Teaching the “Right” Thing: Wrestling with Ethics Instruction in Non-Profit Management Studies

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Summary
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Both government and the public have called for greater accountability in the non-profit sector, creating the current trend toward professionalism and a growing number of professional study programs. But is the post-secondary, non-profit administration program the best place for future professionals to learn what constitutes “right”, or ethical, behaviour? Do ethics courses actually make a difference in the ethical decision-making process and the behaviour of practicing professionals? If so, how are they currently being taught and how should we teach these types of courses? This workshop examines these challenges within the context of a currently “fragmented” state of ethics pedagogy in non-profit management studies.


Keywords
non-profit management, ethics, pedagogy, moral imagination, decision-making

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Lisa Ferguson, Ryerson University

SUMMARY
Non-profit organizations (NPOs) enjoy more trust than most other modern institutions. That trust comes at a price, however. When allegations of unethical behaviour arise, public indignation is swift and can translate into decreased donations for several years. NPOs typically serve vulnerable populations and, consequently, individuals working in them are expected to put organizational and public interests above their own. Yet, increased pressure to perform efficiently to compete for decreasing government funds may lead to compromised values. As the sector grows and increases in importance as the “third sector” between government and the market\(^1\), high-profile scandals worldwide suggest a need for ethics training for non-profit administrators.

Both government and the public have called for greater accountability in the non-profit sector, creating the current trend toward professionalism and a growing number of professional study programs. But is the post-secondary, non-profit administration program the best place for future professionals to learn what constitutes “right”, or ethical, behaviour? Do ethics courses actually make a difference in the ethical decision-making process and the behaviour of practicing professionals? If so, how are they currently being taught and how should we teach these types of courses? This workshop examines these challenges within the context of a currently “fragmented” state of ethics pedagogy in non-profit management studies.

KEYWORDS: non-profit management, ethics, pedagogy, moral imagination, decision-making

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
By the end of the workshop, participants will be able to:

- understand the complexity of ethical dilemmas faced by non-profit administrators, such as the tension between the duty to serve the public and the need to defer to superiors and rules;
- recognize the need to develop ethical thinking in post-secondary students who wish to work in non-profit administration;
- describe the current state of ethics pedagogy in the non-profit administration field and possible implications;
- articulate how research on student reception to varied instructional methods and conceptual approaches could inform curricula impact professional development; and
- contribute to an improved future state of ethics pedagogy in non-profit administration by exploring alternative teaching strategies and sharing ideas with peers.

\(^1\) As described by, for example: Brock, K. L. (2000). *Sustaining a relationship: Insights from Canada on linking...*
REFERENCE SUMMARIES

“Many students may have graduate school ideas about management but grade school notions of ethics.”

- James S. Bowman, *The Lost World of Public Administration Education: Rediscovering the Meaning of Professionalism*

The following resources were used to prepare this workshop:

- Gibelman & Gelman, to demonstrate how ethics scandals affect the public’s view of NPOs and the sector;
- Svara, to argue that including ethics instruction in post-secondary curricula is necessary for future non-profit administrators to develop ethical decision-making;
- Brudney & Martinez, to describe the current state of graduate-level non-profit ethics pedagogy;
- Jurkiewicz & Nichols, to correlate ethics instruction to ethical professional behaviour, lending credence to its practical value in curricula; and
- Saraniero, to show which traditional and/or experiential methods and conceptual approaches might benefit students most.


In light of increasing press coverage of serious “scandals” involving NPOs around the world, Gibelman and Gelman investigate the causes of ethical lapses and their consequences by analyzing coverage of scandals in international print media over the previous three years. Their search yields hundreds of articles, but they limit their analysis specifically to human service organizations. Their analysis identifies the following categories of wrongdoing: personal lifestyle enhancement, theft, mismanagement of resources, and sexual misconduct. All of these incidents involved money, were opportunistic, and motivated by self-interest (greed), perceived entitlement, or sexual fulfillment. The majority of cases involve the CEO or CFO.

Many incidents go undetected for years and theft cases often involve substantial sums. For example, at Goodwill Industries of Santa Clara County, California, an employee and several relatives stole $15 million over 25 years by skimming money from cash registers and diverting donated items to other vendors. This case, as do many others, reflects a lack of board oversight.

The propensity of the press to act as a “watchdog” over NPOs, Gibelman and Gelman note, varies from country to country, reflecting culture and precedents. A few high-profile American cases from the early 1990s piqued media interest in NPO misdoings, with long-term impacts on organizations. When its CEO retired amid fraud allegations, donations to United Way of America (UWA) fell dramatically, and decreased donations across the sector...
in general were attributed to the scandal. UWA donations remained substantially below pre-scare levels over the several years that it took for the case to be resolved.

This demonstrates that even when allegations have not been proven, media reports not only draw attention to but also shape the public opinion of ethical wrongdoings in NPOs. Typical narratives feature villains and victims—often vulnerable beneficiaries of services—and descriptors of alleged wrongdoing which are not fact based but emotion evoking, e.g., cheat, looting, cunning, elaborate swindle, corrupt, charity shocker, preyed on public trust, betrayal, sinner, and felon. Even if the allegations are eventually proven false, the public’s trust is so damaged that it affects the reputation and status of an NPO and is detrimental in procuring funding. Competition for funds is already intense, and the pressure to replace those lost due to ethical lapses may lead to sacrificing of ideals.

Increased calls for sector accountability—from citizens as a result of public scandals and from governments as they increasingly download social service provision to NPOs—have resulted in implementation of stricter accountability procedures in Canada, the US, Great Britain, Australia, and other countries.

The “sacrosanct” and “vaunted” status of NPOs is problematic, Gibelman and Gelman say, and makes them particularly susceptible to public disillusionment in the wake of wrongdoing. Yet the public has a right to demand a high degree of accountability as NPOs typically deal with beneficiaries’ intimate and personal needs. To maintain credibility, the sector must avoid allegations of improprieties considering its vulnerability to public reactions that are influenced by media.


Svara argues that students seeking to enter the public administration field are motivated by a “public service ethic,” i.e., a sense of duty to serve the public. One need not even consider philosophical perspectives to recognize certain expected behaviours inherent in the nature of public service, which should include the refusal to lie or withhold information, not put one’s own interests above the public interest, and to be accountable to superiors and the public. As a long-time teacher of administrative ethics, Svara observes that this is the kind of ethical reasoning that his students start with. But although administrative ethics is grounded in duty, it is reinforced and expanded by other dimensions; principles, virtues, and the benefits to society (i.e., consequences) shape how one serves others and helps public administrators handle the challenges of their roles.

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2 Svara’s discussion of “administrative” ethics applies to public administrators, i.e., “persons who occupy career leadership and staff positions in government and nonprofit organizations” [emphasis added] (p. 1). Jurkiewicz & Nichols studied public administrators who had taken courses such as “Administrative Ethics” or “Ethical Issues in Management” while obtaining a master’s in public administration degree; they do not distinguish whether respondents worked in government or non-profit organizations.
Using Kohlberg's six stages of moral development, Svara notes that by the time students reach post-secondary education, most young adults are operating at the “conventional” morality stages of 3 or 4. At stage 4, ethical reasoning is guided by duty. By following norms and rules in order to maintain society or law and order, rules and authority are accepted with little reflection or even commitment. At stage 3, individuals merely conform to avoid disapproval or dislike from others. Reliance on “postconventional” thinking, on the other hand, reflects a deeper understanding, a broader commitment, and a much greater likelihood of critical reflection and desire to alter unjust norms. Advancement to this level tends to occur with higher education, especially when educational interventions are specifically designed to broaden ethical thinking.

To determine how well established ethical thinking is in his administrative ethics class (a core course required for an MPA degree at his institution), Svara asks his students in the first class to articulate a personal code of ethics. Responses over 10 years show that most students come to the course already possessing an implicit code of ethics as a result of socializing forces that led them through the stages of moral development.

The codes demonstrate, however, that their thinking is not yet fully developed. While students’ tenets reflect duty, virtues, and principles, less than 1% demonstrate consequentialist reasoning. This suggests the need for formal study to broaden and deepen an understanding of ethical concepts and to bring ethical thinking, especially related to the nature of public service, forward in the students’ consciousnesses. The most useful way to raise the level of moral reasoning, Svaro says, is to use techniques that actively involve students in learning. Having them resolve cases by relating their thinking to levels of moral development, for example, helps students recognize why they think the way they do, how to reason at a higher level and to consider alternative ways to think about situations.


Like Gibelman and Gelman, Brudney and Martinez acknowledge that there are several pressures in the NPO sector that creates a danger that individuals will compromise their ethical principles. And like Svara, they note the centrality of personal responsibility or duty in the non-profit administrator’s role. Although the ethical training offered by higher educational institutions presumably protects the non-profit sector against such ethical lapses, the state of ethics education in non-profit studies has received much less scholarly attention over the past few decades than in public administration generally.

Surveying 238 US institutions offering graduate programs in non-profit management, Brudney and Martinez find a “fragmented state” of ethics pedagogy, with the nature and extent of training varying widely. The responding institutions indicate explicitly or implicitly that ethics is taught to instill a sense of personal responsibility and duty in students, in the belief that ethics instruction is a reasonable means of encouraging ethical behaviour in the workplace. Thus, two-thirds of the 80 institutions that responded to the study offered at least one ethics course as part of its program (either standalone or
integrated into the substantive readings and discussion of a course not specifically devoted to ethics). Only 40%, however, required its completion. Furthermore, the syllabi of these courses, in general, do not distinguish between administrative ethics generally, and non-profit ethics specifically.

In addition, courses vary widely in content, scope, approaches, and materials used. The most common approaches include the examination of case studies and professional codes of ethics, the inclusion of guest speakers with expertise in the subject, and exposure to both the “Great Thinkers” (e.g., Kant) and well-known secondary sources (e.g., Rohr). This variety demonstrates different goals: courses using case studies and “real-world” exercises are meant to hone students’ abilities to recognize, analyze, and solve ethical dilemmas, while those using philosophical and secondary works reject the idea of ethical “techniques” and seek to develop students’ sense of values and reasoning in ethical decision-making.

But does teaching ethics actually change behaviour? And if so, how can it best be taught?

Brudney and Martinez suggest that asking students to re-evaluate case studies they previously examined several months earlier during an ethics course—the “typical” approach—is bound to encourage students to self-report that they feel better equipped to make ethical decisions. The real test, Brudney and Martinez say, is whether this behaviour will be altered when students are practitioners facing real-world, rather than hypothetical, dilemmas. Several studies conclude that ethics courses can and frequently do influence behaviour. The wide range of teaching methods and conceptual approaches in these courses make it difficult, however, to assess impact as well as to compare forms of instruction. Brudney and Martinez conclude that more research is needed on the effectiveness of these various methods and approaches.

It is little wonder, the authors say, that institutions have pursued multiple approaches and curricula and why no agreed-upon, universal, “workable” model of non-profit ethics currently exists. Brudney and Martinez cite Cooper’s explanation in “Big questions in administrative ethics: A need for focused, collaborative effort” (Public Administration Review, 2004): although there is a scholarly consensus that ethics education is important, scholars have, thus far, been able to move beyond this consensus to a systematic collaboration on specific problem sets. Consequently, diverse theories, standards, and pedagogical approaches prevail, possibly undermining a common understanding of ethical behaviour in non-profit management.

Meanwhile, to improve the state of ethics pedagogy, the authors offer a three-step approach to teaching ethical decision-making skills in any course, regardless of approach or content:

- identify the scope of an ethical administrator’s work,
- define the content of appropriate ethical standards’ and
- develop a deliberative process that enables an administrator to appropriately assess ethical issues and chart a satisfactory course for resolving them.

Although Brudney and Martinez are sceptical of some studies’ attempt to establish a link between ethics courses and ethical behaviour (and, thus, their practical value in curricula), Jurkiewicz and Nichols go beyond the “typical” before-and-after case study approach to survey public administrators currently working in the field.

Jurkiewicz and Nichols acknowledge that the difficulty of assessing a student’s knowledge and application of ethics (compared to, say, budgeting procedures) has generated decades of debate on ethics instruction. This leads scholars to assert that the risks to the profession and the public of not providing ethics education far outweigh concerns of instructors imposing singular or anomalous views. The authors note, however, that ethics education must be made explicitly relevant to public administration if we expect graduates’ behaviour to be ethical. A further challenge exists in that faculty may not share an understanding of the importance of ethics education themselves.

To add to this literature, Jurkiewicz and Nichols undertake an empirical test as part of the first reported effort to correlate formal ethics education (defined as a semester-long class focusing solely or primarily on professional ethics) with the subsequent ethical decision-making and behaviour of graduates. Responses to their national (US) survey show that public administrators face complex and pervasive ethical challenges within their organizations: 98% of respondents observe practices including preference to citizens based on socio-economic status, abuse of access to confidential information, misuse of public funds, violation of laws, and political favouritism in granting contracts.

Results strongly suggest that formal ethics education in the MPA curriculum significantly impacts professional behaviour. The 55% of 203 respondents who reported having been enrolled in a formal ethics course described ethical conflicts between themselves and their organizations significantly more often than those who had not taken an ethics course. This suggests that the courses either made them better skilled in identifying an ethical conflict or more sensitive to potential sources of conflict. The respondents who had previously taken an ethics course also reported refusing to engage in unethical behaviour—even when directed to do so by a superior—twice as often. Almost two-thirds reported risking their jobs and careers by doing so, suggesting a willingness to critically question authority and having higher expectations of how managers should behave. Jurkiewicz and Nichols suggest further research is necessary to determine what components of process or content of formal ethics education explains these differences. They conclude that while socialization develops *personal* ethical frameworks, it cannot develop an adequate, normative, *professional* code of conduct.

These introductory findings leave many questions for further research: specifically, how, why, and to what extent does formal ethics education affects professional behaviour (the authors suggest a survey controlling for method); what types of ethics instruction are most effective; and whether differences in gender or age affect ethics education outcomes (the
sample was younger—77% were 40 or under, with 32% under 30—and included more females—almost 60%—than the general population of public administrators).


Saraniero attempts to addresses questions raised by Brudney and Martinez: does teaching ethics change behaviour and, if so, how can it best be taught? Although studies, including Jurkiewicz & Nichols, have found evidence that ethics education using the prevailing methods does have some influence on graduates, Saraniero responds to the need for more research on methods and conceptual approaches.

Saraniero’s primary concern is whether ethics training develops students’ moral imagination. This moral imagination does not tie decision-makers to absolute, prescriptive moral rules, but allows them to also consider context (i.e., learn from past experience) and outcomes (i.e., conjure the future). Using moral imagination, Saraniero suggests that individuals can envision possible solutions and possible outcomes to both their own and others’ actions. This is importance since an ethical leader must have a strong moral imagination in order to recognize and reconcile the widely varying views of right and wrong may exist within an organization.

Moral imagination is cultivated not through passive learning but through active experience. Saraniero likens ethical decision-making to a muscle: both need to be exercised to grow stronger. To teach ethics, therefore, non-profit management instructors should “allow and encourage students to put themselves in the other’s place, to question their values and ideals from various perspectives, imaginatively encounter others’ experiences, and imaginatively create alternative approaches to moral issues” (Ravenscroft & Dillard, as cited in Saraniero, pp. 2–3). The classroom itself provides opportunities for experiential learning—working together to make decisions about how to fairly grade a group project, for example.

Saraniero surveyed alumni of a non-profit management master’s program who took a semester-long experiential ethics and leadership course to determine its impact on their real-world ethical decision-making and leadership practice. Almost two-thirds of respondents had taken the course within the last two years, almost one-third between 3 to 5 years earlier, and the remaining 9% between 6 to 10 years earlier. Seventy-seven per cent were women, 64% were between 30 and 39, and the largest group had been non-profit professionals for 11 to 15 years.

As in studies cited by Brudney and Martinez, alumni believe they are better able to make ethical decisions as a result of the course (in this case, 86%). Significantly, this course also

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3 The author does not clarify whether this was a core course or an elective.
altered their moral imagination. All alumni reported being able to better imagine possible outcomes to their actions, and 95% could imagine solutions. Ninety-five per cent reported a better understanding that not all colleagues will have the same ethical views. And almost half reported primarily considering context and relationship, a key element of moral imagination, in their decision-making.

After the course, respondents also became much more involved in fostering a culture of ethics within their organizations, such as by helping to produce a code of ethics (57%), developing ethics policies (50%) or by discussing ethics with colleagues (73%). Sixty-four per cent said they were more likely to report wrongdoing. Furthermore, when asked to identify the ethical traits that best described their leadership practice, the most frequent responses identified behaviours that actively model ethical behaviour, such as leading by example, mentoring others, and demonstrating integrity.

The course used discussions, simulations, games, role play and personal case studies in addition to readings from philosophy and business ethics, and culminated in an applied project for a non-profit client organization. Results show that nearly all respondents found the more traditional instructional strategies such as discussion, lecture, readings and case studies to be helpful. More experiential strategies such as simulations, film and video, and role-play drew a greater diversity of responses which alumni also found helpful to their learning. Saraniero also examined how various conceptual approaches to ethics education were received. More traditional, rules-based approaches (e.g., Mill’s utilitarianism, Locke’s social contract, Kant’s categorical imperative, and Aristotle’s virtues approach) were seen as less helpful than Ghandi’s commitment to truth and nonviolence (perhaps because his lived experience resonated with non-profit professionals) and educational philosopher Nel Noddings’ ethics of care.

Saraniero concludes that diversity appears to be important, as students found both traditional and experiential strategies helpful. Further research is needed to more fully understand experiential learning’s impact on ethics education and ethical practice, but this study shows that it may be a useful approach, not only to prepare students for ethical leadership in NPOs, but also to develop leaders who will implement and sustain ethical cultures in their organizations.

CONTENT AND ORGANIZATION
This 90-minute workshop balances two short lecture sessions with three active learning sessions, including one that allows participants to apply their learning to their particular teaching contexts.

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<tr>
<th>Duration [min]</th>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Introduction and Objectives</td>
<td>Facilitator reviews the objective of the workshop and provides an agenda.</td>
<td>Motivate participants to learn by letting them know what the point of the session is.</td>
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| 5 | “Pop Quiz: Do You Have a Code of Ethics?” [adapted from Svara] | Have participants answer the following two questions anonymously:  
- What is or what should be your code of ethics for working in an NPOs?  
- What are the standards of right and wrong that should guide that work—the “do”s and “don’t”s of the profession?  

For this section, the facilitator could use a polling technique such as polleverywhere.com, which allows participants to respond using mobile phones, twitter or web browser, to pose the questions. | Encourage participants to get actively involved in the workshop. |
| 23 | Lecture: Scandals, Ethics and a “Fragmented Pedagogy” | Conduct a three-part lecture based on the research of the following three articles. Refer to the reference summaries for additional context and information.  
1. Scandals in the Non-Profit World [Gibelman and Gelman]  
   - The media has the power to shape public perception of NPO scandals  
   - Scandals have wide-ranging consequences on individual NPOs and the sector itself  
   - The “vaunted” status of NPOs often interferes with the public right to accountability  
2. Ethics in the Non-Profit Context [Svara]  
   - Ethics is an integral part of the nature of public service  
   - Ethical thinking develops according to Kohlberg's stages of moral development  
   - Post-secondary students tend to have well-developed ethical thinking (stage 3 or 4 of Kohlberg’s model) | Develop a recognition and understanding of the key principles of the research on ethics pedagogy in the NPO sector. |
| 3. | A “Fragmented Pedagogy”  
[Brudney and Martinez]  
- Describe the current state of non-profit management studies (use the US as an example)  
- The big questions in ethics pedagogy are: does teaching change behaviour; and, if so, how can it best be taught?  
- There is a lack of consensus in ethics pedagogy |
| 7 | Activity: “Your Code Compared to Others”  
[adapted from Svara]  
Participants view and react to the responses they previously submitted to the “Code of Ethics” exercise.  
Using Keynote, Powerpoint or the web, display the previously submitted anonymous responses and solicit participant reaction. Ask participants if they are surprised by or disagree with any of the responses.  
Citing Brudney and Martinez, use the wide variety in responses to remind participants of the varied approaches to ethics instrument and stress how difficult it is to establish a normative professional code of ethics. |
| 15 | Lecture: A Tale of Two Studies  
Conduct a lecture on the following two aspects of ethics pedagogy:  
1. What difference does ethics training make? [Jurkiewicz & Nichols]  
- Discuss the kinds of ethical challenges that NPOs encounter  
- Describe the tensions that are inherent in duty and personal responsibility vs. having to acquiesce to authority and rules  
- Correlate formal ethics education with professional behaviour and discuss its value in curricula  
2. Exercising the moral imagination [Saraniero]  
- Describe how the moral imagination develops  
- Discuss which instructional methods and conceptual |

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<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>Putting it All Together: Using Non-Profit Ethics Pedagogy In Your Individual Discipline or Field</td>
<td>Participants will work in small groups to discuss the current state of ethics instruction at their institution or in their field of work. Using the questions provided on a handout (see Appendix A), have participants devise strategies that they (or their institutions) could employ to strengthen and consolidate ethics instruction. Collect each group's plan and so that they can be compiled and shared via email after the workshop.</td>
<td>This functions as a form of post-assessment in which participants apply the material they learned in the workshop to their individual teaching context in order to consolidate their learning and begin formulating concrete action plans for embedding ethics in the non-profit management curricula of their institutions or courses.</td>
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<td>5</td>
<td>Wrap-Up and Conclusion</td>
<td>At the end of the workshop, ask participants, “What is your biggest takeaway?” After briefly discussing the participants’ responses, offer them a handout of the references used in this workshop.</td>
<td>Provide closure to the workshop and ensure that participants leave with a “take-away” message.</td>
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**Total Time: 90 minutes**

**PRESENTATION STRATEGIES**

Just as the moral imagination does not tie ethical decision-makers to prescriptive moral rules, this workshop does not seek to prescribe adherence to any specific methodology or conceptual approach. Instead, this workshop seeks to describe and bring attention to issues within non-profit ethics pedagogy. Participants should leave the workshop with much food for thought and new strategies as to how—and why—they will teach ethics to their non-profit management students. Furthermore, participants may spread these thoughts and ideas beyond the workshop to colleagues and peers, fostering the collaborative curriculum development and research agendas that might lead to a “workable” model of non-profit ethics.

Like some of the resources used, the workshop may raise just as many questions as it answers. The facilitator should approach this as a positive—the workshop is intended to spur discussion, debate, and thought as to the current state and future of ethics in the non-profit curriculum. That said, the workshop culminates in a 30-minute active learning
session in which participants are asked to apply learning to their particular teaching contexts by coming up with strategies for how they or their institutions might better incorporate ethics training. The activity will enable participants to consolidate the issues and ideas put forth by the resources that informed the lecture sessions.

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES


Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (2004). Curricular guidelines for graduate study in philanthropy, the nonprofit sector and nonprofit leadership.
APPENDIX A: Handout for “Teaching the ‘Right’ Thing: Wrestling with Ethics Instruction in Non-Profit Management Studies”

Take approximately 30 minutes to complete these 2 tasks:
1. With your group, discuss the current state of ethics instruction in the non-profit management curriculum at your institution.
2. Then, using the questions below to prompt your thinking, brainstorm with your group to devise strategies that you/your institution could employ to strengthen and consolidate ethics training.

Record your ideas in the space at the bottom of the page. After the workshop, the facilitator will compile all of the groups’ strategies and share them via e-mail.

While formulating your responses, here are some questions to consider:
- How can we best prepare non-profit management students for ethical professional practice?
- How can we make ethics courses more relevant to non-profit management?
  - How can we prepare students to resolve the tension inherent in duty/responsibility vs. acquiescence to authority/rules?
  - What steps should we advise students take to evaluate and act on ethical dilemmas (as per Brudney and Martinez’s third step)?
- Should ethics be a dedicated course, or spread throughout the curriculum?
- Should courses be mandatory or elective?
- Does ethics instruction also belong in undergraduate studies? (e.g., might undergraduate students be less predisposed to better ethical judgement than graduate students?)

My Strategies for Non-Profit Ethics Education:

| Current state of ethics instruction at my institution: |
| Strategies to strengthen and consolidate ethics training: |

(if necessary, continue writing on the back of this handout)