Elliott, and Trankel 1999), suggesting that faculty and students share similar perspectives on the ethical professor.

Most interesting in light of recent accounts of the prevalence of plagiarism and cheating is that 72 percent and 68

percent of students reported that it was never or rarely ethical, respectively, for professors to ignore cheating and plagiarism. Freshmen students tended to view ignoring plagiarism as less problematic for professors than did upperclass students, suggesting that freshmen may require additional socialization into a culture of academic honesty and integrity.

## Part 2

Given that students agreed to a surprising extent on the scope of unethical behavior on the part of professors, the second research study examines issues about which students were more ambiguous: relationships with students, excellence in teaching, and using illegal drugs in one's personal life. The following items in particular were assessed: dating a student, accepting an expensive gift from a student, becoming sexually active with a student only after the student has completed the course and the grade has

**TABLE 3. Student Ratings of the Ethical Nature of Eight Professorial Behaviors (Percentages Shown)**

| Behavior  | 1<br>Not ethical<br>under any<br>circumstance | 2<br>Ethical<br>under rare<br>circumstances | 3<br>Ethical<br>under some<br>circumstances | 4<br>Ethical<br>under most<br>circumstances | 5<br>Ethical<br>under all<br>circumstances |
|---|---|---|---|---|--|
| 1. Dating a student   | 35  | 34  | 19  | 5   | 7  |
| 2. Accepting a student's expensive gift   | 29  | 33  | 29  | 4   | 5  |
| 3. Teaching when too distressed to be effective   | 26  | 25  | 35  | 12  | 2  |
| 4. Teaching material that has not been mastered   | 27  | 36  | 31  | 4   | 2  |
| 5. Failing to update lecture notes when reteaching a course   | 29  | 15  | 35  | 17  | 4  |
| 6. Using cocaine or other illegal drugs in his or her personal (nonteaching) life                                     | 53  | 19  | 7   | 8   | 13   |
| 7. Ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment   | 75  | 19  | 2   | 2   | 2  |
| 8. Becoming sexually active with a student only after he or she has completed the course and the grade has been filed | 24  | 22  | 13  | 23  | 18   |

been filed, teaching when too distressed to be effective, teaching material that has not been mastered, failing to update lecture notes when reteaching a course, and using cocaine or other illegal drugs in his or her personal (nonteaching) life. Because of recent concerns about the rise in plagiarism among college students (Kleiner and Lord 1999; Sohn 2001), an item on plagiarism ("ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment") was added.

## METHOD

Participants were fifty-eight undergraduate students (66 percent female and 21 percent freshmen) enrolled in introductory and advanced courses in psychology at a public university in the Northeast. Similar to part 1, participants completed a survey that asked them to rate the ethical appropriateness of eight behaviors. Participants responded on a five-item scale: (1) not ethical under any circumstance; (2) ethical under rare circumstances; (3) ethical under some circumstances; (4) ethical under most circumstances; and (5) ethical under all circumstances. After rating the ethical appropriateness, students were instructed to write a short answer response explaining why the behavior was ethical or unethical.

## RESULTS

Table 3 presents student responses for each item. Chi square analyses compar-

ing the ratings generated by participants in part 1 with those of part 2 ( $\chi^2 = .006$  to correct for multiple analyses) revealed no differences among the ratings provided by participants across the two samples. Participant short answer responses were analyzed for themes and were categorized accordingly.

### *Relationships with Students*

Three items examined participant views of the ethics of professor-student relationships:

*Accepting a student's expensive gift.* Sixty-two percent of participants indicated that accepting an expensive gift is rarely or never ethical on the part of a professor. Most argued that an expensive gift could be interpreted as a bribe or persuasive device and may be permissible only after the semester ends or after graduation:

"Why would a student give an expensive gift unless he or she wants a better grade?"

"This is appropriate only if the teacher-student relationship has been terminated prior to the gift. During the relationship a teacher's acceptance of such a gift sends mixed messages to the student and his or her peers."

Three participants suggested that accepting an expensive gift would interfere with the normal professor-student relationship:

"This is not appropriate because the teacher is getting paid for the job and gifts would

interfere with the normal student-teacher relationship."

Twenty-nine percent of participants reported that it is sometimes permissible for a professor to accept an expensive gift from a student, and 9 percent reported that it is often or always ethical. Many students explained that accepting an expensive gift is ethical if the professor has a pre-existing relationship with the student:

"Perhaps if the professor was a friend of the family or had a profound effect on the student, it might be appropriate."

"It depends on the relationship between the student and the professor. If the relationship is a friendship and both parties are mutual in this friendship then it seems fine to me, but if it seems as though the student is using bribery then I don't think it should be accepted."

Others argued that accepting an expensive gift from a student is appropriate if the gift is a token of the student's appreciation:

"Sometimes students just want to show their appreciation for what their teacher has done for them without expecting anything in return."

*Dating a student.* Sixty-nine percent of participants rated dating a student as rarely or never ethical. Most argued that it leads to favoritism and provides some students with an unfair advantage:

"Dating a student is a complete failure to uphold a professional relationship which

could influence factors such as grading and classroom distractions.”

“A professor’s job is to teach students and to grade students solely on their performance in class and the work they do. If a professor was to date a student, the student wouldn’t be graded fairly, etc.”

A minority of students argued that a relationship with a student disrupts the power differential between professor and student:

“The power dynamic is not egalitarian and the power imbalance inherent to the student-teacher relationship precludes personal autonomy in both relationships. As both lovers and participants in a student-teacher relationship, both stand to lose. This is a time when it is essential to know one is valued and judged based on the merits of one’s ideas and work, not on other criteria. It all becomes confused when boundaries are burned.”

Nineteen percent judged dating a student as sometimes ethical, and 12 percent reported that it was often or always ethical, especially if it occurs after the course has ended. The majority of these respondents argued that dating a student is permissible if it does not interfere with the classroom and if the professor and student are in love:

“Regardless of context, teacher and student are two people with feelings and they can fall in love with one another. Why not? If they feel uncomfortable with gossip, the student may take another class.”

“If the fact that the professor is dating their student does not interfere with school and grading etc, then I don’t see a problem with it, but if it does, then it should not be allowed.”

Interestingly, several participants mentioned that the professor’s age plays a role in how acceptable it is to date a student:

“Usually professors are much older than students; however, if the professor and student are close in age and don’t have a relationship until the course is over, it might be ok.”

“If the professor and the student are around the same age and they can carry out a relationship that won’t affect anything in the classroom then the professor can do it.”

*Becoming sexually active with a student only after he or she has completed the course and the grade has been filed.* Forty-six percent of participants indicated that becoming sexually active with a

student after the grade has been filed is rarely or never ethical. Most of these students explained that there was at least the appearance of impropriety and that the professor’s reputation would suffer:

“I think they would encounter disbelief, the tendency would be to think that an exchange of sorts had taken place.”

“Down the road, the teacher may be accused of having sexual relations with this person while in class. How can the teacher prove that it wasn’t going on until the student was no longer in the class?”

Others explained that sexual relations between professor and student are unethical because they violate the special professor-student relationship:

“Since the grade has already been filed, you won’t have to worry about the relationship being about a better grade. But there should be a professional relationship with all teachers and students. The students are here to learn and the teachers are here to teach, not find a love interest. Plus it would probably look bad from other students’ perspectives.”

Thirteen percent of participants judged becoming sexually involved with a student as sometimes ethical on the part of a professor, especially if the student has graduated:

“If the student has graduated from the college and the relationship begins after graduation then I think it will be ok but if the student is still going to the college but just not taking any more classes with that professor it’s wrong.”

Forty-two percent judged sexual involvement with a student after a course ends as usually or always ethical. Most of the respondents reasoned that such involvement is ethical because the grade has already been filed:

“If they are past where they have to be professional, and emotions won’t hinder their judgment or behavior in class, then that is their business.”

“This is their own choice—both student and teacher and should not be questioned at all. Personal life is personal and should not be related to the profession at all. I don’t think this would interfere with the teacher’s job at all.”

“The student should be allowed to be sexually active with a professor after he or she has completed the course because it has nothing to do with the course or the grade. Sex is on a personal level not a professional level like school is.”

One student warned that sexual involvement with students, even former students, is perilous because it jeopardizes the professor-student bond:

“Depends on the pre-existing relationship. Yes it’s ethical and legal but if you have been a Svengali to this person, they may be overly influenced by your past relationship.”

### *Excellence in Teaching*

Three items examined student perspectives on professors’ roles in the classroom and on ethical issues that may arise in teaching.

*Teaching when too distressed to be effective.* Fifty-one percent of participants judged teaching when too distressed to be effective as rarely or never ethical. Most argued that in such situations class time would be wasted, which hurts students:

“If they’re not going to be effective, it’s a waste of time for everyone.”

“Stressed professors are not effective and the stress then spread to the students.”

“When the teacher isn’t into what he’s doing, why should we be?”

“When a professor teaches they need to be able to teach effectively and when that is not happening then it negatively effects the students and their grades.”

Others added that professors must separate their private lives from the classroom:

“In cases of tragedy (national or personal) one would be expected to be distressed. However, as a professional, one is expected to separate their private lives from the classroom.”

Thirty-five percent explained that teaching when distressed is sometimes ethical, especially if the professor takes the time to review the material at a later date, while 14 percent responded that teaching while distressed is usually or always ethical:

“It depends on how distressed. If a teacher does this then I believe it is necessary for them to go over the material a second time and when they are less distressed to be fair and sure that everyone understands it.”

“Some people have bad days. Some more than others. Once in a while it’s ok. In my opinion, canceling class isn’t the worst if one feels that they are wasting time anyway.”

*Teaching material that has not been mastered.* Sixty-three percent of participants rated a professor’s teaching material

that has not been mastered as rarely or never ethical:

"The professor is just going to confuse the students if he has not mastered the material."

"If the teacher doesn't totally understand the material how is the student supposed to master it? It's impossible."

"This is not fair! A teacher should in all circumstances know about what they are teaching otherwise they can not teach the students. Students need guidance and are here to learn. What good does a teacher who doesn't know what he or she is talking about to anyone?"

"You should know what you're teaching otherwise you're cheating the student."

Thirty-one percent responded that teaching material that has not been mastered is sometimes ethical, and 6 percent responded that it is usually or always ethical. Many mentioned that it is not possible for a professor to master all of his or her field, but intellectual integrity is essential; professors must know their limitations and be honest:

"Teaching material for the first time is always difficult and not usually 100 percent mastered. If the teacher still presents his teaching in an organized manner creating a learning environment, I think this way is acceptable."

"People are always learning and can't expect their professor to know everything. If the professor admits to lacking information, it's fine."

*Failing to update lecture notes when reteaching a course.* Forty-four percent of participants judged failing to update lecture notes as rarely or never ethical. Many explained that the pace of change and information gathering places an ethical responsibility on professors to maintain and expand their lecture notes and pedagogy accordingly:

"The material constantly changes or the way to teach that material changes from year to year. Students change with time."

"That's teaching old things which can allow students to believe false statements that were once true. You would be misleading them or basically lying to them."

Others noted that professors are responsible for providing students with a quality education and that students may perceive the failure to update lecture notes as indicative of laziness on the part of the professor:

"A teacher is supposed to be in charge and ahead of the game. If they fall behind, they won't get the respect they need to have from their students. Students will see that their teacher is a slacker."

"Every teacher should be on top of everything especially since the students pay them."

Thirty-five percent judged failing to update lecture notes as sometimes ethical, and 20 percent judged it as usually or always ethical:

"Most of the information is constant, so there really isn't a need unless the professor finds something interesting to add to his or her teaching."

"If a professor feels that it is unnecessary to update notes in order to keep teaching at the same level, then its fine. If the students are learning information, then why change it?"

### *Professional and Personal Dishonesty*

*Ignoring strong evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment.* Ninety-five percent of participants judged ignoring evidence of plagiarism in a written assignment as rarely or never ethical on the part of a professor. Many explained that plagiarism is illegal and that ignoring it is not helpful to students:

"Due to the fact that plagiarism is illegal, ignoring the strong evidence is clearly unethical. If no administrative action is taken, the student should at least be informed of the implications of plagiarism."

"This isn't teaching the student how to do independent work."

"If the teacher knows that a student plagiarized then he should speak up. Because the student is not learning anything by just copying and the student should learn that plagiarism is wrong and that you can't get away with it."

Four percent of participants judged ignoring plagiarism in a written assignment as usually or always ethical on the part of a professor. Each of these students qualified their responses by explaining that the professor should not ignore plagiarism but should use it as a teaching opportunity and should not penalize the student:

"If a student genuinely doesn't know what plagiarism is and it is their first offense, let them write it over and don't count it against them."

"In most colleges, plagiarism is addressed with expulsion. Do you really want to ruin

a kid's whole career because of one paper? Use discretion and talk to him or her about it."

*Using cocaine or other illegal drugs in his or her personal (nonteaching) life.* Seventy-two percent of participants judged that a professor's use of illegal drugs in his or her personal life is rarely or never ethical. Many students explained that professors are role models and that drug use tarnishes their credibility and harms students:

"Its not ethical for a teacher to do something illegal. Teachers are supposed to be role models."

"It is not ethical because it is illegal to begin with and if caught it will make the school look bad and lose some credibility in the eyes of the students and public."

"Regardless of whether the teacher uses the drugs at school or not they still effect how the teacher is as a person and as a teacher. This may endanger the students and cannot possibly be considered safe."

"Teachers are supposed to be role models and help students to the best of their ability. I don't see how one could do this while using drugs."

Eight percent judged a professor's use of illegal drugs in his or her personal life as sometimes ethical, and 21 percent judged it as usually or always ethical. Most of these respondents explained that professional life is separate from private life:

"Do what you do in your own life. Just as long as you are professional when you come to class and around campus. Everybody has a vice just control it and don't bring it to the workplace."

## **DISCUSSION**

Part 2 examined student views about the ethical nature of a variety of behaviors in which professors might engage. Qualitative analyses of participant responses revealed that college students expect excellence on the part of their professors. Specifically, students expect professors to act with professionalism, to employ a vast base of content knowledge, and to show concern for student welfare.

### *Professionalism and the Professor*

The present sample of college students viewed the ethical professor as one who can separate his or her personal life and institutional life. Ethical professors do

not allow their personal problems to affect their teaching or to adversely affect students. They do not teach when they are too distressed to be effective, and they learn to compartmentalize their personal and professional lives.

Professionalism also entails refraining from inappropriate behaviors. More than two-thirds of the students surveyed argued that ethical professors do not date their current students and do not use illegal drugs in their personal lives. Despite this, some respondents acknowledged that professors are people as well and that what happens in professors' personal lives is their business as long as their professional duties are not affected. A number of respondents explained that drug use and relationships with former students are personal choices on the part of professors and are not subject to judgment unless they adversely affect a professor's institutional life. Students' emphasis on personal choice is consistent with a body of research suggesting that adolescents tend to view many behaviors and dilemmas as personal choices, rather than moral or ethical decisions (Killen, Leviton, and Cahill 1991; Kuther and Higgins-D'Alessandro 2000; Nucci, Guerra, and Lee 1991). The importance ascribed to personal choice is consistent with the developmental tasks of adolescence and young adulthood, individuation, autonomy, and identity formation (Erikson 1950; Hill and Holmbeck 1986).

#### *Content Knowledge and the Professor*

The present findings suggest that college students expect professors to have a vast amount of content knowledge. Ethical professors remain competent in their content area, are cognizant of new developments, and generally understand their field. Students varied in the extent to which they expected their professors to master the content of their field and remain up-to-date. Some participants argued that knowledge is absolute and static (e.g., "If they haven't mastered the material, who are they to tell you what is right or wrong?" or "Someone who has not mastered a subject completely should not be allowed to teach") and that professors, therefore, cannot excuse themselves from thoroughly grasping their field.

Others noted that knowledge is constantly changing and that despite all efforts it may not be possible for a professor to completely master his or her field. These variations in student responses are likely influenced by their level of cognitive development and epistemological views. During adulthood, cognitive development tends to shift from viewing knowledge as absolute to understanding knowledge as relative and uncertain (King and Kitchener 1994; Perry 1968). Further research might examine how intellectual development influences college students' perceptions of the responsibilities and duties of professors.

#### *Student Welfare and the Professor*

Finally, the data suggest that college students expect professors to promote their welfare and not to engage in activities that may harm them. Specifically, students in the present sample expected professors to act on cases of plagiarism, using such cases as teaching opportunities. Although professors must not ignore plagiarism, many participants reported that professors should exercise judgment in how such cases are handled. Some argued that professors are obligated to act with compassion and should allow students a second chance—the opportunity to rewrite plagiarized work.

#### **Conclusion**

The present findings suggest that college students hold high expectations of their professors that may vary with development. Many view professors as role models who act as exemplars of scholarship and professional behavior. The American Association of University Professors' (1987) ethical guidelines explain that professors must act with beneficence, and the present findings suggest that students expect faculty to act on their behalf and to promote their welfare. Professors must be cognizant of student expectations and should begin to reflect on their behavior both in and out of the classroom. It appears that professors hold not merely a professional obligation to their students, but a moral one as well.

*Key words:* ethics, ethics education, role models

#### **NOTE**

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