

Developing Ethical Architects

Using Surveys to Drive Discussion and Learning in the Classroom

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Abstract

One characteristic of a modern profession is a defined standard of professional behavior intended to guide the practitioner's ethical conduct. Professional organizations and state registration boards typically address these standards in the form of a code of ethics, and accrediting bodies that oversee architectural education include student learning outcomes meant to assure that graduates have an understanding of ethics and professional judgment.

In November 1987, *Progressive Architecture* magazine published a *P/A Reader Poll on Ethics*. Practitioners were directed to review 25 actions and determine if each was *Normal Business Practice, Not Entirely Fair, Unethical, or a Serious Reportable Offense*. For the past ten years, a similar survey has been given to over 400 students as part of the Professional Practice course in the Architectural Technology program at Alfred State - SUNY College of Technology.

This presentation will discuss the results of the Alfred State study of applied ethics that is ongoing in the Professional Practice course and highlight the similarities and differences between sample responses to the 1987 practitioner survey and those of architecture students using a similar evaluation instrument. The comparison will then be used to draw conclusions regarding the effectiveness of case study-based instruction that focuses on ethics and professional conduct.

Keywords

Architecture, architectural education, ethics, professional ethics, professional practice, survey

Introduction

From the time we are very young, and whether we know it or not, our ethical underpinnings are being shaped by a number of external influences. While the primary origin of this education is typically our immediate family, other sources are likely to be encountered at school, in church, or through participation in extra-curricular activities as a result of our interaction with teachers, clergy, coaches, and, of course, our peers. The lessons we learn may be the

outcome of formal lectures by authority figures or more casual conversations with classmates which present and seek to resolve questions dealing with the human condition such as good vs. evil, right vs. wrong, and moral vs. immoral. As educators, we assume that each student brings some form of personal ethical philosophy with them as they begin their collegiate education. How well they understand the application of these principles remains unknown until they are tested in some way either by life or in the classroom.

The word ethics is derived from the Greek word *ethos* which means “character.” In fact, being of “good moral character” is a general requirement for each of the 50 licensed professions in New York State. Two of those professions, architecture and engineering, also have education requirements that are closely linked to the respective accrediting body for each - the National Architectural Accrediting Board (NAAB), and ABET’s Engineering Accreditation Commission (EAC) and Engineering Technology Accreditation Commission (TAC).

The NAAB Student Performance Criteria (SPC) defines the knowledge and skills that are “the minimum for meeting the demands of an internship leading to registration for practice” (p. 21). The SPC are organized into three realms that encompass *A. Critical Thinking and Representation; B. Integrated Building Practice, Technical Skills and Knowledge; and C. Leadership and Practice*. Student Performance Criteria C.8 – Ethics and Professional Judgment states that “*accredited degree programs must show evidence that each graduate possesses the skills and knowledge to demonstrate an understanding of the ethical issues involved in the formation of professional judgment regarding social, political and cultural issues in architectural and design practice*” (p. 25).

In contrast, ABET requires each accredited degree program to define both Program Educational Objectives and Student Outcomes. The Engineering Accreditation Commission defines Program Educational Objectives as “broad statements that describe what graduates are expected to attain within a few years of graduation. Program educational objectives are based on the needs of the program’s constituencies.” Student Outcomes “describe what students

are expected to know and be able to do by the time of graduation. These relate to the skills, knowledge, and behaviors that students attain as they progress through the program” (p. 2). For example, EAC Criterion 3 – Student Outcomes states that “The program must have demonstrated student outcomes that prepare graduates to attain the Program Educational Objectives.” This will be demonstrated by “*f. an understanding of professional ethical responsibility*” (p. 3). Similarly, TAC Criterion 3 – Student Outcomes includes requirements for baccalaureate programs that include “*i. an understanding of and a commitment to address professional and ethical responsibility including a respect for diversity*” (p. 3). Programs may also include outcomes specific to their area of study. For example, Architectural Engineering Technology program outcomes state that “In addition, graduates of the baccalaureate program will, to the extent required to meet Program Educational Objectives: *d. apply principles of construction law and ethics in architectural practice*” (p. 7).

Both the NAAB Student Performance Criteria and ABET Student Outcomes that discuss ethics focus on the demonstration of understanding rather than ability to show accomplishment. While ABET offers no clear definition of understanding or ability related to the demonstration of student achievement, NAAB defines both levels of accomplishment. Understanding is defined as “the capacity to classify, compare, summarize, explain and/or interpret information” while Ability is defined as “proficiency in using specific information to accomplish a task, correctly selecting the appropriate information, and accurately applying it to the solution of a specific problem, while also distinguishing the effects of its implementation” (p. 21).

The Alfred State study of applied ethics focuses on understanding rather than ability to demonstrate student achievement related to ethics and professional behavior.

Approach

The discussion of ethics in the Professional Practice course begins with a comparison of the dictionary definitions of *ethics* and the textbook definition of *professional ethics* found in the *Architect's Handbook of Professional Practice*. Each term is defined as follows:

Ethics – A system of moral principles; the rules of conduct recognized in respect to a particular class of human actions or a particular group, culture, etc.

Professional Ethics – Statements of principles promulgated by professional societies or public agencies governing professional practice in order to guide members or licensees in their professional conduct.

This is followed by a brief explanation of different ethical theories and areas of study including *applied ethics* and how they relate to the students' behavior as citizens, professional practitioners, and members of professional societies such as the American Institute of Architects (AIA) in our society.

The Alfred State study of applied ethics utilized the previously mentioned survey over the course of ten years to introduce students to specific and potentially controversial actions that the architect may encounter in daily professional practice. In each case, students applied their own understanding of ethics and morality and decide whether the action is Normal Business Practice, Not Entirely Fair, Unethical, or a Serious Reportable Offense.

As a follow-up to the survey, the *AIA Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct* and the *New York State Rules of the Board of Regents, Part 29, Unprofessional Conduct*, are reviewed with students. Published case studies are also used to initiate class discussion on contemporary topics such as unpaid internships, cheating, and negative bias toward colleagues in related disciplines. The scenarios go into greater detail than the survey questions and allow the students to share different views in terms of the ethical behavior of the case study subjects. In the end, the students are asked to determine the ways in which a moral outcome might be achieved in the given situation.

For the purposes of this analysis, responses from five of the ten years of the study (2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, and 2013) have been tabulated for comparison (Table 1). A direct graphic comparison between the 1987 and 2013 results (Figures 1-3) has also been included as part of each case study.

The study presented in this paper is a comparative analysis of the respondents' reactions to three case study experiences. Each practical scenario might be encountered by recent graduates or young professionals as they seek employment, provide services related to public health, safety and welfare, and interact with clients in business situations where societal issues of equality and human rights may be at play.

Evaluation

While the *P/A Reader Poll on Ethics* results offer a baseline of sorts for comparison, there are significant differences regarding both the sample size and composition that should be identified. The 1987 poll received over 1300 responses of which 1000 were

Table 1: Ethics Survey Results

Practitioner responses from 1987 compared to Alfred State student responses every other year since 2005 (in percentages)

Question	Normal Business Practice					Not Entirely Fair					Unethical					Serious Reportable Offense								
	'87	'05	'07	'09	'11	'13	'87	'05	'07	'09	'11	'13	'87	'05	'07	'09	'11	'13	'87	'05	'07	'09	'11	'13
1. Writing off personal expenses as business expenses.	12	2	2	0	0	4	28	12	13	11	13	8	43	38	40	48	25	42	16	48	45	41	62	46
2. Hiring/keeping employees with false promises of advancement.	1	0	0	0	4	0	18	35	33	44	25	17	70	63	62	44	71	67	11	2	5	12	0	16
3. Embellishment of one's school or professional credentials to get a job.	6	13	7	7	8	29	12	25	23	7	13	8	47	39	40	41	58	58	35	23	30	45	21	5
4. Using surplus materials from a client's construction for one's own premises.	11	6	8	0	0	0	27	19	32	33	29	33	36	44	35	48	42	38	25	31	25	19	29	29
5. Accepting a gift from a contractor.	41	42	46	63	58	63	21	35	30	26	25	33	28	23	22	11	17	0	8	0	2	0	0	4
6. Accepting a gift from a building product manufacturer.	49	63	53	67	63	71	25	21	30	22	21	25	21	14	15	11	16	0	4	2	2	0	0	4
7. Giving a gift to a local official.	19	38	45	48	50	63	17	33	17	26	29	25	39	27	33	22	21	8	24	2	5	4	0	4
8. Accepting equity in a development as compensation for design services.	82	37	37	35	25	38	12	28	32	31	41	25	4	28	23	31	17	33	1	7	8	4	17	4
9. Accepting full credit for work that others collaborated on.	2	2	0	0	0	0	27	19	20	26	13	29	62	58	65	59	62	58	9	21	15	15	25	13
10. Putting one's seal on drawings one has not supervised.	10	0	2	0	4	0	13	15	3	0	0	13	28	29	27	15	29	13	50	56	68	85	67	74
11. Soliciting a job from a client who has already agreed to give the commission to another firm.	11	10	8	16	13	4	19	31	22	36	17	29	53	57	57	44	62	50	17	2	13	4	8	17
12. Supporting political candidates who might be helpful in the future.	75	77	68	63	79	71	14	15	18	33	8	13	9	8	14	4	13	16	1	0	0	0	0	0
13. Accepting work in a country that denies civil rights to any of its citizens.	26	14	15	48	13	29	34	37	23	19	41	29	36	47	57	30	46	33	4	2	5	3	0	9
14. Discussing a confidential project with another potential client.	2	4	2	0	0	0	13	8	6	26	17	21	73	69	62	30	54	42	13	19	30	44	29	37
15. Making sure that your firm is represented only by white males in dealing with some clients.	12	0	2	0	4	0	29	17	12	7	13	4	39	35	45	48	54	29	20	48	41	45	29	67
16. Buying paid advertising for your firm.	74	84	78	82	84	88	15	8	16	7	8	0	10	3	4	7	8	13	1	0	2	4	0	0
17. Incompletely informing the client about potentially controversial design features.	4	0	3	4	0	4	40	31	32	26	29	21	44	52	47	56	46	50	11	17	18	14	25	25
18. Accepting work from a client whose operations pose environmental hazards.	18	2	5	7	4	8	25	17	12	15	13	0	37	60	57	63	46	42	20	21	26	15	37	50
19. Accepting moonlighting jobs while employed full time.	59	39	44	33	33	25	28	39	34	45	17	33	10	14	19	22	38	42	3	8	3	0	12	0
20. Spreading unfavorable gossip about a firm that is compelling with yours for a commission.	3	4	2	15	4	0	15	27	28	41	33	21	65	59	68	37	50	75	17	10	2	7	13	4
21. Agreeing with a contractor not to report some construction errors.	2	2	0	0	4	0	11	0	2	4	8	4	31	29	10	37	4	13	56	69	88	59	84	83
22. Padding the billing hours on one job to offset losses on another.	5	0	3	0	0	4	14	10	10	26	13	13	52	44	33	48	29	44	30	46	54	26	58	39
23. Yielding to a client request that will result in unsatisfactory performance.	15	4	10	19	13	13	38	35	20	33	16	13	38	50	57	44	58	68	9	11	13	4	13	16
24. Yielding to a client demand that could compromise public safety.	0	4	7	11	17	8	2	0	3	0	0	4	24	29	17	48	21	13	73	67	73	41	62	75
25. Paying recent graduates exceptionally low wages because one's firm is sought after for experience.	19	13	7	26	17	13	45	54	45	48	29	42	30	27	37	19	54	29	5	6	11	7	0	16

selected for tabulation and analysis – roughly 2.5 to 3 times the number of students surveyed over the last ten years. In addition, the students responding to the survey were, with few exceptions, in the second year of the Architectural Technology program, 18 – 20 years old, with little or no practical experience in the architectural field. The 1987 poll respondents, by contrast, were all employed in the profession although the size and type of firm that employed them and their role within the firm varied. The published analysis stated that “Ethical concerns are by no means limited to owners and principals of firms (who made up 53 percent of the respondents). There were also substantial representations of staff architects (22 percent) and project managers (13 percent) and a fairly typical profile in terms of years in the profession (57 percent with 10 or more years) and firm size (53 percent from firms of 10 employees or less)” (p. 15). While the 1987 poll respondents had the advantage of their professional experience to draw on when evaluating the 25 actions, the students had only their innate understanding of ethics and limited understanding of the architectural profession to inform their survey responses.

In addition, the 17 years that elapsed between the 1987 poll and the first year of the Alfred State study in 2004 saw unprecedented technological, social and economic changes in the world that directly impacted how people lived, worked, and learned. The changes also impacted the profession in terms of how and where U.S. firms practiced architecture as well as the financial climate (recessions in the early 1990’s and 2000’s) in which practice occurred. The rapid pace of change continued over the next ten years of the study and was punctuated by the devastating

after-effects of the great recession that began in December 2007 and continues today.

While these changes may have colored the student perception of actions presented in the survey, the actions themselves remain as relevant today as they were in 1987.

Case Study No. 1:

Seeking Employment

This is a situation that might be encountered by a recent graduate or young professional involving how to represent him or herself to a potential employer while seeking employment.

Action – “Embellishment of one’s school or professional credentials to get a job.”

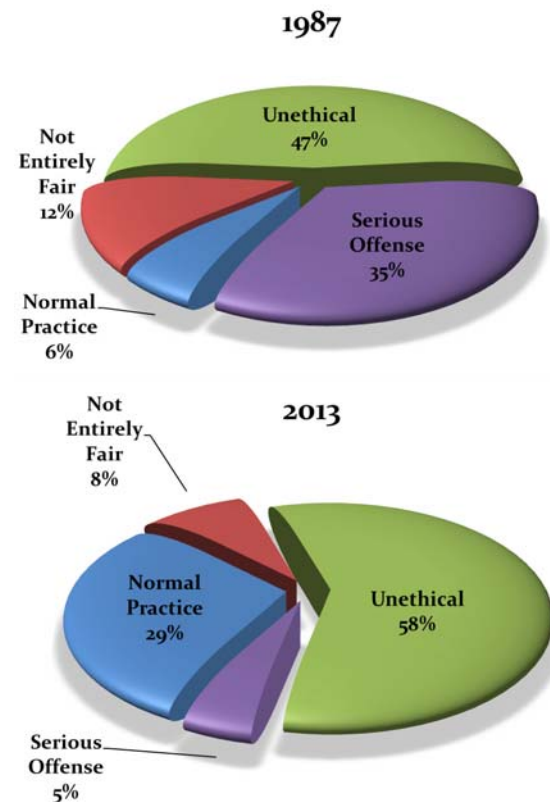


Figure 1: Comparison of 1987 and 2013 responses to the action “Embellishment of one’s school or professional credentials to get a job.”

Analysis – In 1987, 82% of respondents indicated that this was clearly an unethical action. Student responses ranged from a low of 62% in 2005 to a high of 86% in 2009 with an average of 72% responding that the action was at least unethical or a serious reportable offense.

Conclusion – It is encouraging that the majority of students find the act of embellishment unethical, but the decline in the percentage of those that determined it to be a serious reportable offense since 2009 is notable. Of particular concern is that 29% of students surveyed in 2013 responded that the action was normal business practice. This indicates the need for further investigation and greater emphasis on this topic and the perils of embellishment in the future.

Case Study No. 2:

Health, Safety and Welfare

As graduates move from internship to licensure and registration, they gain broader experience and are rewarded with increasing levels of responsibility. This includes greater contact with clients and contractors – the other major players in the process of building. An issue that might be encountered by more experienced interns or recently registered architects involves considering the types of clients to do business with as it relates to the design professional’s responsibility to the best interest of the greater public.

Action – “Accepting work from a client whose operations pose environmental hazards.”

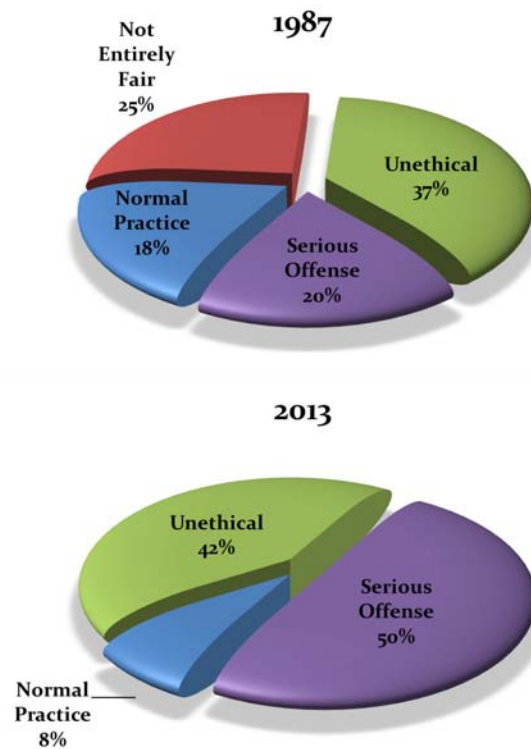


Figure 2: Comparison of 1987 and 2013 responses to the action “Accepting work from a client whose operations pose environmental hazards.”

Analysis – In 1987, 62% of respondents indicated that this was a more controversial topic than other “gray area” actions due to the relatively high number (and close split) of those responding that it was either unethical or normal practice. Student responses ranged from a low of 42% in 2013 to a high of 78% in 2009 with an average of 65% responding that the action was either not entirely fair or unethical – slightly higher than the 1987 response. However, unlike the 1987 P/A Reader Poll where 57% of respondents indicated that the action was either unethical or a serious reportable offense, the student responses ranged from a low of 71% in 2005 to a high of 92% in 2013 with an average of 81% indicating that the action was clearly unethical.

Conclusion – This stark contrast is most likely due to the impact of the environmental movement and emphasis that has been placed on sustainability over the past two decades – a way of living that has become a societal norm.

Case Study No. 3:

Equality and Human Rights

The last 50 years have seen a progressive societal shift in the area of civil rights in the United States. At the same time, the number of U.S. design firms which practice globally has grown to over 30% – a number that represents approximately 26,000 architects according to Architectural Record (2010). In some cases this has created a dichotomy between architects who possess a value system rooted in one culture and a client who see the world and possibly the definition of civil rights quite differently. The accommodations that architects are willing to make in building and maintaining relationships with a growing racially diverse and global clientele are the basis for potential moral and ethical conflict.

Action – “Making sure your firm is represented only by white males in dealing with some clients.”

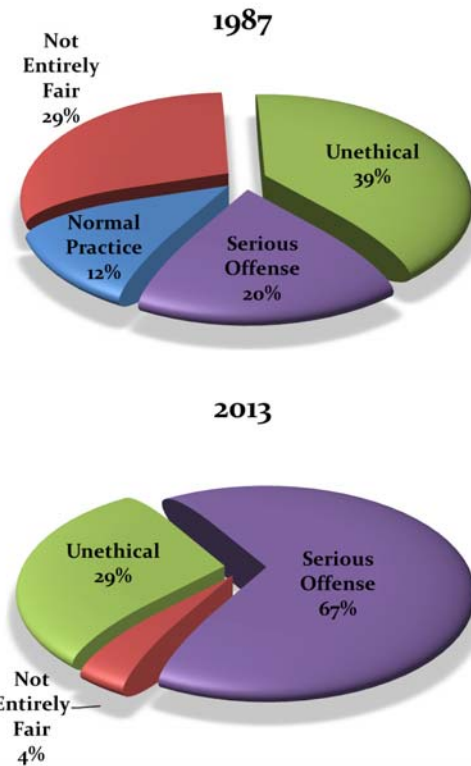


Figure 3: Comparison of 1987 and 2013 responses to the action “Making sure your firm is represented only by white males in dealing with some clients.”

Analysis – In 1987, 68% of respondents indicated that this was either not entirely fair or unethical, a controversial topic due to the relatively high number responding that it was either a reportable offense (20%) or normal practice (12%). Student responses ranged from a low of 33% in 2013 to a high of 67% in 2011 with an average of 53% – significantly lower than the 1987 response. However, unlike the 1987 P/A Reader Poll where 59% of respondents indicated that the action was either unethical or a serious reportable offense, the student responses ranged from a low of 83% in 2005/09 to a high of 96% in 2013 with an average of 88.2% indicating that the action was clearly unethical.

Conclusion – It is encouraging that the vast majority of students surveyed in 2013 saw this action as either unethical or a serious reportable offense. Most of the students

completing the survey over the past ten years were born between 1985 and 1994 and have known only relative racial and gender equality in their lifetimes. Having women and minorities in the architectural work force is not a foreign concept to them and the idea of excluding either or both of those groups from certain aspects of professional practice would most likely seem immoral, unethical or both.

Closing Remarks

In the postscript to his Book, *Ethics for Architects*, Thomas Fisher writes, “In a depressed economy, ethics may seem extraneous: something nice to do once we pay the bills. But the opposite is true. During difficult times, questions at the heart of ethics, such as what constitutes a good life, become uppermost in people’s minds” (p. 152).

The ethics survey has proven to be an effective tool in fostering classroom discussion on specific topics related to the study of applied ethics in professional practice. Because there is no expectation of a right or wrong answer, students are encouraged to evaluate each action based on their life experience and second-year architecture students’ somewhat limited understanding of architectural practice. As can be seen in the overall survey results, this leads to a diverse range of responses to each action which in turn helps drive the classroom discussion.

The survey is also used to demonstrate student understanding of professional ethics in meeting associated course student learning outcomes. The evaluation of these outcomes can then be tied back to program objectives and used for the purposes of both course and program assessment which effectively closes the loop.

The study presented in this paper begins to explore the possibilities offered by the ethics survey method to enrich and improve learning in the classroom.

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