

Examining Faculty Barriers and Challenges in Adopting Ethical Pedagogies in Online Environments

Mr. Samuel Aaron Snyder, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Sam Snyder is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Engineering Education at Virginia Tech. He received his Bachelors of Science in Materials Science and Engineering in 2017 from Virginia Tech. His current research interests are in engineering ethics education and exploring the relationship between empathy and ethical decision-making.

Dr. Diana Bairaktarova, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

Dr. Diana Bairaktarova is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Engineering Education at Virginia Tech. Through real-world engineering applications, Dr. Bairaktarova's experiential learning research spans from engineering to psychology to learning sciences, as she uncovers how individual performance is influenced by aptitudes, spatial skills, personal interests and direct manipulation of mechanical objects.

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Abstract

Our study examines the challenges and barriers that faculty experience during a major undergraduate curriculum shift at a US research university. As a part of the revised curriculum, faculty are required to include ethical reasoning and/or global awareness as a portion of their program. However, a majority of the faculty involved in the program were not primarily trained in ethics or global education. As a result, many faced institutional barriers and challenges when attempting to incorporate practices and pedagogies into their classroom. With the outbreak of COVID-19 in the past year, students and faculty have had to adapt to online teaching formats which present an additional set of difficulties for faculty in developing ethics and global education pedagogies. To better understand the barriers that faculty are facing, we conducted semi-structured interviews with around 20 faculty across the university. The interviews included discussions of the pedagogy's faculty used within their newly designed courses, who faculty interacted with and how they gained the ethical and intercultural competencies, and the challenges faculty faced in redesigning the courses. Preliminary results have found that some of the more common challenges that faculty are facing is the lack of institutional guidance and resources, the lack of support from other faculty, and a lack of time to implement the required changes. Moving forward, we plan to expand this study to reinterview faculty as the program progresses and faculty learn more about how to teach in online settings.

1. Introduction

Ethical and global competencies have been identified across a variety of disciplines as essential skills for students entering the workforce. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools in Business (AACSB) include both ethics and a global mindset among the core values for preparing business students for the future [1]. Similarly, the NAE has outlined the students must be prepared to work in multidisciplinary and globally oriented teams and include ethical considerations when solving engineering problems [2]. As accrediting and funding agencies require more from students in these knowledge domains, the burden of education falls to the universities, specifically on the faculty to prepare students for a global centric world. Initiatives include creating study abroad opportunities for students, utilizing pedagogical tools such as case studies and roleplaying, and revising entire courses to integrate ethics and global awareness throughout the curriculum.

However, global and ethical competencies, when taught in isolation, often fall on deaf ears. When ethics and global awareness are integrated in only a few classes scattered across the curriculum, it can be difficult to connect and carry over the knowledge learned prior through to graduation. It often falls on specific faculty to advocate for the importance of ethical reasoning and global awareness to their peer faculty members. Frequently, institutions will create discipline specific courses that cover topics such ethics and global awareness that act as the sole avenue for students to learn these concepts. However, the downside to this is that students can compartmentalize this information and fail to connect it with the rest of the curriculum, as that's

how the course was designed. On the other hand, an across-the-curriculum model in which ethical and global concepts are integrated into many disciplinary courses provides a model in which students can connect their ethical knowledge to their disciplinary work. And while an across-the-curriculum program for these integrative concepts might lead to a lack of depth of continuity, many faculty do not have the competencies to teach these concepts even if they wanted or were required to [3]. This lack of a shared vision is one of the many barriers that researchers and faculty advocates face when attempting to incorporate competencies that both they and governing bodies have deemed important for student entering the workforce.

2. Background

2.1. Contextual Solution for Change Initiatives

Evidence-based teaching practices, sustainability, and ethics are three areas that have been identified at both the national and disciplinary levels as needing to be more comprehensively used or taught throughout the curriculum [4]–[6]. However, the barriers that change leaders face, the solutions that the communities crystalize, and the lasting success of the initiative are highly variable.

Fisher et al. (2019), in the examination of a change initiative to incorporate EBIPs in STEM courses across multiple departments found that many departments were siloed. Even within departments, subsets of faculty would often not discuss with each other about their teaching practices. Through the use of social network analysis, the research team and change leaders identifies these small communities and created multiple systems to align the interests of various departments. This was done by creating a cohort system that provided faculty with the ability and opportunity discuss their classroom practices and improve them. Additionally, faculty were also recognized for their teaching practices with awards [7].

Wieman, Perkins, and Gilbert (2010) have attempted to shift the teaching culture of 9 various science departments at the University of Colorado and the University of British Columbia. They began their investigation under the assumptions that the unit of change would be the department, that they needed data to convince faculty to teach differently, and that the change process requires both resources and a reward structure. Eight of the departments decided to participate and each was awarded \$1 million to be used for educational development over the following five year. A majority of the departments used the funds to higher science engineering specialists to help guide their departments through the educational reform [8].

While each of the above change initiatives were brought about through outside researcher driven initiatives, cultural shifts can occur without the need for interventions like that in the Wieman et al. (2010) article. STEM education centers (SEMs) can provide a centralized resource for departments across a university to transform their curriculum. Carlisle and Weaver examined 6 education centers across a range of universities, both public and private, and ranging in the emphasis placed on teaching and research [9]. SEMs allow faculty and administrators to seek out tools and resources at the individual level. Their existence also serves as a reminder to the commitment the university or college has for knowledge pertaining to the centers core values.

The above three articles each highlight successful change initiative, even though each differed greatly in culture, scale, and initial barriers. As more and more engineering faculty and

advocate for the incorporation of these competencies and practices into their respective curriculums, it becomes increasingly transparent that there is no ‘one size fits all’ solution to implementing change [10].

2.2. Incentives

One of the most common barriers for faculty to adopt EBITs or more heavily emphasize sustainability and ethics in their courses is due to the lack of incentives. All of the aforementioned interventions identified and acted to ensure this barrier did not mitigate their change initiative but did so based on the context of their study. Fisher et al. (2019) used the individual as the unit for change and because of this decided that faculty recognition for achievement in utilizing EBITs would most benefit them, whereas Wieman et al. thought of the department as the unit of change and have a large financial backing for the project, and were able to guide and worked together with the departments to provide them appropriate financial incentives [7], [8]. While incentives can be a powerful tool for convincing faculty to join a change initiative, they are only as successful insofar as they are valued as heavily as other research-focused incentives [11]. Incentivizing faculty through tying research and teaching together through the tenure track process may incentivize faculty that may not have had the inclination to do so otherwise.

2.3. Competing Goals

When attempting to shift the culture of a department, college, or university with a change initiative, it is important to not think solely of the culture but of the individuals, faculty networks, and departments that make up the unit of change. A major barrier to change initiatives is that oftentimes the same incentives will motivate all faculty to change. As in the case of Fisher et al. (2019), even within departments, there were subgroups of faculty who simply did not associate with each other regarding teaching [7]. If these groups differ in their goals, one solution or incentive may not prove enough to get over the hump and induce a full cultural shift a college. Because of this, it can be important to create faculty awareness of the surrounding university environment, which can help faculty see the importance of an initiative, even if it does not exactly align with their goals [12]. Regarding engagement in teaching ethics and social impact, Polmear et al. (2020), found that faculty members’ personal experiences, beliefs, and interests variable motivate their engagement [13].

2.4. Trust

Even in the case that the goal of the change initiative aligns with that of the department or the individuals within, there is still the issue of whether those involved in the change initiative trust in it. This trust can be operationalized in many ways. Can the individual/department trust that:

- 1) the change initiative will be lasting?
- 2) the change was aligned with their interests?
- 3) the change, even if aligned, is better than the current status quo?
- 4) they still have autonomy over the content of the courses that they teach?

The answers to each of these questions may serve as a barrier that those involved with the change initiative must be ready to answer and have a plan in place to overcome them, or they will find that individuals may not trust the change initiative enough to join it [14].

3. Research Aims

The aim of this study is to explore and begin to categorize the barriers that faculty across a university-wide pedagogical and cultural shift face and examine possible solutions. We seek to examine the variety of barriers that will need to be overcome to shift the culture of the institution to being more ethically and globally minded by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the barriers that faculty face because of a university-wide initiative to create a more ethically and globally oriented university community?
2. What are potential solutions for how the barriers and challenges that faculty can be addressed?

4. Methods

4.1. Setting and Participants

This study was conducted at a Mid-Eastern Research 1 University, with an undergraduate population of over 24,000 students and over 2,000 instructional faculty members. Faculty were recruited from across the university without discretion, including satellite campuses from around the state. Faculty were initially reached out to through email recruitments with a short video attachment, which was sent to each department head, to disseminate as they best saw fit. Faculty were asked to complete a 10-minute survey, approved by the University's Institutional Review Board. At the end of the survey, faculty were asked whether they would be willing to participate in a 45 to 60-minute interview. Of the approximately 100 instructors that responded to the survey, 25 responded saying they were willing to complete the interview. The final sample consisted of 21 faculty interviews, averaging 50 minutes long.

4.2. Study Context

Currently, this Mid-Eastern Research 1 University is undergoing a major change to the general education curriculum. The seven conceptual areas of focus (i.e. mathematics, liberal arts, philosophy, fine arts), have been replaced with seven skills called Pathways. In addition to the redefining of these areas, two additional integrated areas have been added to tie the general education curriculum together: ethical reasoning and global awareness. With the addition of these two areas, many courses have had to be revamped to include the two integrated areas. With this change, a plethora of faculty have been unprepared to include the new material. To address this issue, workshops, small grants for new courses, and lesson plans have been prepared to help address the discrepancy between the competencies needed by some faculty and their current levels.

4.3. Interview Protocol

The interview protocol was split into six sections. The first section asked questions concerning the faculty member's field of study and their career in industry. The second section focused on grasping a general understanding of either ethical reasoning or global awareness, depending on courses that the faculty member taught the prior academic year. Section three asked questions associated with the barriers and challenges associated with teaching a Pathways Course. Section four asked was designed for non-Pathways faculty and asked about their knowledge of the Pathways program. The fifth section asked about the faculty member to reflect on the Pathways

course they had taught or briefly talk about any future plans for the course. The last question asked how ethical/global awareness factored into their teaching more generally.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Incentives

When people think of incentives, they may think of providing a gift card to students after taking a voluntary survey or participating in an interview for research. But incentives are an incredible tool for motivating faculty as well. The Pathways program provided grants to faculty designing a new courses and minors for the program, offering up to \$10,000 to support the course design. However, financial benefits may not be enough. One faculty member from the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences put it eloquently:

“Incentivizing people is not just about paying them for their time. It’s about knowing that it’s really important and meaningful for their feedback. I don’t know that if people really invest the time and engage really meaningful feedback, that I’ll at least say at a college or university level, there would be any recognition of that.”

Ensuring that faculty feel like their time has been valued, not solely with money, but recognition, whether in the form of feedback or awards, can go a long way. By making sure that their voices are heard, faculty can feel like they are a part of the change initiative, and not simply a means to an end for improving the general education program.

5.2. Competing Goals

Even if they were properly incentivized to participate in the Pathways program, many faculty felt that their departments and the administration in charge of the Pathways initiative did not have the same goals as they did in altering their courses. One institutional issue that a participant put forward was the idea of soloing. Ethical reasoning and global awareness are not concepts inherently related to only one department or college. With the creation of the Pathways program, many departments felt it was in their best interest to create they own courses with the aforementioned integrative concepts, as the number of credit hours provided for students is one way or measuring the utility of a department. By not creating incentives for faculty to collaborate and create multidisciplinary courses, departments must compete with each other. As an example, *“it’s [in] the best interest of the business school to claim they do all these things and keep all their students over there right? And it’s in our best interest right, to say, you don’t know what you’re doing.”* While no one department owns these integrative concepts, for some faculty, it quickly became of competition of who knows best.

As some departments and faculty were competing for the limited resource of credit hours, other faculty did not trust that the administration in charge of the change initiative were fully committed to helping them. One faculty member in the Biology department felt that the Pathways program needed to be emphasized differently, that the connection between the integrative concepts and *“hard sciences needs to be made clearer.”* This faculty member did not feel that ‘ethics’ had not been defined in a way that they could apply it to their course, and as such was not clear on how their *“department should be doing to reach the university goal.”* While one of the goals of Pathways was to allow faculty to teach ethical reasoning to their students in a manner that fit their

own course, if faculty do not feel that Pathways program aligns with their course, then they may feel that teaching ethical reasoning and global awareness are not integrative concepts, but competing for time with what they have to teach, even if they aren't.

5.3.Trust

When faculty do not trust a change initiative, they may feel that it is competing with their interests, whether that be teaching or research. This is the case for a faculty member in the Biology department who felt that they way the Pathways coordinators were defining ethics did not align with how they could integrate it into their course naturally. They could not trust that the Pathways initiative to align with their interests. While this misalignment could be potentially fixed with a clarifying conversation, some faculty's distrust of the initiative ran deeper. One faculty member thought that the Pathways initiative was *"it's a rebrand attempt at liberal arts. I think the word liberal arts has become politicized... and the word Pathways is just a politically benign way of saying liberal arts."* This faculty member has seemingly lost all trust of the Pathways process, down to what the purpose of the initiative is. And while the ideas might have arisen from a lack of communication early on in the change process, once the

Trust is a two-way street when it pertains to change initiatives. Faculty must trust that those involved with the Pathways program will provide them resources to create a change, while those leading the change initiative must also trust that the faculty working towards the change, even if assessment results do not appear right away. With the Pathways program, faculty have to outline and provide examples of assessments they are using for the integrative concepts. However, teaching is an integrative process. Faculty are constantly experimenting and reiterating on pedagogical tools to find what works best for their students. One faculty member, from the department of Agricultural, Leadership, and Community Education, needed more clarity on how they were going to be assessed on the integrated concepts. They felt that the Pathways leadership team needed to *"trust that people are trying to [adopt the concepts], and give them three years to demonstrate it."* By providing faculty time to adjust to new assessments, Pathways leadership can demonstrate that they trust faculty.

5.4.Time

As stated previously, large-scale change initiatives in higher education take time. Time to teach the material in what are already densely taught courses, time to create and adapt new material, and time to iterate and assess the changes they have made. When asked about how they were integrating ethical reasoning into their class, one faculty member responded that *"because of the short timing in class, there's a lot of things that we don't integrate together."* If faculty are not provided enough time to redesign their course to incorporate new material, it can affect student's performance, and a once streamlined course can appear scattered or incoherent. Other faculty felt similarly that the University was not receptive of their time, constantly adding more requirements and assessments for faculty to meet, when *"there's only so much any one person can do."*

Time is a valuable resource to faculty. In talking about how the university could help faculty with this transition in pedagogies, a faculty member in the Human Development department wanted administration to understand that designing a new course from scratch is *"substantially greater amount of work than teaching an existing course that I've already taught"*

four times.” While not every Pathways instructor was required to redesign a course, many new courses were designed for Pathways, and treating newly developed courses the same as ones taught previously is disingenuous to the amount of time put into each for a given semester.

6. Conclusions

When examining the barriers that faculty across a university face at the onset of a university-wide pedagogical shift, there is no one problem that ties all of them together. Each faculty member may believe in the pedagogical shift to a different degree. They may have differing levels of knowledge on teaching ethical reasoning and global awareness. Some faculty may have to redesign their entire course while others may already meet the requirements. Faculty members may be supported by their department in their course redesign, while others may be the sole supporter of the pedagogical changes in their department. For all of the faculty members described above, communication from those involved with the pedagogical shift, the Pathways leadership team is vital.

While there is no one method of communication that could remedy all the challenges and barriers faculty experienced throughout the transition to the Pathways general education curriculum, many could have been mitigated by ensuring that resources for integrating ethical reasoning and global awareness into the curriculum were easily accessible to faculty. When change initiators, administration leaders, and faculty member all communicate with each other, a change initiative can build up trust over time.

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