

Business professor says lessons on ethics, character can prevent unethical behavior in the workplace

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A Kansas State University professor's research is showing a gap between the character traits that business students say make a good executive and the traits they describe having themselves.

Thomas A. Wright, the Jon Wefald Leadership Chair in [Business Administration](#), said business schools need to close that gap by continuously discussing ethics and character in the classroom.

Wright suggests that there is a significant moral decline in higher education, including in schools of business. He said it is critical for [students](#) to learn about the importance of character and ethical behavior before entering the workplace.

"As business professors in an increasingly 'just show me the money' business school environment, we all share responsibility for this moral decline," Wright said. "Many citizens are increasingly seeing the potentially grave consequences of dishonest and fraudulent actions by our business and political leaders."

Wright is a professor of management and directs the Center for Character-based Leadership at K-State, whose master of [business administration](#) program recently was recognized by the Aspen Institute as one of the top 100 programs in the world for its efforts to integrate ethical issues into the curriculum.

Wright studies character and its development. Using the instrument developed by psychologists Christopher Peterson and Martin E.P. Seligman, Wright measures student character strength on a number of dimensions including valor, hope, zest, honesty, critical thinking, kindness and gratitude.

As a result of this research, students are able to identify their individual strength profile as well as how they compare to other students. When students focus on their signature strength profile -- their top-five strengths of character -- some intriguing results occur, he said.

To date, Wright has found that master of business administration students list [social intelligence](#) as being one of the top two strengths necessary to be an effective manager, while love of learning is listed as the top strength necessary to be a successful master of business administration student. However, both of those strengths were among the least common strengths self-reported by the students.

"Obviously, if the development of character is important, many of our students are entering the workplace woefully lacking in a number of the prerequisites necessary for success," Wright said.

Many students rated honesty as one of their top five strengths. However, in another study, Wright found that 88 percent of the students reported that they have cheated in school, with many students reporting they had cheated 100 or more times.

"Students report that they lack viable, positive adult role models -- individuals who can walk the talk," Wright said.

Indicative of a morally relativistic perspective, the majority of students sampled said it solely depended on the situation whether a person should lie, cheat or steal, Wright said.

"It's a common belief that as long as our behavior is seen as being instrumental in our pursuit of personal and material success while not hindering our personal choice preferences, we are willing to accept a modicum of lying, cheating and stealing behavior from both ourselves and our leaders as a cost of doing business," Wright said. "Alternatively, a character-based leader will not lie, cheat or steal, nor will he or she tolerate those who do."

He said students who cheat in school are not only more likely to cheat in graduate and professional school, but they also are more likely to engage in unethical business practices. This provides all the more reason for why higher education institutions should include ethical and character development in their pedagogy, Wright said.

"It's important to help students develop the awareness and skills necessary to make morally based choices through the development of character strengths," Wright said. "Our collective failure to practice strengths of character, such as perseverance and self control, has led us to the brink of both moral and financial ruin. Massive governmental takeovers are not the answer, but the development of individual character may well be a viable solution. As faculty members, the ethical and strength of character development of our students should be made an integral part of our stated mission in higher education."

Wright's research will be included in a chapter on character in business ethics education for an upcoming book, "Toward Assessing Business Ethics Education," edited by K-State's Diane Swanson, von Waaden business administration professor, and Dann Fisher, associate professor of accounting.

Source: Kansas State University ([news](#) : [web](#))

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