

ETHICS AS A STAND-ALONE COURSE FOR PH.D. IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

by

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Liberty University

A Dissertation Presented in Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

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## ABSTRACT

Ethics is an essential aspect of society and public administration (PA). Despite being an essential aspect of PA, ethics courses are not universally integrated into higher education programs. Few higher education institutions have adopted a comprehensive approach to ethics, and ethics courses are not required for most doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) graduates in PA. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The research questions that guided this study are: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs? What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? Applying Kolb's experiential learning (EL) theory provided this study with a theoretical underpinning. Data to answer the research questions were collected by 12 semi-structured interviews, two focus groups, and document analysis. Braun and Clarke's six-step thematic data analysis process was applied, resulting in identifying the themes to answer the research questions. The six themes identified are: Limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas, a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity, limited conceptual understanding, uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations, course structure, and integration with other courses. The findings in this study have empirical, theoretical, and practical implications.

*Keywords:* Public administration, experiential learning, Ph.D., ethics

### **Dedication**

To my wife, Christie Scott, I dedicate this dissertation to you, a woman who shows me the true meaning of unconditional love. You are my rock and supportive force, without whom I could never have achieved this goal. You let me know that success was obtained by the mere dedicated effort to obtain this Ph.D., and failure only exists if I did not make the good faith effort in pursuing this loft quest that God placed on my heart. Your persistent kindness, patience, and support have served as a motivating force every step of this journey. You have been and continue to be the supportive force behind my success. This finished work is a testament to the journey we walked together.

To my deceased parents, Daniel Scott Sr. and Mary Scott. This finished product and every educational endeavor manifest your life's effort to ensure your children know that education and knowledge of facts are invaluable. Thank you for instilling in me the ability to face life's challenges with a smile despite any fear and knowing that no person or event can stop me from achieving goals.

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First, I thank God for placing the desire and ability to return to school, not only to pursue study in an area that has been important to me but also to continue the path to obtain my Ph.D. This accomplishment shows that anything is possible with the mercy and grace of God.

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I want to thank the 12 participants who were willing to share their individual experiences, without which this work could not have been completed. Your time, knowledge, and honesty are invaluable and helped enrich this much-needed area of research. I am humbled by the participants' dedication to the field, and I hope to build on and grow this wonderful field.

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### **List of Abbreviations**

Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA).

Bachelor of Arts (BA)

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

Experiential learning (EL)

Master in PA (MPA)

Public Administration (PA).

Public Policy (PP)

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“The nation's morals are like its teeth; the more decayed they are, the more it hurts to touch them.” - George Bernard Shaw.

### Overview

Ethics is an important aspect of social existence. The role of ethics education is to promote and instill moral conduct among students (Fuertes, 2021). The relevance of ethics in public administration or public service has been the focus of several studies (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Hubbell, 2018; Khan et al., 2021). Ethics, however, remains a significant issue, with common ethics-related violations, such as corruption and fraud, still existing in the public management environment (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Khan et al., 2021). Hence, the focus of this study was the possibility of requiring ethical education when taking up graduate studies in public administration.

In this chapter, the focus of the discussion is to introduce the topics of study and the details of the problem, which were central to the development of the entire research. Chapter One contains the background of the study, the problem statement, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the nature of the methodology and research design, assumptions and limitations, the definition of relevant terms, and the significance of the study. The chapter ends with a summary.

For the remainder of the study, Chapter Two contains a detailed review of relevant literature to justify the gap addressed in this research. Chapter Three contains details and procedures of the methodology and research design of the study. Chapter Four contains a discussion of the results of the data analysis. Chapter Five concludes the study with a summary of findings, interpretations, conclusions, and recommendations.

## **Background**

Considerable public interest exists in matters of ethics in public service. Throughout history, cases of fraud, corruption, and high-profile scandals in public service have harmed the public's trust in public administration (Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017). Despite the importance of ethics in public administrations, these ethical violations remain rampant in public services (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Khan et al., 2021). Although more stringent laws and policies have reduced criminal behavior, unethical practices such as nepotism, conflict of interest, abuse of confidential information, misuse of insider knowledge, and a lack of accountability remain prevalent in public service (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Khan et al., 2021). For example, the privatization of the public management environment has changed the roles, values, and accountability of public service, thus affecting the role of ethics in this context (Fuertes, 2021).

According to West (2021), there has been an increased focus on ethics education in public administration by researchers and scholars since the late 1960s. During the same period, ethics courses appeared in master of public administration programs. Professional associations such as the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) began to focus on ethics in the curriculum during the decades of the late 1960s and beyond (West, 2021). The NASPAA has been encouraging public administration programs to improve students' values, knowledge, and skills to underpin their capabilities to act ethically and efficiently. In 1986, the NASPAA developed its accreditation process, and in 1989, it adopted standard 3.21, which supported the need for ethics to be taught in graduate public affairs (West, 2021). Conversely, a limitation of the standard is that they did not require adding a core course on ethics.

Initiatives to revolutionize the government continued to occur in the 1990s, with the focus on introducing private sector values, practices, and techniques in the private sector to enhance public service performance and improve public trust in government (Hijal-Moghrabi & Sabharwal, 2018). The business-like model supported enhanced performance and efficiency while promoting transparency. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many public services solely offered by the government are now delivered by a network of arrangements involving the private, public, and nonprofit sectors. The networks aim to enhance government performance in policy outcomes and service delivery to restore government trust (Hijal-Moghrabi & Sabharwal, 2018).

The importance of ethics in contemporary public administration cannot be overstated (Fejzullahu & Baralli, 2019). Public servants should have high ethical standards because it is the law and essential in promoting public trust in the government. It is indispensable for public administration officers to be responsible, competent, respectful, economical, honest, politically vigilant, and trustworthy. As such, to be ethical, public administration offices should be able to assess standards that guide decision-making independently. Despite standards and values, adherence to ethics in public administration is a problem globally and in the United States.

For instance, Europe's increasing body of codes and rules has made managing ethical violations sophisticated and complex (Demmke et al., 2021). In an assessment of the ethical frameworks of the European Union (EU), the European Council, and the Council of the European Union, it is explicitly indicated that unethical behavior by staff and members of the EU institutions and organizations is unacceptable (European Court of Auditors, 2019). Unethical behaviors reduce the public's interest and are linked to the risk of fraud and corruption. According to the Council of Europe, corruption is a core threat to local and regional governance and Europe's democracy, which makes it an urgent matter for public authorities to address



(Council of Europe, 2023). In developing and transitional countries, concerns about leaders and public officials' unethical conduct have increased interest in ethics and values (Hossain et al., 2020). Although transitional and developing countries have adopted systems and structures at the national and organizational levels, eliminating unethical behaviors such as corruption is still persistent, resulting in a decline in public trust (Hossain et al., 2020).

During the last 50 years, there has been a decrease in public trust in the United States (Holzer, 2022). There are significant deficiencies in using human resources in the public sector, which makes ethics essential. Public administrators experience daily challenging choices, making ethical considerations essential to public administrators because their policy decisions can benefit or harm affected citizens (Hijal-Moghrabi & Sabharwal, 2018). Unethical behaviors such as corruption negatively impact productivity and perpetuate inequality and poverty, adversely affecting income distribution (Buye, 2021). According to Transparency International (2021), corruption is at its worst in the United States, with a perceptions index of 67 out of a maximum possible 100 points.

Public servants are increasingly becoming unethical, a problem that can be attributed to their unfamiliarity and exasperation with the ethics applicable to public management (Buye, 2021). The question remains: How can unethical behavior be adequately addressed in public administration? Current research indicates that addressing ethics issues in public service should begin at the root, specifically through education programs provided in higher education institutions (Hubbell, 2018; King et al., 2021). Hubbell (2018) found that developing public administration education programs could positively influence future ethical outcomes in public administration. The role of ethics education in public administration is largely undervalued (Fuertes, 2021).

As such, in the published literature, researchers have supported that ethics should not only be taught in higher education or embedded as an element in different core courses in public administration programs but also incorporated in the K-12 curriculum (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). Ethics education can focus on internal issues essential to a public organization, such as inclusion, diversity, performance appraisal, conflict mediation, personnel management, hiring, firing, promotion, and interactions between subordinates and superiors (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). Contrastingly, almost every accredited master's and doctoral program in educational leadership has at least one three-credit hour course devoted to teaching ethics (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). In the nation, most, if not all, educational administration professional associations, such as school boards, local educational agencies, and state educational departments, require public educational administrators to prove that they have mastered the ethical requirements (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). For instance, the Code of Ethics for the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) contains 12 statements that educational leaders should subscribe to in their practices (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021).

Research suggests that ethics in the context of public service has grown extensively up to the present (Fuentes, 2021; King et al., 2021). Ethics education and training have led to positive behaviors among individuals, especially students in public administration (King et al., 2021). However, the focus of ethical education remains fixated on traditional aspects of public administration (King et al., 2021). Insufficiencies in how ethics education is provided could be a major concern because the students are future professionals who will join public administration (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; El Baradei, 2021).

Educators are responsible for instilling the right values through an education system that recognizes that ethics education influences the adoption of ethical behavior in future careers

(West & Buckby, 2020). Currently, the education system is not achieving this goal. Most higher education institutions do not have stand-alone ethics courses to demonstrate their seriousness in teaching ethics to students (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021; Santos et al., 2018; West & Buckby, 2020). Moreover, ethics courses are implemented differently across different institutions, thus possibly contributing to the different prioritization of ethical values and behaviors that students may develop (Morçöl et al., 2020).

Educators should look at this gap as a problem that needs to be evaluated to determine how best to offer ethics education to promote ethical values in students as they prepare to begin their careers in public service. Addressing this problem is important, as unethical behavior remains a problem in public administration, with violations such as corruption and nepotism still evident. A major challenge for public administration is a lack of unifying courses that dictate ethics as a requirement in Ph.D. programs (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Frederickson & Ghere, 2014). The current study explored how ethics education is structured in Ph.D. programs and its impact on the profession in public administration.

The theoretical framework for this study is experiential learning theory. This framework aided in exploring how ethics should be best incorporated into the curriculum of the Public Administration Ph.D. Moreover, this theory helped understand how incorporating adequate ethics education courses can impact Ph.D. graduates and the field of public administration.

There is a need for public administration education, especially doctoral programs, to involve ethics as a core subject (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Frederickson & Ghere, 2014). A gap in research exists regarding a lack of standards and best practices when approaching ethics education, suggesting a limitation within the education system. The researcher focused on addressing this gap because of its contributions to improving

scientific knowledge in ethics education, practices in public administration, and overall positive implications to society.

### **Situation to Self**

The main motivation for conducting a study about having a stand-alone ethics course as a requirement for completing a Ph.D. degree in public administration is the relevance of ethics to public sector workers. Public administration is focused on serving communities for positive change. Ethics is an important aspect of public administration, as it involves nonprofit organizations providing services using public funding or taxes. Addressing the research gap may minimize the pressing issues of fraud, corruption, and high-profile scandals. With these potential contributions to positive social change, the researcher perceived that conducting this study was worthwhile.

Different philosophical assumptions are considered based on ethics in public service. The ontological view of public administration is that it involves providing services that cater to the needs of the public (Northoff & Smith, 2023). In this context, public administration requires honest and dedicated work on the part of a public servant for the people governed or within the area of jurisdiction. Ethics is relevant in this area. Epistemologically, this study could enable learning of the impact of a stand-alone ethics course in public administration on the teaching of public administration and the efficiency of ethics in public administration (Sol & Heng, 2022). In the axiological view, it is understood that each individual has their own set of values, which are aligned with the ethical considerations that they regard as important. Methodologically, it is viewed that the steps for conducting this study exist to address the purpose and answer the study's research questions. Experiential learning (EL) theory was the paradigm that guided this study. The purpose of this paradigm is to differentiate the obtainment and usage of information

in the context of stand-alone ethics courses in public administration education. With the EL theory in mind, it could be stated that the views and opinions of participants about a stand-alone ethics course in public administration are developed through one's experiences (Dillette & Sipe, 2018; Kong, 2021).

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is the lack of required stand-alone ethics training in public administration (PA) within the doctor of philosophy (Ph.D.) programs. Unethical behavior is one of the common problems encountered in public administration. Successful public administration is built on trust in its constituents (Fuentes, 2021). Unethical behaviors, however, such as bribery, nepotism, conflicts of interest, a lack of accountability, corruption, and use or abuse of confidential information mar the sector (Fuentes, 2021; Puiu, 2015). Researchers have extensively explored issues of ethics and ethics violation in public administration, but research on how education and training can influence the effectiveness of ethics application in public administration is limited (Bowman et al., 2001). Incorporating ethics and its essential values in public service may be useful in enhancing how ethical issues are approached in the sector. Ethics studies and programs are not prioritized or required as a common core in doctoral education programs (Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Frederickson & Ghore, 2014). More broadly, ethics is not a primary area of study in most faculty areas of Ph.D. within public administration (Bowman et al., 2001; Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). As an area of study, few U.S. higher education institutions prioritize and coordinate ethics courses in education, implying that ethics is treated as a lesser field of focus, limiting its efficiency in public administration (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021).

The identified gap points to a significant problem that scholars in public administration should examine (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). Ethics and values are important in public administration but are not prioritized in higher education programs. A lack of standards and best practices when approaching ethics education shows a limitation within the education system. The aim of the study was to offer insight into such a disconnect by exploring how incorporating ethics education as a core area and a requirement in Ph.D. programs can enhance the efficiency of ethics in public administration.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. At this stage in the research, a stand-alone ethics course will be generally defined as a unit of teaching not connected or intended to be used or function alone or separately (West & Buckby, 2020). The theory guiding this study was Kolb's EL theory, which can be applied to support the importance of teaching ethics in a Ph.D. program.

### **Significance of the Study**

The study will contribute to academic research, public administration, and positive social change. A gap in research exists regarding a lack of standards and best practices when approaching ethics education, showing a limitation within the education system (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Santos et al., 2018; West & Buckby, 2020). Addressing this research's problem and purpose will bridge the existing gap in the literature. The study could advance knowledge in ethics and public administration research by addressing the gap. Moreover, the findings of this study will improve the body of literature about ethics education and public administration.

The study's findings could also contribute to public administration and ethics education practice (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). Through the data collection, the study will provide an empirical basis to determine whether Ph.D. programs offer ethics as a stand-alone course or whether ethics courses are integrated within the other major units in public administration. Furthermore, the research could yield insight from the data into the implication of having stand-alone or integrated ethics education programs to promote ethical behavior in public administration. Based on these insights, policies, and strategies could be developed for contemplating and completing the inclusion of ethics as a graduation requirement in Ph.D. programs for public administration.

The findings of the study could also contribute to positive social change (Reupert, 2023). Reader awareness could be promoted through the discussions and the findings from this study. Ethics, in general, is a positive aspect that must be infused into society. Improving the awareness of the role of ethics in public administration of readers as members of society, including formal ethics education in Ph.D. programs for public administration, could promote positive social change.

### **Research Questions**

Despite increased attention to ethics in public administration, ethical challenges remain a major concern (Khan et al., 2021). Many researchers have examined the importance of ethics and the implications of ethics violations in public administration (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017). Limited research exists, however, on how education and training can influence or change how ethical behavior is viewed in public administration. In most Ph.D. programs, ethics education is not provided as a single or stand-alone program, and ethics is not a requirement for graduation. Often, ethics courses are embedded within other core units,

meaning they are provided as a small part of another course in public administration. The research questions that will guide the study are:

**Central research question:** What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs?

**Sub-research question 1:** What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course?

**Sub-research question 2:** What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses?

In their study, Raadschelders and Chitiga (2021) supported the need for education focused on ethics, which should not be limited to public administration only. In 2002, it was reported that 64% of the accredited PA undergraduate and graduate programs offered freestanding ethics courses. Comparably, in 2017, the percentage had decreased to 11% (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021; Svara & Baizhanov, 2019). The occurrence of crisis in public administration has resulted in questioning the role of education and accrediting professional organizations in promoting ethical practices (Fuertes, 2021). Teaching ethics and public values has been neglected, which has resulted in practices that cause a lack of trust. Teaching ethics is essential because the knowledge supports decision-making (Yesim, 2020). West and Buckby (2020) noted that early education and training programs influence how different values and perceptions are implemented in the professional field. For example, proper preparation and implementation of ethics in education can influence how graduating students view or perceive the study area as they begin their professional careers. The research questions were based on the identified gap in the published literature that: (a) the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course are not



comprehensively understood and (b) the similarities and differences of ethics courses in the Ph.D. PA program are not known. Addressing the research gaps helped to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs.

### **Definitions**

The following is a list of recurring key terms and important acronyms used in the study:

1. *Corruption* - Corruption is unethical behavior characterized by misuse of public or organizational power (Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017).
2. *Embedded/Integrated Courses* - Embedded/integrated courses refer to the approach of teaching ethics as a course attached to or within other courses (West & Buckby, 2020).
3. *Ethics* - Ethics is the study of morality. This concept involves carefully and systematically reflecting on moral decisions and behavior to achieve a correct output for situational analysis (Pitak-Arnop et al., 2012).
4. *National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA)* - NASPAA is a body in public administration that accredits schools to ensure they manage their programs adequately.
5. *Public Administration* - Public administration is a broad field that focuses on implementing governance policies necessary for building and strengthening society. Public administration prepares individuals to serve as public servants or managers in local, state, and federal government (Khan et al., 2021).
6. *Stand-alone Courses* - Stand-alone courses are not connected or intended to be used or function alone or separately (West & Buckby, 2020).

## **Roadmap**

Ethics is an important aspect of society. The topic for this study was ethics education in public administration. Standards and best practices are lacking for ethics education, thus exposing a limitation within the education system in public administration. The problem is the lack of required stand-alone ethics training in PA Ph.D. programs. The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The research questions addressed in this study are as follows: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs? What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? The methodology used to address the problem, purpose, and research question was a qualitative case study. The study contributes to academic research, public administration, and positive social change by addressing the purpose and answering the research question. Chapter Two contains a detailed review of the underpinning theoretical framework and relevant literature.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

Ethics denotes the moral conduct or rules based on a standard of a specific group or institution. Despite increased attention to ethics in public administration, ethical challenges remain a major concern (Khan et al., 2021). In public administration, ethics guidelines are required to conduct interactions and activities of public service. Ethics is considered a way of ensuring responsibility and accountability between the public and the administration. Adhering to ethical guidelines ensures administrators are culpable or answerable to those they serve.

Additionally, ethical guidelines certify that the institution employs integrity in its operations. Many researchers have examined the importance of ethics and the implications of ethics violations in public administration (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017). For ethics to have significant meaning in public administration, however, it should be developed from its roots. Education programs or courses in public administration should be designed to build a solid foundation for learners (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). As the learners leave school and begin a career in public administration, they should hold and understand strong ethical values or guidelines. Ethics does not appear to be a primary area of study in Ph.D. education programs, which limit the effectiveness of implementing ethics in the real world. In the current literature review, the researcher examines insights from existing research regarding ethics in Ph.D. programs and gaps that need to be addressed.

Limited research exists on improving ethics education courses in higher education institutions. Research shows that most ethics education programs in colleges and universities run concurrently or are integrated into other courses (Santos et al., 2018; West & Buckby, 2020). Most universities do not have “stand-alone” ethics courses where public administration students

can choose the course as a major or minor (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). The implication is that ethics is not considered a significant study area for Ph.D. students and most other areas of higher education. In this chapter, the researcher examines this issue by investigating existing literature on ethics education and related issues in public administration to inform the gap in the literature, compelling a study on requiring ethics as a requirement for Ph.D. graduates. Experiential learning theory served as the theoretical framework for studying how incorporating adequate ethics education courses can promote better outcomes for Ph.D. graduates as they begin their careers in public administration.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Throughout recent decades, ethics education and training have gained significant support to promote informed decision-making and moral reasoning in public administration (Johnson et al., 2022; Kidd et al., 2020). Most students in higher education institutions are already in entry-level jobs or preparing to start their careers. The adherence to adequate levels of learning makes a stark difference in how these students fare or approach matters of ethics in public service.

#### **Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory**

David Kolb developed EL theory in 1984 as a paradigm for differentiating how information is obtained and used. The main tenet of EL theory is that learning best occurs through experiences (Dillette & Sipe, 2018; Kong, 2021). Experiences are memorable and become helpful for students as they try to learn new things. Learners' evaluations should also align with their previous experiences (Kong, 2021). EL emphasizes that learners should participate in all learning processes and tackle concepts focusing on how the experience leads to learning (Che et al., 2021). EL is a paradigm in which the learner learns in a style that follows the “Do, Reflect, and Think and Apply” approach (Butler et al., 2019, p. 12). In this case,

learners engage in a tangible event (Do), replicate what occurs in the event and other evidence (Reflect), develop theories based on the event or experiences (Think), and articulate a hypothesis or explain a problem (Apply). The goal of EL is to generate positive modifications in academics to ensure students can apply what they have learned to real-world issues (Che et al., 2021). Experimental learning ensures learners are given more authority and responsibility in learning by involving them in the experience. Additionally, EL promotes flexibility so that the learning experience comes full-circle to help develop key skills and mental-learning abilities.

Various researchers have examined the impact of EL on learning outcomes. Boggu and Sundarsingh (2019) examined whether learning can be achieved through active participation in a specific task. The researchers sought to examine changes in learners' perceptions of their autonomous actions before and after the intervention. After completing the intervention, the results showed that EL cycle activities nurtured learner autonomy while enabling students to gain useful career skills (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2019). Applying similar concepts can enhance ethics education programs in higher education to promote learning experiences and prepare students for their future professions. Che et al. (2021) examined computer science students' learning experiences and reported similar findings. Che et al. found that student participation in learning positively correlated with attitude and expectations of learning.

Studies also show that EL has long-term positive impacts on student learning. Bradberry and De Maio (2019) argued that EL equips students to analyze and synthesize information, which becomes essential in future learning and gaining essential skills. Students also become confident in their abilities because they have first-hand knowledge, which increases their likelihood of graduating and moving on to a successful career path. The same can be replicated in ethics education courses to enhance Ph.D. programs and prepare students for their future.

Learning ethics is essential because it supports students in applying the knowledge in their professions. For instance, Robinson et al. (2022) found that experiential learning can impact how students comprehend and apply ethical values. Another researcher, Hylving et al. (2023), supported the idea that applying experiential learning in higher education enables students to understand the complexity of ethics better. Sholihin et al. (2020) advanced the discussion by indicating that experiential learning increases students' self-efficiency when dealing with ethical dilemmas.

Accordingly, the lack of a stand-alone ethics course can hinder students from gaining the opportunity to engage in the experiential learning cycle. Students could miss concrete experiences, where ethical dilemmas are stimulated, hindering their ability to observe and develop abstract conceptualizations related to ethical principles reflectively. The lack of a stand-alone ethics course could result in a deficiency in active experimentation, where learners can apply their knowledge of ethics in their profession. A ramification of the lack of a stand-alone ethics course could be ethical misconduct in the learners' professional practice. The absence of a stand-alone ethics course decreases the opportunities for students to engage in guided reflection on ethical issues. A decline in guided reflection hinders the development of learners' ethical reasoning. The lack of a stand-alone ethics program could limit students' ability to create and modify abstract concepts related to ethics in public administration. The gap could limit their ability to apply ethical principles in their work.

A stand-alone ethics course could allow students to actively experiment with applying ethical concepts in different scenarios. The absence of such a course limits the learners' opportunities, affecting their preparedness to resolve real-world ethical dilemmas. The lack of a stand-alone ethics course might result in gaps in graduate students' ethical knowledge and

decision-making capabilities, which could have adverse ramifications for their professional practice.

### **Related Literature**

Professional codes of ethics are essential because they assist public administrators in making ethical decisions (Odeh, 2023). The increasing changes in public administration, including digital innovation, have supported the need for ethics in the field (Pakhnenko & Kuan, 2023). In public administration, ethical leadership can moderate the relationship between demographic diversity and organizational outcomes (Moon & Christensen, 2022). Good public administration services are a core aspect of having a quality government. Accordingly, ethics is a core aspect of fostering quality public administration services, especially with the emerging fourth industrial revolution. The anticipated adoption of disruptive technology in government supports improving ethics competencies to avoid maladministration (Muliawaty & Muliawaty, 2020). Ethical leadership can help public managers and personnel in enhancing organizational outcomes. Consistent with Moon and Christensen (2022), Pomarón's (2020) perception is that applying ethics supports achieving outcomes and expected values, which promotes productive achievements. Ethical education enhances critical reflection, promoting competencies among the students (Monteiro et al., 2019).

Based on the prevailing ethical issues, additional conceptual and theoretical clarity between the scope of integrity and public administration theories is needed (Fourie & Kimaro, 2020). It is challenging for public administration to avoid the fourth industrial revolution and rising technological advancements. The fourth industrial revolution and technological advancements will likely result in a shift in ethics and integrity. In public administration, clarity is needed to increase an understanding of the possible integrity, ethical issues, and solutions to

the problem of process and choice (Fourie & Kimaro, 2020). Ethics is one factor that significantly influences how efficiently public administrators perform their operations, making it significant to focus on the concept (Machmud et al., 2023). As such, tailor-made ethics courses and training tools are essential in public administration (Bohatá, 2019). Education on ethics is essential because it supports increased competencies among students (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Concepts related to public administration, ethics, courses, and higher education were discussed in this section as themes.

### **Unethical Behavior in Public Administration**

Research indicates that ethics violations occur in public administration. Kennedy and Malatesta (2010) claimed that ethical violations include abuse of public office for personal interest. Ethical violations such as corruption, nepotism, and stealing cause major challenges to effectively deliver services necessary to promote the public good. Khan et al. (2021) conducted a systematic literature review to examine the relationship between e-government and corruption. The researchers reviewed peer-reviewed articles from Scopus and Web of Science databases for titles and abstracts related to corruption and e-government, selecting 63 articles for the study. The findings indicated that high incidents of corruption occur in e-government organizations (Khan et al., 2021). Many ethical violations that occur are also not extensively investigated. Similarly, Sulitzeanu-Kenan et al. (2022) conducted research from 40 countries and found unethical behavior rampant in public administration. The researchers found a relationship between unethical behavior in public service and societal culture.

Additionally, Sulitzeanu-Kenan et al. found that ethical behavior, such as honesty, among public sector workers is influenced by the public sector culture. Public sector culture affects different areas of public administration, such as relationships with institutions, incentives, and



corruption policies. The risk of incidents related to corruption in public service is high within societies where societal and public sector cultures seem to tolerate corruption compared to a society where strict penalties exist. Nicolaidis and Manyama (2020) came to similar conclusions. Ethical violations, which harm the people, are rampant in many countries. The researchers recommended teaching and training leaders to understand and incorporate ethical leadership into action.

Ethical violations are also increasing because of unhelpful prevention strategies. Khan et al. (2021) found that corruption in administrative powers occurs because of factors such as poor prevention and enforcement strategies, a lack of citizen participation, and limitations of e-government. In another study, Bautista-Beauchesne and Garzon (2019) examined anticorruption strategies. The researchers explored theoretical and conceptual strategies for preventing public administration corruption and conducted a systematic literature review using keyword-string searches from pertinent databases. After scanning the databases of Taylor and Francis, ProQuest, Elsevier, Sage, Wiley Online Library, and JSTOR, the researchers settled on 46 articles for the review (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019). The results from the study revealed a lack of methodological diversity, theoretical deliberation, and clarification in the definitional basis of corruption prevention. Fourie and Kimaro (2020) added that developing ethics and integrity frameworks is essential in addressing ethics in public administration. Ethics and integrity frameworks are often known as codes of ethics that are mainly prescriptive and exclude the underlying reasons for unethical behavior (Fourie & Kimaro, 2020). Most existing frameworks do not address the reasons for rampant unethical conduct. Further, these frameworks fail to adequately identify ethical dilemmas that can increase the risk of unethical behavior and lack clarity in defining and analyzing ethical or unethical behavior. Fourie and Kimaro stated that

effective ethics and integrity frameworks should be considered starting at the grassroots of the institutional environment. The idea is to rely on code of ethics solely but make those frameworks meaningful to the people they aim to serve.

Recent research suggests that interdisciplinary collaboration can help address ethical violations. Bautista-Beauchesne and Garzon (2019) indicated the need for more interdisciplinary collaboration between different fields that study the issue of corruption. Collaborative efforts from public administration, management or political science, and criminology can play a vital role in creating better educational goals to overcome corruption in public service. The two studies show that ethical violations like corruption remain a major challenge in public service. Although most studies show that corruption incidents are declining, others reveal that corruption and other ethical violations continue to harm the public (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019). The findings reveal a need for public administration institutions to examine the potential incidents of ethical violations that are not extensively evaluated in extant research.

### **Role of Ethics Education Programs**

Ethics education has a role in influencing ethical behavior in public service. Privatization and individual goals affect the current public management environment significantly (Fuertes, 2021). Such privatization can affect roles, values, and accountability in the public sector. For example, as privatization increases, ethical issues such as pursuing personal interests emerge, which can undermine social values integral to public administration. Fuertes examined the role of ethics in education and the practice of public service. The researcher conducted a desktop search to examine the extent to which ethics education programs were designed as stand-alone subjects in UK schools. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, they included 17 public administration agencies, 12 universities, and three colleges in the study. The researcher found

that less than 10% of higher education institutions offered compulsory ethics modules (Fuertes, 2021). Fuertes concluded that the role of ethics education in public administration is largely undervalued, which may result in adverse effects on how individuals approach ethical issues in future careers as public administrators.

Ethics education can significantly impact how students approach ethical conduct. Nichols et al. (2007) argued that it was only in the late 1980s and 1990s that most schools started incorporating ethics education courses. For example, universities began offering ethics in engineering courses in 1998. Graduating students should understand ethical considerations and implications as they apply what they have learned in their professions. Nichols et al. examined students from two universities to evaluate their commitment to ethics based on their final grades in a safety course. In this study, students answered 30 true-false questions to test their understanding of the BCSP Code of Ethics and Professional Conduct related to workplace safety. The findings showed that earning a high score academically does not translate to a higher understanding of ethics (Corple & Linabary, 2020; Nichols et al., 2007; Paul, 2019). Some students who normally score median to below grade scored high on the ethics test. The findings from the study indicate that greater emphasis on ethics courses in education is vital in promoting integrity as students prepare to pursue their professional goals.

In another study, Patel et al. (2021) found that Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery (MBBS) students do not have adequate training in research ethics, which is a vital component when entering clinical research. A major reason for this outcome is the lack of effective ethics education programs in higher education. The researchers investigated 130 second-year MBBS students to evaluate the knowledge obtained and attitude toward ethics when dealing with animal and human research (Patel et al., 2021). As evidenced by a lack of adequate

training in ethics while in school, the researchers called for more focused ethics education programs.

Ethics education programs should be effectively branded to increase visibility. Hubbell (2018) explored how branding a Master of Public Administration (MPA) program can influence how students approach the discipline. The researcher acted as a participant-observer in the study at a Jesuit University to examine how the institution lives up to the values of public justice as dictated in public administration. The researcher reviewed all the MPA programs in the Jesuit University accredited by NASPAA to determine how the department of public administration brands its social justice values. The findings indicated that branding an education program is the most effective way of communicating with potential students (Hubbell, 2018).

Additionally, the branding of a program changes the message, making it easier to understand and distinguishing it as unique. The more a program is branded, the more influence it will have on student outcomes (Head, 2020; Hubbell, 2018). Findings from this research showed a strong connection between developing public administration education programs and improving future ethical outcomes in public administration. For example, the Jesuit University social justice program became effective because it was targeted and uniquely designed for students in public administration. When such education programs follow a unique path, they can influence future individuals joining public service in higher education.

In another study, Misra and Goel (2020) aimed to assess the impact of ethical decisions on students' decision-making. The participants in this study were business students in a bachelor of commerce program who were taught ethics in the program. After the business ethics course, students were exposed to opportunities to act unfairly to assess the efficacy of ethics education and determine the extent to which the learned values were internalized. Consistent with Coldwell

et al. (2020) and Miller et al. (2020), Misra and Goel (2020) supported the idea that teaching ethics improves learners' competencies. Notably, Misra and Goel (2020) acknowledged that instead of focusing on principles and theories in ethics, it is essential for learning to help students understand how to apply the competencies they have gained.

Different from Misra and Goel (2020), who involved business students, Faihs et al. (2022) focused on medical school learners. The study focused on assessing the need to teach ethics, law, and decision-making skills among medical students. The researchers identified that medical students desire more ethics, law, and decision-making teaching to increase their competencies. The lack of competencies increased students' fear of encountering moral and ethical dilemmas. For this reason, Ethics should be taught in most programs to assist learners in ethical decision-making (Faihs et al., 2022; Misra & Goel, 2020). Lönngren (2021) assessed ethics in engineering education, where the researchers supported its essence in enhancing responsibility for societal impact. The researchers identified that ethical reflection is perceived as irrelevant to the profession and has little or no importance in engineering. The findings supported the importance of ethical education (Lönngren, 2021).

Contrastingly, Contreras (2023) supported the efficacy of a leadership program offered by a non-governmental organization to increase ethical competencies among students. The notable contribution of content in the article is that the researchers supported the idea that ethics education occurs not only in formal settings such as professional training and universities but also in informal environments (Contreras, 2023). Ethics education focuses on providing and improving knowledge based on best practices and standards of conduct. Teaching ethics should not be theoretical, making it essential for some application. The combination of theoretical and

application aspects supports the development of skills among students, consistent with the moral aspects (Contreras, 2023).

### **Ethics Courses are Partially Incorporated into the Curriculum**

Researchers have also shown that a unifying context is lacking when teaching ethics education, which could harm public administration. King et al. (2021) asserted that over the last 40 years, the field of ethics in public service has grown extensively, especially in its setup in the traditional MPA programs. The growth of ethics education and training has positively influenced the behavior of individuals in public administration and students' ability to argue and reason around ethical conflicts (King et al., 2021). Such ethical training is, however, still largely dependent on traditional aspects of public administration. In their study, King et al. aimed to develop an analysis of the syllabi for MPA ethics courses to determine how the ethics curriculum incorporates ASPA ethical codes. The researchers assessed 30 NASPAA-accredited MPA programs in the United States based on eight ideologies of the ASPA guidelines (King et al., 2021). Overall, King et al. investigated a match between the values in the syllabi and the ASPA codes. The results showed that most MPA courses only partially incorporate the complete range of the ASPA guidelines (King et al., 2021). Constantly low coverage of the full range of the ethical codes and limited integration of ethical codes was evident across the syllabi.

Unethical leadership is a global issue, and higher education institutions have a role in mitigating the problem (Coldwell et al., 2020). In their study, the researchers focused on determining whether a stand-alone ethics course would be more effective than an integrated one in fostering academic ethical competence. An assessment of the data related to students' direct and indirect courses on ethical instruction assisted researchers in understanding the importance of stand-alone ethical instruction. The researchers identified that the stand-alone course was

more effective than an embedded course in enhancing learners' ethical reasoning and decision-making (Coldwell et al., 2020). Miller et al. (2020) added to Coldwell et al.'s (2020) findings by supporting the efficacy of a curriculum to increase individuals' confidence when dealing with ethical issues. The researcher added to the evidence by supporting the idea that a stand-alone course increases students' confidence to confront ethical issues. Students' ethical sensitivity, judgment, and intent to resolve issues increased, supporting the importance of a stand-alone ethics course (Coldwell et al., 2020).

Ethics education programs reveal incompleteness when reviewing research on human subjects. Wessels and Visagie (2017) examined the eligibility of ethics research during ethics review. In reviewing two databases, the researchers investigated whether studies in public administration satisfy appropriate conditions for review. Through an assessment of the databases—International Review of Administrative Sciences and Public Administration Review—the researchers selected 70 articles, at least 60% of which involved human participants (Wessels & Visagie, 2017). However, only 26% of the articles incorporating human subjects adequately reported how the study ensured minimal risk to the participants (Wessels & Visagie, 2017). The findings from the study reveal a dangerous trend: studies in public administration fail to show a unifying context that can protect human subjects in studies. A general application of seeking ethical consent is often provided in the studies but does not detail how harm will be prevented. Such a limitation risks harming participants and shows that ethical standards that can be fully embraced in public administration are lacking. The information in these studies shows that Ph.D. programs in higher education institutions may also lack a comprehensive incorporation of ethical courses or units.

Similar to public administration, other education programs have partial ethics courses or completely lack adequate ethics courses. Raji et al. (2021) pointed out that ethics courses are exclusionary in artificial intelligence (AI) education programs. Ethics is incorporated in such scientific courses in a distilled way to avoid the risk of ethical thinking, which may limit computational thinking. The partial application of ethics in AI has resulted in indifference, devaluation, and a lack of mutual support towards humanistic social science. In an analysis of U.S. schools, Raji et al. determined most courses in AI heavily rely on mathematical and programmatic analysis, whereas “human-centered” ethics courses are not considered as important. Individuals or groups that approach AI or mathematical issues in any way that is ethical, not computational, or scientific are often disregarded (Raji et al., 2021).

In another study, Loue and Loff (2019) indicated that most research programs have limited ethics education. The programs and courses lack extensive ethics education training, principles, and processes, compromising the quality of education or skills used in research. While investigating 10 principal investigators in research studies, the investigators found that most researchers lack the understanding of “vulnerability” in research (Loue & Loff, 2019). Such a problem could indicate inadequate ethics education training, which poses a risk to applying ethics in professions.

### **Ethics Educations Programs are Largely Fragmented Rather Than Stand-Alone.**

Studies have also shown that ethics education programs are often fragmented and detached. Extensive research has been conducted to study topics related to public values in public administration. For example, De Graaf and Van der Wal (2017) conducted a study to investigate how public values incorporated in political science, economics, and law are similar. The researchers performed a qualitative analysis of about 50 public value publications in



political science, economics, and law that had been published between 1969 and 2014. The findings from the study showed that in each discipline, public values are viewed based on their key emphases and epistemologies (De Graaf & Van der Wal, 2017). No unity exists in how different disciplines perceive ethics in public administration.

Berkovich and Eyal (2020) investigated how ethics education can promote attitude and identity development in leadership. The researchers collected data from 73 graduate students using a pretest and posttest to determine their views on ethics education and leadership outcomes. The findings showed that students who received general ethics education did not significantly influence ethics and indicated little perception of the role of ethics education (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). In contrast, students with specific ethics-focused courses strongly perceived ethics as a vital part of public administration (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Therefore, the findings prove that general ethics education may not significantly influence how students later view ethics as they begin a career in public administration.

Ethics courses remain largely fragmented because of poor implementation. In another study, Puiu (2015) posited that ethics violations mar public administration because of poor implementation of ethics education programs. The researcher examined various tools that can be applied in public schools to advance how ethics is currently applied in public administration and found that more targeted, rather than fragmented, ethics education programs may influence the strength of ethics in the work environment and during public service (Puiu, 2015). In another study, El Baradei (2021) assessed faculty perceptions of ethics in public institutions and why, what, and how education programs for ethics can be implemented. The researcher conducted an online survey to collect data from different education institutions across the globe. The findings showed that most ethics education programs are often detached rather than being bound into a

strong, comprehensive course (El Baradei, 2021). Such fragmentation of ethics education limits the seriousness required when pursuing ethics in public administration. In contrast, ethics is considered a general subject, which conveys that it is not significantly important.

Most ethics education is squeezed into other education programs rather than being offered as a stand-alone course. West and Buckby (2020) conducted a study to determine how ethics components are included in the qualification process for prospective accountants in Australia and New Zealand. The researchers completed an evaluation of the structure of ethics courses taken in schools by potential accountants. A total of 48 universities took part in the study to share their data about ethics courses by forthcoming accountants. The findings indicated that most ethics courses are “sandwiched” between other unit classes (West & Buckby, 2020). Such an ignorant view of ethics increases the risk of poor moral character. It leads students to lack moral sensitivity or judgment as they strive to become part of public service. The lack of focus on stand-alone ethics courses increases limitations for students aiming to tackle ethical issues in public administration.

Rather than offer stand-alone ethics courses, other institutions teach ethics as a general course. Santos et al. (2018) explored how ethics education is conducted and its benefits among public administration students in Brazilian schools. The researchers determined that ethics in most Brazilian institutions is taught as a general course using data from 15 Pedagogical Projects Courses (Santos et al., 2018). Students take short ethics classes incorporated into the larger courses pursued in public administration. The study indicates that a reflective and critical approach to ethical issues that emerge during public service is lacking in the current state of ethics education. As educators fail to take a more focused approach to ethics using stand-alone

courses, students are underequipped to deal with ethical issues and moral conflicts that may emerge in public administration.

Raadschelders and Chitiga (2021) also examined how ethics education is offered in colleges and universities in the United States. After reviewing different public administration programs, the researchers found that ethics education is often taught jointly with other courses, such as law. It is common to see a single unit of ethics but not a course. Although other courses demand a passing grade to graduate, ethics is not featured as a core area of study but something that can easily be perused within other course material. The result is a lack of comprehensive and stand-alone ethics education courses for students in public administration. The findings from the study support the notion that ignoring ethics in Ph.D. programs could harm students and professionals as they join public service.

Studies have also revealed that attention is lacking to improve stand-alone ethics courses in special education. Yıkmış (2022) found little attention to ethics education in the special education literature, which indicates that ethics education programs are often poorly handled. The study included 20 preservice special education participants to examine the nature and state of ethics education programs in special education (Yıkmış, 2022). A major finding from the study was that a stand-alone ethics course in undergraduate programs can increase teachers' awareness of ethics and ethical conduct while also encouraging mastering key ethical principles. The study revealed, however, that limited stand-alone ethics education programs are designed for special education teachers. Most of the ethics lessons provided do little to enhance ethical behaviors because they are not prioritized (Yıkmış, 2022). The lack of defined programs for ethics education compromises ethics adherence in special education.

Paul (2019) revealed similar sentiments while investigating ethics courses and programs in marketing. The researcher surveyed some of the best schools in the United States using four regularly used ranking reports to evaluate the state of ethics courses in marketing courses. The results from the study revealed that stand-alone business ethics courses and marketing ethics courses were lacking. Out of the top 10 business schools included in the study, most did not offer stand-alone ethics courses and lacked programs specifically dedicated to marketing ethics at either undergraduate or graduate level (Paul, 2019). The findings revealed that stand-alone ethics courses are lacking in most programs in higher education, including public administration.

### **Ethics Education Programs Differ Depending on the Institution**

The implementation of techniques used to teach ethics differs from school to school. Doudenkova et al. (2017) inquired about the effectiveness of current education approaches in teaching ethics and their implications on future professionals in public service. After a review of the literature, the researchers found that most ethics courses do not create a solid foundation for students to address different ethical dimensions as they enter public service (Doudenkova et al., 2017). In contrast, a shaky foundation is provided in schools and rarely improved upon in the profession. The researchers claimed that when the foundations of ethics education are strong, students can enter the job market with clearer, hands-on experience of how to face ethical challenges. In this way, improving current methods of teaching ethics in schools is required. Institutions of higher education should develop more focused courses for Ph.D. programs and make it mandatory for ethics to be pursued as a requirement for graduation.

Studies have revealed differences in how ethics education programs are implemented in different disciplines. Morçöl et al. (2020) explored the similarities and differences between MPA and Master of Public Policy education programs. The researchers sought to determine whether

the two disciplines should strive for a unique focus on their curricula. Using data from 43 institutions that use NASPAA-accredited MPA programs, they explored titles from their ethics education programs to determine how each is implemented (Morçöl et al., 2020). The results from the study revealed that a clear distinction is missing in how MPA and Master of Public Policy education programs are designed. The results revealed that teaching strategies in both programs fail to incorporate strong ethical foundations that can enhance the profession of public administration. Instead, according to the findings, the teaching strategies were generalized rather than focused on each discipline. This scenario challenges professionals joining public administration after completing their degrees because they are not well-equipped to tackle ethical issues.

Ethics education programs also lack a single approach that can be applied effectively in many institutions of higher learning to promote better learning outcomes. Souza and Vaswani (2020) found that most institutions use diverse methods to teach ethics courses. Although some methods are effective in enhancing comprehension of ethics principles and ethical conduct, the approach fails in other ways. By reviewing 29 articles published between January 2014 and September 2019, the researchers examined various strategies incorporated in learning and assessing ethics (Souza & Vaswani, 2020). Whereas some institutions use strategies such as videos, others have role modeling and interactive lectures. Some of these teaching techniques, however, lack an integrated approach that can be embedded in most institutions. The study also revealed that most programs or schools lack efficient assessment methods for ethics education. Of the 29 studies reviewed, only 11 showed that assessments emphasized ethics education (Souza & Vaswani, 2020). Most ethics education programs do not offer assessments to students.

When assessment is provided, the exams are not mind-provoking but include strategies such as multiple-choice evaluations or single exams with open questions.

In another study, Todorov (2021) found that effective teaching approaches for ethics are lacking in an Australian program. The Higher School Certificate is a certification awarded for completing senior secondary education in New South Wales, Australia. Despite being a highly accredited course in teaching design principles and statistics, the program lacks research ethics (Todorov, 2021). Teaching and assessments focus on research principles but not research ethics. Such a scenario has been evident in different institutions and how they approach ethics courses.

In their study, Coldwell et al. (2020) used case analysis and role-plays as instructional materials for teaching ethics. According to Zhang (2022), the pedagogical approaches that can be applied to teach ethics include reflecting on personal experiences, engagement and dialogues, and student-led case discussions. Simola (2019) posited that pedagogical learning for ethics education should focus on enhancing students' literacy by applying research-supported concepts and principles to assist students in understanding how the concepts can be applied in the real world. Ethics-related pedagogical learning should also enhance students' awareness of the prevailing gaps that could arise between their intended and actual ethical behavior. Additionally, ethics-related pedagogical learning should also enhance a sense that they should continuously enhance their competencies (Simola, 2019).

Similarly, Namadi et al. (2019) supported the effectiveness of case-based learning in promoting moral reasoning. Case-based learning involves using scenarios to increase the nurses' awareness of ethics. Cases are useful pedagogical instruments because they actively engage students in learning (Namadi et al., 2019). The instructional approach chosen influences ethics

education and students' ability to gain the requisite skills to overcome complex issues in their work environments (Namadi et al., 2019; Simola, 2019; Zhang, 2022).

### **Enhanced Ethics Education Promotes Moral Competence**

The literature also shows that defined and targeted ethics education is associated with higher moral competence. De Souza and Rasmussen (2019) claimed that individuals working in public service commonly face moral dilemmas. Public administrators need to prepare and understand how to handle such complex circumstances. De Souza and Rasmussen viewed moral competence as a tool that may support public managers in addressing moral conflicts, which can begin with the education process. de Souza and Rasmussen conducted a study to examine the influence of ethics education in the development of an individual's moral competence. The researchers used a moral competence test (MCT) to measure students' responses after receiving or not receiving ethics education. The results revealed that students who did not receive teaching in theoretical concepts did not show meaningful change in moral competence (de Souza & Rasmussen, 2019). However, students who received active methodological teaching techniques regarding ethics showed a greater understanding of ethics and ethical dilemmas. This research revealed the significance of applying and emphasizing ethics education in higher education programs to promote good decision-making in public administration.

Andersson et al. (2022) came to a similar conclusion. In an integrative system review, the researchers hoped to show the relationship between ethics education and the ability to improve ethical competence among healthcare professionals and students training in the healthcare field (Andersson et al., 2022). Andersson et al. examined literature from PubMed, CINAHL, and PsycInfo databases and reviewed 40 articles. Their findings illustrated a link between effective ethics education and moral competence in handling ethical problems

(Andersson et al., 2022). The study supported ethical competence learning, which can be applied in Ph.D. programs in public administration. Sánchez-Romero et al. (2021) also considered ethical education and training vital in promoting moral development. The researchers investigated how value learning can promote moral development among students with intellectual disabilities. They developed a training course and adopted MCT to measure moral development. The study's results illustrated improvement in two components of moral development among students who took ethics education training (Sánchez-Romero et al., 2021). These findings may help inform stakeholders in public administration education programs to develop well-meaning courses for graduating students to prepare them as they begin their professional careers.

Ethics education and training offer essential support in many academic disciplines. Martins et al. (2020) examined how bioethics education can lead to higher moral competence among nursing students as they address three ethical dilemmas. In a longitudinal study, the researchers used the MCT extended (MCTxt) questionnaire, which incorporates three ethical dilemmas. Students in the study completed a 32-hour Bioethics and Nursing Ethics course (Martins et al., 2020). The findings indicated that before completing the training, students showed moral competence stagnation but increased moral competence scores regarding judging dilemmas and performance in decision-making after completing the test (Martins et al., 2020). Martins et al. completed another study on how bioethics training can enhance moral competence among medical students. The identified dilemmas in the bioethics course were related to theft, torturing a terrorist, and euthanasia. Similar to the previous study, the findings indicated that students exhibited better performance when making decisions about ethical dilemmas and improved judgment of ethical dilemmas. The findings of both studies support the argument that



efficient ethics courses can enhance how students and professionals approach ethical issues in the real world.

The findings mirror those of Marques et al. (2021), who determined that incorporating the right values in public administration influences a leader's behaviors and judgment. When appropriate values are promoted, sustainable leadership is promoted. Using a systematic review of 2,038 articles from the Scopus database, the researchers compared values, public administration, and sustainability (Marques et al., 2021). The findings showed that sustainability is possible when ethical values are developed early on among individuals seeking public service (Marques et al., 2021). In this way, the study effectively supports the argument that early and focused ethics education is vital in schools. Public administrators should strive to push for agendas and policy changes in education systems to incorporate focused ethics courses (Bellé & Cantarelli, 2017). This approach is especially vital in higher education to prepare students to begin a career in public administration.

### **Ethical Guidelines in Public Administration are Outdated**

Another issue in the literature is that current ethical guidelines and education programs are based on traditional ethical attitudes and values. Researchers have noted that current ethical issues are challenging and different from past ethical concerns in the public sector (Taebi et al., 2019). Taebi et al. sought to determine the challenges science and engineering programs face regarding ethics education as students prepare to earn their degrees. After examining various programs in different universities and colleges, the researchers found that ethics education offered in current higher education programs is largely based on traditional foundations of ethics courses (Taebi et al., 2019). The researchers determined that current education programs need adequate infrastructure for ethics education to help feature current issues facing public

administration (Taebi et al., 2019). Better ethical guidelines and values based on today's programs are required to promote better outcomes for students and professionals. When students receive quality ethics education, they are likely to translate this education into practice in their professions.

Similarly, Denisov and Nemtsova (2021) found a need to transform ethics courses based on the changing paradigms of public administration. The researchers conducted a literature review and determined that current ethical applications and systems in public administration have not been updated (Denisov & Nemtsova, 2021). Existing research does not incorporate data on how ethics has evolved, especially in the digital or information age (Denisov & Nemtsova, 2021). The ethical standards that existed in the past differ from the current ethical platforms, and, as such, education should be transformed to incorporate current information. The researchers proposed that efforts be made to modernize ethical systems presently in use in the public space to adapt to the changing technological world and new emerging ethical issues (Denisov & Nemtsova, 2021). The findings revealed that current education and professional guidelines used in public administration have failed to address ethical issues. How education is provided and developed into the future is required.

Despite ethics education programs being integrated into U.S. institutions in the 1980s, much of what is taught, even today, has not changed. No consensus exists on what makes ethics education efficient in schools (Elliott & June, 2018). Between 1980 and 2015, ethics courses have increasingly been embedded in the mission, vision, and values of most institutions of learning. Real change, however, has not occurred in how ethics education is provided. Elliott and June (2018) asserted that contemporary ethics education is a general standard of education for

students, but it is also an area where controversy is normal, and arguments on what constitutes ethical decision-making remain rampant.

Additionally, most institutions' "code of ethics" is handed down as a historical artifact, exposed to scrutiny, appraised, defended, or condemned (Elliott & June 2018). Ethical values are woven within the curriculum just as they were more than 40 years ago. Ten pointed out that because ethics is largely an "add-on" in most curricula, teaching materials and content rarely change or improve. The problem worsens because ethics education is not considered a core study area in most higher education institutions. Time has not changed how ethics is presented to students, which limits the effectiveness of ensuring students take ethics as a core area.

Another area that is still lagging in ethics education is the training of educators. Beardsley et al. (2019) examined the extent to which training is provided to teachers in high schools. The findings revealed that most teachers in high schools do not receive formal training on how to teach ethics despite being a significant aspect of public service. Past ethics courses followed a similar path, with ethics education as a general program that did not warrant too much time. The current study aims to show that incorporating core ethics courses for Ph.D. students can adequately prepare them to ensure ethical reasoning in public service.

### **Ethics Education Programs Do Not Adequately Implement NASPAA Codes**

Studies have also shown that the NASPAA code of ethics guidelines are not adequately implemented in ethics education programs. Svara and Baizhanov (2019) explored the public service values the NASPAA demands from accredited public administration education programs. Based on their guidelines, NASPAA expects to promote values such as transparency, improving welfare, justice, accountability, and responsibility in education programs. To determine whether such values are upheld in education, the researchers engaged in a self-study using 125 programs

and evaluated the values promoted in the mission statement of each of these programs (Svara & Baizhanov, 2019). The findings indicated that most education programs incorporated few or implied that NASPAA values are not explicit and comprehensive guidelines. Most of the institutions in the study incorporated a broad orientation of the values and did not show any specific shared values promoted by NASPAA for public affairs or public administration. Only a few institutions have incorporated an adequate NASPAA code of ethics in their programs.

West and Buckby (2020) reached similar conclusions. The researchers investigated how ethics instruction occurs in public administration education programs. A literature review of articles from the 1960s to 1980s revealed that professional organizations such as NASPAA and ASPA set the ethical standards currently used in public administration (West & Buckby, 2020). Despite the realization that ethics is a vital subject in public administration, many programs have not incorporated the core ethical guidelines promoted by these organizations in their courses (West & Buckby, 2020). The researchers also found that even today, most public administration institutions have not integrated core ethical guidelines proposed by professional organizations. The lack of adequate implementation of the NASPAA code of ethics shows a failure in ethics education and the profession in promoting an industry that fully recognizes the value of ethics and its influence on good decision-making. The more students fail to see the value of ethics as they pursue their courses, the harder it will be for them to address ethical issues when they begin work as public administrators.

Additionally, when NASPAA codes are incorporated into the curricula, the teaching methods do not efficiently incorporate the extensive values NASPAA stands for. Zeemering (2020) investigated how students articulate public service values based on NASPAA-accredited programs they take. The researchers used a Q-methodology to determine how students prioritize

public service values. One major finding from the study was that not all values are collectively embraced based on NASPAA codes (Zeemering, 2020). The researchers noted variations in how students prioritize public service values and found that the sustainability of the values was not evident. The study also revealed gaps in self-study and recognition of key NASPAA codes among students (Zeemering, 2020). The researchers concluded by noting that education programs should incorporate a better understanding of public service values among students to develop a better curriculum that meets public service needs.

Similarly, Awasthi and Mastracci (2021) found poor incorporation of NASPAA codes in MPA programs. Focusing on “emotion” as an important value in public service, the researchers produced a framework that embodies the NASPAA Universal Competencies #1 and #5. Through the framework, the capacities in the competencies include emotional labor, emotional intelligence, and empathy. The researchers found that most MPA programs do not adequately prepare students to understand the concept of emotion, as found in the NASPAA code of ethics (Awasthi & Mastracci, 2021). Such a situation results in public administration students lacking the emotional intelligence and empathy required to make informed, ethical decisions.

Haupt et al. (2017) encountered comparable themes while investigating how local government managers perceive implementing MPA programs based on the core competencies provided in the NASPAA codes. Using survey data, the researchers found that most MPA programs do not adequately emphasize leadership skills as a key ethical concept in the NASPAA code of ethics. Additionally, the researchers determined that MPA programs should emphasize adopting NASPAA’s core competencies in critical thinking and analytical skills to enhance ethical decision-making (Haupt et al., 2017). Along with improving education based on the NASPAA code of ethics, research also shows the value of social equity as presented in the

NASPAA. Blessett et al. (2019) found that education programs should expose potential MPA graduates to social equity perspectives to prepare them for a public service career adequately. This goal can be achieved by embodying the core competencies explored in the NASPAA code of ethics within these programs.

### **Increased Motivation for Public Service Increases Ethical Behavior**

Other researchers have examined the motivations for public service and ethical behavior, which encourage improved ethics education programs. Wright et al. (2016) aimed to investigate the relationship between motivation for public service and ethical behavior. The researchers hypothesized that employees motivated by public service may internalize these feelings and do not mind the consequences of reporting evident unethical behavior (Wright et al., 2016). The researchers obtained data from 477 employees working in a large state organization to examine their perceptions of motivation and ethical behavior.

The results from the study illustrated that subordinates view supervisors with a motivation for public service as ethical. Further, employees motivated by public service show increased determination in reporting unethical behavior and are not concerned with the consequences (Wright et al., 2016). The study provides compelling arguments in favor of appropriate ethical programs in educating, training, and sensitizing forthcoming employees to be more equipped with concepts relating to ethical behavior.

Public service motivation (PSM) has also been linked to increased motivation for ethical behavior in public service. Sun (2021) surveyed 465 front-line public service workers in an eastern Chinese city to examine the relationship between PSM and commitment to change. The study revealed that PSM is higher in individuals who comprehend ethical values and codes more than other groups of employees (Sun, 2021). The more an employee attains ethical values, the

higher their motivation will be to change and evoke PSM, an essential personal dispositional factor related to positive change-related behaviors or responses, which may be related to affective commitment to change. Sun found that PSM encourages behavior to change the status quo proactively and to see positive change. In contrast, superficial harmony negatively impacts the connection between PSM and commitment to change. In this way, when employees connect with ethical values, they are motivated to work in public service and encourage change that promotes ethical conduct.

Wang et al. (2020) investigated how moral foundation theory (MFT) can shape how individuals in public service trigger PSM. Though effective, MFT indicates that moral foundations are also evolutionary and adaptive to the challenges in social lives. The study perceived such evolution and adaptiveness to be related to exposure to ethical guidelines, values, or accepted social morality, which, in turn, motivates commitment to public service (Wang et al., 2020). MFT may be promoted when public administration ethics education emphasizes understanding of ethics among students.

Other researchers have also connected PSM to ethical behavior. Meyer-Sahling et al. (2019) explored the causal effect of PSM on ethical behavior by drawing on survey experimental data. The researchers surveyed a sample of 5,000 Chilean central government workers to examine the connection between PSM and ethical behavior and found that activation of PSM increases the willingness to engage in ethical behaviors such as reporting ethical violations to management (Meyer-Sahling et al., 2019). In this regard, the study revealed that PSM triggers ethical behavior intent, and as such, activating PSM among public service workers can enhance adherence to ethical principles. Public administration ethics education programs should be designed to encourage PSM, which stimulates adherence to ethical principles.

Additional data show that PSM is positively connected to organizational performance and altruism. Zubair et al. (2021) conducted a quantitative study to examine how PSM encourages public service workers to become more efficient and its relationship to ethical conduct. The researchers found that as PSM increases, so does organizational performance, ethics (e.g., altruism), and perceived social impact (Zubair et al., 2021). Educators in public administration should strive to promote PSM while teaching ethics to promote ethical behavior.

Awaah et al. (2021) explored how instructing vital concepts in public administration education promotes quality human resources, a component of ethical behavior. Through a sample of 650 students, the researchers aimed to determine how teaching public administration in African universities influences behavior (Awaah et al., 2021). The results revealed that many public administrative education programs have inadequately conceptualized core values, such as ethics and corruption (Awaah et al., 2021). The result is emergent unethical behavior when individuals work in public service. Without adequate education programs, the motivation for public service does not influence ethical behavior. Individuals cannot be motivated to do what is right when they have never been guided in making informed decisions.

### **Ethics Education Programs Can Improve Leadership Roles in Public Administration**

Enhanced implementation of ethical guidelines has also promoted ethical leadership and diversity in public service. As students graduate, the ability to address ethics challenges and take leadership roles should be evident. Bhana and Suknunan (2020) claimed that many leaders do not possess ethical practices, but through training and development in higher education institutions, it is possible to promote ethical leadership. Using a mixed-method study, the researchers evaluated 312 academic and administrative staff from a higher education institution to determine ethics and leadership conceptualization. The results indicated poor reflection of



leadership and ethics-related items, including respect, fairness, transparency, and behavior (Bhana & Suknunan, 2020). The poor leadership and ethics-related decline was associated with a lack of training in both ethics and leadership. At least 50% of the respondents pointed to inadequate leadership and ethics leadership programs in the institution (Bhana & Suknunan, 2020). The researchers recommended better ethics leadership and development programs to encourage students to connect with ethical leadership before graduating. Hassan et al. (2014) added that ethical leadership significantly benefits public service employees. The researchers conducted a study with 161 managers from a large state agency to determine whether ethical leadership impacts employee performance and behavior. The results illustrated that employee absenteeism is reduced when ethical leadership is applied. Therefore, their leadership skills are enhanced when students develop ethical values and incorporate them into their leadership roles as they join the public service profession.

Just like in public administration, many organizations face the risk of unethical conduct from employees or staff. Effective leadership can shape organizational culture, which results in employees' readiness to change, become ethical leaders in their departments, and guide and offer support where necessary (Metwally et al., 2019). Metwally et al. (2019) conducted a study using 270 direct reports from middle and lower managers in a public firm to determine whether ethical leadership can impact employee readiness for positive change and how such leadership can be achieved. The results revealed that ethical leadership motivates employees to accept change and can be achieved through organizational culture obtained through methods such as training or education (Metwally et al., 2019). Targeted ethical training is essential in helping employees feel comfortable in their work environments, leading to productivity. Training also shapes employees into great leaders. Sabir (2021) obtained comparable results when examining how ethical

leadership influences teachers' behaviors. The researchers evaluated how ethics and leadership are connected using a sample of 320 teachers. The study revealed a positive connection between teachers and their leaders when it was assumed they were moderately ethical (Sabir, 2021). In the process, teachers committed and connected better in their work when they perceived their leaders as ethical. The findings support the hypothesis that adequate ethics training can promote leadership roles.

In a literature review, Moon and Christensen (2021) sought to investigate the effectiveness of ethics in leadership and its impact on a diverse workforce. The researchers evaluated whether ethical leadership could promote diversity and achieve key organizational outcomes. Through an assessment of four theories, the study's results indicated that ethical leadership encouraged public administrators to develop efficient relationships with human resources, which leads to diversity and meeting set goals (Moon & Christensen, 2021). The results upheld the argument that effective, ethical education and professional guidance or training in public administration are vital in promoting ethical leadership and putting people at ease, which meets diverse needs.

Education programs focused on inquiry of ethics promote the application of ethical behavior. Zhong and Bao (2019) added to this argument by stating that promoting personal values or profiles creates a desire for commitment and collaboration. Employees gain confidence working with others when goals are aligned. In the same way, when individuals commit to meet certain ethical goals, including ethics promotion, goals can be achieved. Moseley and Connolly (2021) investigated the role of inquiry-based learning in public administration education and its role within diverse groups. The researchers also found that inquiry-based learning connected students with the outside world and increased acceptance, which led to diversity and inclusivity.

The study findings show that inquiry-based learning is required in ethics education to encourage administrators to consider ethical issues outside of the classroom. For example, students in higher education institutions can learn about the world they are about to enter as they pursue their careers. Such ethics courses would be based on supporting others and how public servants can better their world.

### **Ethics Education Programs Should Consider Technological Changes**

Public administration education programs should also be designed in a manner that considers technological changes in the modern world. Mišić (2021) explored the importance of ethics in a digital era. A major finding from the research is that public administrators or policymakers should engage in anticipatory ethics because technology changes constantly (Mišić, 2021). Similarly, such anticipatory mechanisms can work when developing ethics courses for Ph.D. students to ensure they are well-equipped as they enter the professional world. Adequate ethics education programs can ensure that ethics issues affected by technology can be developed and documented. Emina (2020) noted that today's institutions need access to information and data to make informed decisions. Digitalizing information and data mean that new ethical issues emerge that public administrators should be able to address. Ethics education programs in public administration should consider the many ethical issues influenced by technology and integrate them in individualized courses for better outcomes.

Focusing on the role of technology in public administration cannot be underestimated. Muliawaty and Muliawaty (2020) argued that technology today is an indispensable need for any government in different fields and departments. Technology can also be disrupted, however, impacting many government aspects. A public administrator must understand how to deal with both the positive and negative aspects of technology (Martins et al., 2020; Muliawaty &

Muliawaty, 2020). Ethics education programs in higher education institutions should be designed with such issues in mind. As Cortellazzo et al. (2019) declared, the digital age is a time for public administrators to show great leadership because leaders play a key role in developing a digital culture. Leaders develop relationships with multiple stakeholders to collaborate on digital tools while recognizing how ethical issues can be addressed. Digital transformation should not be ignored in public administration because it may negatively affect how future leaders approach ethical issues impacted by technological issues.

Technology is especially useful in decision-making as public administrator systems strive to standardize, store, and control the flow of information. Technology is adopted to improve the effectiveness of providing public service (Gunz & Thorne, 2020). The responsibility of public administrators to safeguard the technology and information obtained, such as ensuring confidentiality and privacy and protecting users' information from hackers and other ethical issues, remains one of the major concerns today (Gunz & Thorne, 2020). For example, the data obtained from the public needs to be safeguarded in all sectors of public administration. Sigfrids et al. (2022) stated that governments and public administrators strive to design suitable governance frameworks to mitigate the risks posed by "Big Data." The researchers recommended that public administration move from traditional top-down hierarchical governance ideologies and policy-making strategies to more modern and informed strategies to ensure ethical responsibility (Sigfrids et al., 2022). Similarly, the education programs offered in higher education institutions should be modernized and emphasized to develop greater leaders of tomorrow who understand the responsibility of tackling ethical issues.

Other researchers have stressed the need for public administration and ethics to adapt to technological advancements. Andrews (2019) determined a need to explore public value in a

period where “Big Data” is commonplace. Public administrators must determine how technological changes influence various issues, including ethics. The researchers systematically reviewed peer-reviewed articles to evaluate how the information age influences leadership and the people they serve (Andrews, 2019). The study’s findings showed that little research has been conducted on how technological changes influence public administration. Scholars have not examined how public administration decisions and ethics have changed because of the increased information and technological changes. The study revealed essential information that can inform public administration and illustrate ethical expectations that can be studied in schools. When more ethical issues and their relationship to technological changes are explored in schools, students become more aware and critically prepared to address any challenges.

Plant (2018) added that despite changing technological advancements, public administrators have a role to be responsible. One way such efforts can be valuable is by promoting administrative responsibility to address ethical problems. Plant determined that when ethics education paradigms are introduced early in learning, they become instilled and suitable for future use. In this way, even as technologies change, individuals are prepared and ready to handle the challenges. It is dangerous for public administrators to ignore how technology can change the face of the sector. Teaching ethics in higher education institutions cannot be undermined because it is the most effective way to recognize and exploit technological advances. The more students become sensitized about ethics, the less they become involved with ethical matters in their careers.

### **Summary**

Ethics codes or guidelines are vital for public administration. Ethics is a critical component of public administration, as it ensures responsibility and accountability between the

public and the administration (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Khan et al., 2021). In this manner, administration members have to be accountable to the public they serve. The literature review, however, revealed that unethical behavior remains a problem in public administration (Khan et al., 2021).

Violations of ethics in public administration have been explored in literature (Khan et al., 2021). In a systematic literature review, Khan et al. (2021) found that high incidents of corruption occur in e-government organizations. Workplace culture has also been found to drive ethical practice in public administration (Fourie & Kimaro, 2020; Sulitzeanu-Kenan et al., 2022). Therefore, a culture that does not prioritize ethical practices often encounters ethical violations among its members (Nicolaidis & Manyama, 2020; Sulitzeanu-Kenan et al., 2022). The common ethical violations found in the literature include corruption and nepotism (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Khan et al., 2021).

The literature review also revealed a need to implement measures to address ethical violations (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). Ethics should be developed from the roots and embedded through education to ensure that they have positive implications for public administration (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020). A specific education program for ethics in public administration is essential to ensure a solid foundation for learners (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Fuertes, 2021). Ethics, however, is not a primary area of study in Ph.D. education programs, thus limiting its effectiveness in real-life applications (Berkovich & Eyal, 2020; Santos et al., 2018; West & Buckby, 2020). Researchers have expressed the need for public administration education, especially doctoral programs, to involve ethics as a core subject (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Frederickson & Ghore, 2014). There is a gap in research in terms of incorporating standards and best practices in higher

education institutions for integrating ethics as core subjects in public administration courses in colleges and universities (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Santos et al., 2018; West & Buckby, 2020). The researcher addressed this gap by examining the problem of unknown best practices for incorporating ethics as part of graduation requirements for Ph.D. programs and the impact it would have on the teaching of public administration and the efficiency of ethics in public administration. Chapter Three will include a detailed description of the methodology and design implemented to address the problem and research gap.

## **CHAPTER THREE: METHODS**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. In Chapter Three, the researcher provides a description of the methods used to complete this study. Specifically, the researcher details the research design, research questions, setting, participants, procedures, the researcher's role, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

### **Design**

In this study, a qualitative methodology was applied to What-based research questions. An advantage of conducting qualitative research was that it allowed using a wide array of rigorous study techniques and approaches to understand the participants' experiences and opinions (Bazen et al., 2021). Another advantage of applying a qualitative methodology was that it allowed inductive reasoning to derive meaning from the collected data. A qualitative methodology supports using different data collection methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, which were applied to answer the research questions (Bazen et al., 2021; Borgstede & Scholz, 2021). Other methodologies, specifically quantitative and mixed methods, were not applied because the approaches are more suitable for collecting data that can be used to determine the cause-and-effect relationships to test hypotheses (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021).

A qualitative research methodology has assorted designs, such as case study, ethnography, grounded theory, phenomenology, and narrative research (Creswell & Poth, 2020). A case study design was selected over other methodologies because of varied reasons. For example, narrative research was not selected because it is more suitable for exploring an individual's life, which is told in the form of stories. A phenomenological design was not chosen



because it describes the importance of a lived phenomenon to understand the experience (Creswell & Poth, 2020). A grounded theory design was not selected because it involves creating a theory to explain a concept that is not adequately understood, which was not the focus of this study. The ethnographic research design was also not chosen because it is more suitable for interpreting and describing a culture-sharing group's experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2020).

A case study assesses contemporary and real-life systems (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2017). A case is an individual, small group, or organization. In this study, the case was a small group of PA Ph.D. graduates. The history of the case study approach can be traced back to its popularity in the fields of psychology, law, medicine, and political science. The origin of modern social science case studies is related to anthropology and sociology (Hamel et al., 1993). Historical examples of case studies can be traced as back as the early 19<sup>th</sup> century when sociologists and anthropologists assessed people's lives and experiences to gain insights into how the people interpreted and assigned meaning to their experiences, which were presented descriptively or in the form of narratives (Johansson, 2003).

When conducting a case study, identifying whether the focus will be an individual, event, decision process, or community is essential (Yin, 2017). Yin (2017) posited that case studies can be exploratory or descriptive. Stake (1995) states that case studies can be intrinsic or instructional. In this study, Stake's (1995) types of case studies were used. For this reason, a single instrumental case study was used. A single instrumental case study supported exploring the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs by exploring the perspectives of graduates and performing a document analysis. Applying a case study design facilitated gaining an in-depth description of the participants' experiences, which supported answering the research questions.

## Research Questions

Based on the purpose of the study, the following research questions guided the study:

**Central research question:** What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs?

**Sub-research question 1:** What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course?

**Sub-research question 2:** What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses?

## Setting

The study took place in different U.S. universities offering Ph.D. programs in public administration with stand-alone courses for ethics. The participants were Ph.D. public administration graduates from universities fully accredited by the U.S. Department of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA). Using multiple sites for this study enhanced its robustness (Gelman et al., 2021). The participants had to be from universities with Ph.D. programs focusing on public administration. The criterion was important to help determine how stakeholders of public administration, especially Ph.D. students, perceive ethics education within Ph.D. programs and potential improvements. The universities included were institutions where participants graduated from, which provided public administration leadership programs with either a stand-alone ethics education approach and/or ethics education embedded into other major courses of study.

## Participants

The study participants included public servants who were Ph.D. public administration graduates from different CHEA-accredited universities. Study participants were limited to those

who had worked in their respective public service departments or organizations for at least three years. Purposeful sampling was applied to recruit the most suitable participants. Palinkas et al. (2015) identified purposeful sampling as a technique in which the researcher uses their judgment to determine the participants in a study. Purposeful sampling is often used in qualitative studies when the researcher aims to collect information-rich cases concerning a phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015). Purposive sampling was suitable for use in this study because the focus was gaining an in-depth description of the experiences of a specific group of Ph.D. PA graduates (Bazen et al., 2021). The sampling approach supported recruiting participants knowledgeable in the topic.

Eligibility criteria are important when conducting purposeful sampling. For the current study, the eligibility criteria included the following: (a) a Ph.D. graduate of public administration from CHEA-accredited universities in the United States; (b) has been working in a public service department or organization for at least three years; (c) took ethics as stand-alone or embedded course in the public administration Ph.D. degree; and (d) willing to respond to semi-structured interview questions for this study. These individuals had the knowledge and experience relevant to address the research questions on the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs.

The determination of the sample size for this study depended on data saturation. According to scholars, data saturation is reached when no new information (e.g., codes or themes) is identified by adding more data sets to the study (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). A recent study revealed that 9 to 20 participants in qualitative interviews may provide rich data to reach saturation (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). The sample size planned for this study was at least 12 participants. Participants varied in age, gender, and years they have worked

in the public sector. The researcher identified that thematic saturation was achieved at the 12<sup>th</sup> participant, where no new information was retrieved after additional data collection. If data saturation was not reached with the initial 12 participants, the plan was to continue recruitment and data collection. Moreover, the researcher used snowball sampling. The researcher asked initial participants to refer other eligible individuals to be respondents for this study. These procedures helped achieve data saturation.

The demographic data collected for the 12 participants included gender, highest educational qualification, profession, and working experience in years. John, the first participant, was male, had a Ph.D. in PA as his highest education, and had been employed as a university instructor for the past 40 years. Dennis, the second participant, was male, had a Ph.D. in PA and public policy, and was a policy consultant with 20 years of work experience. Ashley, the third participant, was female, had a Ph.D. in PA and policy, and was an adjunct professor for five years. The fourth participant, Jake, was male, had a Ph.D. in PA, and was an adjunct instructor with 17 years of experience. The fifth participant, Nancy, was female, had a Ph.D. in PA, and worked as a university professor for over 17 years. The sixth participant, Faith, was female, had a Ph.D. in PA and public policy, and had 10 years of experience as a management analyst. Sakura, the seventh participant, was female, had a Ph.D. in PA and policy, and was a university professor with 17 years of work experience. The eighth participant, Natasha, was female, had a Ph.D. in public policy and administration, and had 35 years of work experience as an associate professor. Participant nine was Joseph, who had a Ph.D. in PA and policy and had been a consultant for 34 years. Martha, the 10<sup>th</sup> participant, was female, had a Ph.D. in PA, and was an associate professor with 21 years of experience. The 11<sup>th</sup> participant, Vlad, was male, had a Ph.D. in PA, and was an associate professor with 14 years of experience. Mariam, the 12<sup>th</sup>

participant, was female, had a Ph.D. in PA and public policy, and was an associate professor with six years of experience.

### **Procedures**

The researcher obtained approval from the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix A) to authenticate the study process. After obtaining the approval, the researcher began participant recruitment by searching for graduates with a Ph.D. in public administration. The process entailed a recruitment post on various social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and LinkedIn; see Appendix B). The researcher also contacted the administrators of the chosen universities to ask for permission to obtain the email addresses of their public administration Ph.D. graduates. The researcher invited potential participants by sending an email informing prospective participants about the study. Those willing to participate accessed a link to the informed consent (see Appendix C) and demographic survey. In the informed consent, the participants learned about the purpose of the study, scope of participation, confidentiality agreement, audio recording of interviews, minimal risks involved in participation, voluntary nature of participation, and other information about their rights as participants of this study. Participants agreed to the content of the consent form by clicking "I consent" to signify their willingness to be part of the study. Those who disagreed with the information in the consent form clicked "cancel" to end their involvement in the study. Only those who clicked the consent button accessed the demographic survey. A copy of the consent form is included in Appendix C.

The demographic survey included questions about age, gender, years of service, and other information corresponding to the eligibility criteria. By asking these questions, the researcher identified the participants' demographic information and screened interested

individuals for their eligibility to participate in the study. Eligible participants accessed a page where they could select an available date to schedule an interview.

### **The Researcher's Role**

The researcher's role included formulating the research questions, choosing the methodology, designing the study, collecting the data, analyzing and interpreting, reporting the results, and ensuring ethical conduct (Collins & Stockton, 2022). Formulating the research questions was a core role of the researcher because they guided the research process. Once the research questions were developed, the researcher selected the qualitative methodology and a case study, which aligned with the purpose and provided a means for an in-depth understanding of the topic. Another role of the researcher is designing the study, which involves selecting the sample size, determining data collection methods, and creating the instruments.

The researcher was perceived as a human instrument involved in data collection. Data collection using interviews and focus groups involved the researcher asking questions to facilitate collecting in-depth data. The researcher searched for the sources used as human instruments in the document analysis process. During data collection, it was important for the researcher to develop self-awareness. Self-awareness is essential in ensuring researchers recognize their biases and assumptions that may interfere with data collection (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The researcher kept their subjective opinions out of the study to enhance reliability. Their role as researchers was also crucial in ensuring that they used adequate techniques in data collection. For instance, because data collection occurred through interviews and focus groups, the researcher ensured they employed techniques to obtain rich or in-depth data relevant to the research question.

The researcher was responsible for overcoming confirmation bias by eliminating the influence of beliefs about stand-alone ethics courses (Peters, 2022). Specifically, the researcher decreased the influence of confirmation bias by developing natural and objective research questions, ensuring no particular outcome was favored. Selection bias can occur when recruiting participants (Smith, 2020). The researcher overcame selection bias in this study by recruiting participants based on inclusion-exclusion criteria. Response bias can occur when participants respond in a manner that does not accurately reflect their authentic experiences or perceptions (Kreitchmann et al., 2019). The research reduced response bias during data collection by reassuring participants that there was no right or wrong answer. Additionally, the researcher eliminated the possibility of non-response bias by appropriately designing the protocols used in performing the interviews and focus groups and recruiting the most suitable participants to answer the research question. It is essential for researchers in qualitative studies to self-consciously critique, assess, and evaluate how their subjective perceptions and context influence the research process (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In this study, the researcher overcame reflexivity bias by reflecting on the potential biases and replacing them with positive examples.

The researcher is responsible for ensuring conflict of interest is minimized, if not eliminated. The researcher did not recruit family members, relatives, friends, and co-workers as participants in this study to minimize conflict of interest. The researcher's motivation to focus on the topic was supported by their experience working in schools and with children. As such, the researcher focused on how ethical violations occur in public service. The researcher's biased perception is that education serves as the root or foundation where ethics can be taught to help graduates use this knowledge in their public administration professions.

Another role of the researcher is performing the analysis and interpreting data. The researcher performed thematic and inductive analysis, which involved organizing the data, coding, identifying patterns, deriving meaning, interpreting the results, and developing explanations. The researcher also reported the findings to answer the research questions. Reporting the findings allowed conveying the results to answer the research questions and authentically represent participants' responses.

### **Data Collection**

The data sources were semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis with the participants. A core attribute of qualitative research is that it is flexible, open, and responsive to the data collection process (Busetto et al., 2020). In the subsequent sections, a discussion of each data source is provided.

#### **Semi-structured Interviews**

Qualitative semi-structured interviews support informal exchange among individuals, making them conversations with a specific goal (Busetto et al., 2020). Jamshed (2014) stated that interviews are among the most effective methods of collecting data in qualitative research. In case studies, interviews provide a suitable method of collecting in-depth or detailed information from the study participants. Qualitative interviews allow the researcher to understand the study subjects' views, perceptions, beliefs, motivations, and experiences based on how they understand or derive meaning from their environment (Jamshed, 2014). Given the detailed information obtained, interviews allow the researcher to obtain a “deeper” understanding of the social issue under study than other methods, such as surveys (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). In a study with little about the phenomenon, interviews offer the best method for exploring detailed concepts to answer the research questions.



The researcher chose telephone/virtual interviews as the best technique to obtain rich participant data. The application of telephone/virtual interviews seemed realistic, given the geographical differences that make face-to-face meetings inaccessible (Farooq & De Villiers, 2017). The participants in the study were from different states; therefore, telephone interviews were more realistic regarding ease of access and eliminating additional costs. Telephone interviews are similar in quality to face-to-face interactions because they balance power distribution and allow participants to feel confident in their comfort zones (e.g., home or work). According to Rahman (2023), in-person and telephone interviews are acceptable and accurate qualitative study data collection methods. Conducting telephone interviews helped the researcher collect data anytime within the day, depending on the convenience of the participants. As such, the interviews took place at a time most suitable for the respective respondents.

The researcher used semi-structured interviews to gain control of the interviews and support flexibility in questioning to obtain in-depth information. The researcher began the interviews by preparing the materials and schedules needed to ensure quality interaction and retrieval of information. The first step in ensuring the success of a semi-structured interview is to develop an interview guide. Developing an interview guide makes it easier to keep track of the questions. The semi-structured interview guide (see Appendix D) allowed this researcher to ask questions back and forth without losing focus on the topic of interest. Additionally, semi-structured interviews and telephone as the medium allowed this researcher to adjust the questions.

Semi-structured interviews provided the opportunity to include probes to elicit more information and enabled the researcher to build rapport with individual participants. For example, after asking, “What kind of ethical courses are offered in your Ph.D. program or

curriculum?” the researcher could follow up with the question, “So the department does not have a stand-alone ethics course for Ph.D. programs?” The succession of questions helped obtain relevant responses while also advancing the discussion. The researcher practiced active listening by talking less to avoid leading the respondents rather than allowing participants to share their meanings or experiences. Additionally, the researcher ensured the questions were respectful while considering cultural dimensions. The researcher informed the participants during recruitment (i.e., through informed consent) that they had the freedom not to answer any questions they found intrusive or uncomfortable.

The researcher conducted an expert review to improve the credibility of the study. For the expert panel, the researcher asked three ethics and public administration experts to evaluate the questions in the interview guide (see Appendix D). The experts used the following criteria for evaluation: (a) correct word usage in the interview questions, (b) ease of understanding of the interview questions, and (c) completeness of questions included in the interviews. The experts provided comments about aspects of the interview questions that required modification. The researcher made necessary changes based on the common comments of the experts. A list of the interview questions asked is as follows (see Appendix D):

1. Please tell me about yourself and how you would introduce yourself to someone for the first time.
2. How about your occupation? Tell me about your employment and how long you have held that position.
3. Did you hold any other professional positions before your current position? Please tell me about them.
4. Please talk about your current position in public administration.

5. What is your perception about a stand-alone ethics education program for a Ph.D. in public administration?
6. Please walk me through an ethics course you had during your Ph.D. in public administration.
  - a. Was it a stand-alone ethics course?
  - b. How was it taught?
7. What is your perception of the ethics-related learning you received? [Ask if they learned ethics]
  - a. Was it effective in instilling ethical lessons in you as a Ph.D. student?
  - b. Please explain why you thought it was effective.
  - c. If not, do you think it is necessary?
8. What is your perception of the influence of an ethical program on your ability to handle ethical dilemmas?
  - a. Was it effective in helping you gain the skills to overcome ethical issues in public service? Please elaborate.
9. In what ways do you think ethics-related learning in Ph.D. programs could be improved?
10. We have covered much in our conversation, and I appreciate your time. As a final question, what else would be important to understand about how higher education institutions structure their ethics education programs in public administration?

Data collected using interviews was used to answer the first sub-research question: What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? Interview questions one and four served as background

questions (McGrath et al., 2019) intended to identify the characteristics of the respondents. The four questions were also meant to help the researcher understand how the respondents perceived themselves based on their background and setting, as explained in previous research (Kelly et al., 2010; McGrath et al., 2019). Additionally, following the recommendation by McGrath et al. (2019), the researcher framed the interview questions in a straightforward and non-threatening manner to increasingly build rapport between the researcher and the participant. The researcher adjusted the questions based on the role and position of the participants in their respective public administration departments.

The aim of the study was to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics PA Ph.D. program. Interview questions five to nine focused on the current ethics education programs in the participants' institutions and their viewpoint on how stand-alone ethics courses would change Ph.D. ethics education in informing future careers in public service. De Graaf and Van der Wal (2017) found that most Ph.D. ethics education programs follow traditional arrangements where they are integrated into other courses and with limited changes incorporated in current programs. Understanding how stand-alone programs can change the narrative and improve professionalism in addressing ethical issues in public services is essential (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). The aim of interview question ten, the last question, was to give the respondents a chance to offer additional insight into the topic, as Kelly et al. (2010) advised. For this question, the participants could discuss what they had already provided and how it all came together. The participants could show their insights and viewpoints based on their own stories. The researcher developed the question so the respondents would know how to give their concluding statements and provide their overall insights.

## **Focus Groups**

Focus groups facilitate data collection to understand human attitudes, behavior, and responses to a concept (Taherdoost, 2021). During focus groups, researchers guide discussions among participants to elicit views on the focus topic. Applying group facilitation skills to male participants is comfortable enough for them to disclose their thoughts, feelings, and perceptions on the topic with the least possible bias (Lauri, 2019). Focus groups were a suitable data source because they offered an opportunity to derive insightful and comprehensive qualitative data from the participants (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020). Also, focus groups facilitated the creation of group dynamics and synergy that led to the generation of insightful data, which supported answering the research question (Gundumogula & Gundumogula, 2020).

Focus groups allowed the Ph.D. PA graduates to engage and reflect on their experiences and that of others (Bazen et al., 2021). The researcher, the moderator of the focus groups, observed the participants' interactions and engagement, which supported a better understanding of the collected data. Focus groups can contain six to eight participants (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021). In this study, the 12 interviewed participants were assigned to two focus groups, each containing six respondents. Conducting a focus group allowed bringing together homogeneous group participants with the appropriate expertise and experience on a specific topic, allowing them to share detailed information (Borgstede & Scholz, 2021). The focus groups were conducted via Zoom, which supported convenience and enhanced the feasibility of the data collection process. In addition to convenience, conducting virtual focus groups increases participants' likelihood of participating in a study because the online form of collecting data is flexible (Dos Santos Marques et al., 2021). The advantage was evident in this study because all

12 participants involved in the interviews agreed to be part of the focus group process. The questions used to conduct the focus groups are:

1. Kindly provide a brief personal introduction to acquaint yourself to the other members of the focus group.
2. Can you describe the structure of the ethics courses in your Ph.D. PA program?
3. What were the main topics covered in your ethics course? How did these topics relate to your field of study?"
4. What were the teaching methods used in your ethics course? How effective were they?
5. What aspects of the ethics course do you think are most beneficial for students in the Ph.D. PA program?

Data from the focus group facilitated answering the second sub-research question: What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? The first focus group question was asked to help participants become familiar with each other. Questions two to five were asked to understand the similarities and differences of the ethics courses. In the published literature, it is well understood that teaching ethics is limited to specific courses in higher education (Raadschelders & Chitiga, 2021). Different designs and course content related to ethics support individuals in gaining competencies in how to overcome problems in the profession (Andersson et al., 2022). Case studies and discussions have been identified as preferred methods for teaching ethics compared to field visits and lectures (El Baradei, 2021). Researchers have also supported the essence of linking theory to practice, using case studies, and applying teaching approaches focused more on debates and open discussions (El Baradei, 2021).

## Document Analysis

Document analysis in qualitative research enables researchers to assess pre-existing texts to add context to existing data (Morgan, 2022). The document analysis is a systematic process for reviewing and assessing existing texts, which can provide a wealth of empirical information. Through document analysis, researchers can apply a systematic procedure to review and assess documents and synthesize the data to answer research questions. Document analysis provides researchers with various documents, such as images, written texts, and audiovisual materials, to extract information. Conversely, relying on existing documents can result in biases. Also, it is vital to consider the context in which the documents were created (Kayesa & Shung-King, 2021). Document analysis enables qualitative researchers to conduct studies that might be challenging to complete by decreasing the ethical concerns associated with data collection (Dalglish et al., 2021; Morgan, 2022). In this study, document analysis was conducted to triangulate the interviews and focus groups performed, helping answer the second sub-research question: What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses?

A document search of universities offering Ph.D. PA programs was conducted. Universities with and without stand-alone ethics courses were selected, whose information about their Ph.D. PA courses was publicly available. The specific document assessed included the university's course outlines. The researcher accessed the course outlines by performing a Google search of universities offering Ph.D. PA programs. Subsequently, the researcher randomly selected the universities and reviewed their course outlines to determine whether or not they offered stand-alone ethics programs. The Google search to obtain the documents was performed between January 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024, and February 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

## Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was performed to gain insights from the collected data. In qualitative research, thematic analysis enables the researcher to identify, analyze, and interpret patterns of meaning emerging from the data (Nowell et al., 2017). In the current study, thematic analysis helped identify patterns such as repetitions or topics that reoccurred from the data. The analysis of interviews and focus groups followed the six steps for thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2012) work. The six steps include: (a) familiarizing with the data, (b) coding, (c) identifying initial themes, (d) revising themes, (e) finalizing themes, and (f) writing a report. The researcher loaded all the data into the NVivo software to aid in thematic analysis.

In the first step, the researcher familiarized themselves with the interview and focus group data by reading the transcripts collected at least two times (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During the second reading of the transcripts, the researcher identified words or phrases that were direct answers to the research questions for use in the next step. After gaining an understanding of the interview and focus group data, the researcher uploaded the documents into NVivo to facilitate with data management. In the second step, the researcher coded the data, identifying the initial codes from the interview and focus group transcripts. Identifying the initial codes entailed determining how each text or phrase from the first step could be labeled concerning addressing the research questions. The purpose of this step was to make the data sets simple and directly aligned with the topic of the study. The researcher then coded the remaining data while adding more code as needed. The third step entailed grouping similar codes to form a theme. In the fourth step, the researcher reviewed and revised the themes. The purpose of this step was to review some large themes for possible decomposition into smaller themes and small themes that could be combined if needed to form more robust themes. The fifth step was finalizing and



defining the themes based on the codes and answers of participants. In the sixth step, the researcher wrote a report that included the themes and a discussion of their meaning and basis from the data collection. The document analysis involved reading the course outlines to identify whether the Ph.D. PA programs had a stand-alone or integrated ethics curriculum. Subsequently, the researcher took screenshots of the documents and included them in the findings sections. The report is presented in Chapter Four.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is crucial in qualitative research. Establishing trustworthiness ensures the study's credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Stahl & King, 2020). The researcher explained these four areas in the following paragraphs.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility focuses on how confident the researcher is about the truth of the study's findings (Stahl & King, 2020). The researcher aimed to minimize bias to improve credibility. The researcher ensured credibility using expert-reviewed interview questions, ensuring the data collection protocols were relevant and non-leading. The researcher improved credibility by collecting data from multiple groups of sources. For example, the researcher used in-depth semi-structured interviews with an adequate number of participants to ensure the results could be strongly supported. The researchers promoted data triangulation by performing focus groups and document analysis to support answering the research questions. The respondents provided unique experiences and meanings about ethics education in public administration courses, contributing to an enhanced understanding of the topic. Data triangulation supported in collecting data that were used in answering the research questions and addressing the problem statement.

An additional approach that was used to promote credibility was researcher reflexivity. Through reflexivity, the researcher reflected on the preconceptions, ideas, and assumptions to avoid any bias that could have occurred during data collection and analysis (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). The researcher engaged in reflexivity by maintaining a journal to reflect and record thoughts, decisions, feelings, assumptions, and preconceived biases.

### **Transferability**

Transferability demonstrates how the findings apply to similar circumstances, phenomena, or populations (Stahl & King, 2020). The study's findings are transferable to other populations because the sample size of 12 for the interviews was adequate (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). For instance, according to current research, nine to 20 participants in qualitative interviews provide rich data to reach relevant conclusions (Hennink & Kaiser, 2021). The researcher used a sample size of 12 participants and retrieved rich data, which provides readers with adequate context to determine whether the results are applicable in their context. The researcher enhanced transferability by providing detailed descriptions of the study participants' demographic information to assist the readers determine whether the results are applicable in their context.

### **Confirmability**

Researchers can determine confirmability by showing the degree of neutrality in the findings (Stahl & King, 2020). The study was free of bias or personal motivations because no interview questions were rehearsed. The researcher obtained raw data from the participants and coded them based on the respondents' meanings and experiences in their faculties. After transcribing and coding the data, the next step was identifying emerging themes to form the study's conclusions. The researcher used qualitative coding software to enhance the

trustworthiness of the findings. Also, the researcher included the participants' verbatim responses and screenshots of the document analysis when explaining the retrieved themes. The verbatim responses and screenshots facilitated in confirming the findings were based on the data collected from participants and not the researcher's imagination (Korstjens & Moser, 2018).

### **Dependability**

The dependability of the study findings focuses on the extent to which other researchers could repeat a study to obtain content results (Stahl & King, 2020). An outside auditor played a vital role in enhancing the dependability of the study findings. The researcher's dissertation supervisor, who has completed several peer-reviewed articles, played a crucial role in reviewing and examining the study's completion process. As an expert outsider, his guidance and support promoted every stage of the study, increasing the trustworthiness of the results.

The researcher enhanced the findings' dependability by providing detailed description of the research procedure (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Maintaining a detailed record of the research processes such as data collection and analysis provides the readers an understanding of how the activities were performed. As such, the readers can understand the rationale of why each of the data collection and analysis were performed.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The researcher observed research ethics during this study. An ethical consideration was obtaining informed consent from the participants. In qualitative research, human participants should be protected and allowed to give honest perspectives and views during data collection (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Mirza et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of qualitative researchers seeking participants' voluntary informed consent. Each participant was sent a consent letter explaining the qualitative study's aim and objectives. The consent form included

information on how the researchers' anonymity and confidentiality would be promoted. The researcher ensured that, if needed, they would explain to potential participants how consent occurs in qualitative studies and what they may have missed, such as not fully comprehending their consent. Education and guidance on informed consent ensured that the participants were well-versed while signing the consent forms. In research, it is indispensable to treat participants with respect and trust (Mirza et al., 2023). In this study, all participants were treated respectfully regardless of age, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, lifestyle, and political beliefs.

Researchers should protect participants' data privacy and confidentiality (Mirza et al., 2023; Taquette et al., 2022). Another ethical consideration is protecting participants' identities. The researcher did not use personally identifiable information in the study but used pseudonyms to protect their information. Additionally, for confidentiality, the researcher ensured that only they and the external auditor (supervisor) had access to the information. However, the researcher ensured their supervisor could not access respondents' personal information.

Additionally, as a human researcher, the researcher was cautious about how much personal information or experience they shared. It was paramount to ensure that the information from the respondents was free of influence from the researcher's personal biases. Therefore, the researcher only provided the following personal information: their name, where they worked, and the dissertation they were completing. The researcher explained this information to the respondents respectfully to ensure that they understood the extent to which ethical issues could be compromised in a research study. Privacy was also a consideration in the study. The researcher stored all raw data and video recordings in a password-protected computer. The researcher also encrypted the files and ensured that the room in which their computer was stored was locked to avoid unauthorized access.

### **Summary**

In Chapter Three, the researcher explained the methods used in the case study. The study was a qualitative case study because the focus was on a real-world problem facing ethics education programs, and the researcher sought insights from those involved to understand how to solve such a problem. Chapter Three also included an examination of the role of the researcher and how such a role affects the study. The researcher took measures to ensure the data obtained were relevant to this descriptive case study, including interviews and focus groups with 12 Ph.D. public administration graduates from CHEA-accredited universities. A document analysis was also conducted to promote data triangulation. The researcher also described the process of conducting the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis for this study and discussed the trustworthiness of the data to explain how the findings were obtained. Finally, toward the end of the chapter, the researcher explained the ethical considerations and their effects on the study and provided details about the methods used in the study and how such methods would influence the results. In Chapter Four, the researcher presents the results of the study.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Overview**

The problem of focus in this study is the lack of required stand-alone ethics training in PA Ph.D. programs. Unethical behavior is one of the common problems encountered in public administration. Successful public administration is built on trust in its constituents (Fuentes, 2021). The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The researcher sought to answer the following research questions:

Central research question: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs?

Sub-research question 1: What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course?

Sub-research question 2: What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses?

The following section of this chapter is a detailed description of each individual who participated in the study. Next, this chapter includes a discussion of the data collection procedures. A presentation of the study results follows the section. The final section of this chapter is a summary.

### **Participants**

The current study included 12 participants. The real names of the participants were known to the researcher. However, because participants' anonymity and confidentiality were paramount in this study, using pseudonyms was an important consideration. Therefore, the researcher created a pseudonym for each participant, which was used instead of their real names.

The use of pseudonyms is consistent with a qualitative approach. Overall, assigning a pseudonym to each participant helped protect their identity. There was a mix of male and female participants. Each had at least a Ph.D. in public administration or a related field. Besides, they have at least five years of working experience. The participants' pseudonyms and demographic details are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*Participant Pseudonyms and Demographic Details*

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Highest Education</b>	<b>Employment</b>	<b>Years of Working</b>
John	M	Ph.D. in Public Administration (PA)	University instructor	40
Dennis	M	Ph.D. in Public Policy (PP) and PA	Policy consultant	20
Ashley	F	Ph.D. in PA and Policy	Adjunct Professor	5
Jake	M	Ph.D. in PA	Adjunct Instructor	17
Nancy	F	Ph.D. in PA	University professor	17+
Faith	F	Ph.D. in PP and PA	Management Analyst	10
Sakura	F	Ph.D. in PA and Policy	University professor	17
Natasha	F	Ph.D. in PP and Administration	Associate professor	35
Joseph	M	Ph.D. in PA and Policy	Consultant	34
Martha	F	Ph.D. in PA	Associate professor	21
Vlad	M	Ph.D. in PA	Associate professor	14

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Mariam	F	Ph.D. in PP and PA	Associate professor	6
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*Note.* This table shows the pseudonyms of the participants and their demographic information.

### **John**

John pursued his Public Administration (PA) Ph.D. from 2011 to 2016 at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Moreover, he pursued his Master's in PA from 2009 to 2010 at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He studied for his Master's in Logistics Management from 1985 to 1987 at the Air Force Institute of Technology. He has been involved in research in budgeting and public policy. In particular, he has conducted extensive research on the U.S. Military Retirement Policy.

Regarding his employment, John has been working since 2019 as a public administration instructor. He also serves as an instructor in Master of Public Administration (MPA) and student advisor/support specialist at a university in the United States. John has been an adjunct professor in PA since 2011, teaching undergraduate-level courses such as Leadership and PA. He also worked in logistics, installation management, and joint command/warfighting operations.

### **Dennis**

This participant is a policy consultant. Concerning his educational background, Dennis pursued his Ph.D. in Public Policy (PP) and PA from 2001 to 2007 at Tennessee State University. He also has a Master's in Communication from Western Kentucky University, which he obtained in 1999. Regarding his employment, Dennis currently serves as the president of a particular company, a position he has held since 2009.

### **Ashley**

This participant described herself as a researcher, evaluator, data scientist, project manager, and leader who has positively impacted communities. She is based in Buffalo, New



York. She has a Ph.D. in PA and Policy, which she obtained in 2022 from the American University. This degree is in addition to her Master's Degree in Social Science, which she obtained from the University of Buffalo in 2017. About her employment background, Ashley works as an adjunct professor at a university in New York, a position she has been doing remotely for about five years now. In 2021, she worked as a Research Consultant. From 2018 to 2020, she served as a Principal Investigator and worked as a Research Assistant in Washington, DC. In 2018, Ashley worked as a Housing Specialist.

### **Jake**

This participant is an experienced leader with a Doctorate in Public Administration and 20+ years of experience consulting, leading change management, executing communications strategies, and teaching courses/workshops. Regarding his educational background, Jake has a Ph.D. from Capella University, which he obtained from 2011 to 2018. He is an ASPA and Action Learning Action Research Association (ALARA) member. Jake holds U.S. Office of Personnel Management Certificates, LEAD, and Crisis Leadership, which he obtained from 2017 to 2020. Concerning his employment background, Jake is currently an adjunct faculty instructor at a university in the United States, a position he has held since July 2023, and has been working remotely. He is also an adjunct faculty at another university, a position he has held since 2018. Furthermore, he worked as a Site Support Services Manager from 2010 to 2023. In addition, Jake has worked with the U.S. Air Force from 2006 to 2010.

### **Nancy**

Nancy is a professor at a university in the United States. Regarding her educational background, she pursued a Ph.D. in PA from Syracuse University from 2001 to 2006. She also obtained a Master's in PA (MPA) from Syracuse University. This participant has a Bachelor of

Arts (BA) in Government from Dartmouth College, which she obtained in 1996. Concerning her employment background, Nancy has been working for over 17 years as a professor. She also serves as a Senior Associate Dean, a position she has held since 2015. Besides, she worked as an Associate Professor from 2012 to 2021.

### **Faith**

This participant works as a consultant, researcher, and evaluator in Washington, DC. She has a Ph.D. in Public Policy and Administration from George Washington University, which she obtained in 2019. In addition, she has a Master's Degree in Public Affairs from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, which she obtained from 2015 to 2017. Furthermore, she has a Bachelor's Degree in Anthropology and Secondary Education with a History Minor from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Concerning her employment history, Faith currently serves as a management analyst in Washington, DC, a position she has held since 2022. Besides, she previously worked as a university lecturer for four years. Moreover, she is a subject matter expert and Ph.D. fellow, a position she held from 2020 to 2022. In 2019 and 2020, Faith worked as a Program Manager at multiple shelter sites across the United States.

### **Sakura**

This participant is a director and professor at a university in Portland, Oregon. Regarding her educational background, Sakura obtained her Ph.D. in PA and Policy from Portland State University in 2003 and her Master's in Communication at the same university in 1998. She obtained her Bachelor's in Linguistics from Osaka University in 1983. Concerning her employment history, Sakura has been serving as the Department Chair and Professor in the Department of Public Administration at a particular university since 2006.

She is also an Associate Director.

### **Natasha**

This participant is an Associate Professor of Public Administration. Concerning her educational background, she has a Ph.D. in PP and Administration from Virginia Commonwealth University, which she got in 2000. Moreover, Natasha holds an MPA from the same institution, which she obtained in 1985. She earned her Bachelor of Arts from the University of Virginia in 1982. Regarding employment background, this participant works as an Associate Professor of Public Administration at a particular university. She previously worked as an Associate Professor at another university. She also previously worked at a different university where she taught specific courses. Natasha's other prior employment includes serving as a Services Coordinator, a consultant in Maryland, and a Director of Residential Services in Pennsylvania.

### **Joseph**

Joseph has a Ph.D. in PA and a PP from Old Dominion University, College of Business, School of Public Service. He obtained that degree in 2017. Besides, this participant pursued his MPA at Troy University from 1999 to 2022. Furthermore, Joseph has a BA in Sociology, which he obtained from East Stroudsburg University of Pennsylvania in 1988. Concerning his employment background, Joseph is currently serving as the senior director for the triage response team, a position he has held since 2021. In addition, he worked as the Director of Law Enforcement Field Engagement in 2020 and 2021. From 2002 to the present day, Joseph has served as an independent consultant. Besides, this participant served as a policy officer in Virginia from 1989 to 2020.

**Martha**

This participant holds a Ph.D. in PA from Arizona State University, which she got in 2008. She also obtained a Master of Mass Communication from the same institution in 2003. In addition, Martha has a Bachelor of Arts Degree in Journalism from Arizona State University, which she obtained in 1978. Regarding her employment background, this participant is currently an Associate Professor/non-resident teaching at a university in California and has been in this position since 2013. Besides, she previously worked as a Faculty Associate at a university in Arizona from 2006 to 2011. Moreover, she worked from 2002 to 2005 as a teaching assistant at a university in Arizona.

**Vlad**

This participant has a Ph.D. in Public Administration from Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, which he got in 2012. He also obtained an MPA from the State University of New York in 2003. Furthermore, Vlad obtained a Master of Science Degree from Ukraine's Dnipropetrovsk National University in 1996 and a Bachelor of Science in Electrical Engineering in 1990 from the same university. Vlad is currently an associate professor at a university, a position he has held since 2019. From 2012 to 2019, this participant worked as an Assistant Professor of Public Administration. He was also a Research Associate from 2009 to 2012, where he was involved in research projects on collaboration in the public sector and conflict transformation. His research interests are public management and organization theory, leadership and collaborative governance, open government and information technologies in public organizations, human resource management and democratic theory, and citizen participation.

**Mariam**

Mariam has a Ph.D. in PP and Administration, which she obtained in 2017 from Tennessee State University. She also has a Master's in PA, which she obtained in 2010 from the University of Jordan. She currently serves as an associate professor at a university in the Middle Eastern nation of Jordan, a position she has held since 2018. In addition, Mariam has been serving as an author in Rome, Italy, since 2020.

**Data Collection Procedures**

For data collection to answer the research questions, the number of participants recruited in this study was 12. The sample size was appropriate, allowing the researcher to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus groups easily. Concerning location, the individual interviews occurred through telephone/virtual interviews and lasted 45 minutes to 60 minutes. The interviews and focus groups were semi-structured. The researcher used a digital voice recorder to record the interview data after obtaining permission from the participants. For backup, the researcher took notes old-fashioned, using paper and pen in each interview. Keeping notes as a backup was important in case something happened to the digital voice recorder and all the digital data got lost.

The two focus groups, with six members each, were conducted and automatically recorded via Zoom. Each focus group lasted for approximately 60 minutes. During the focus group, the researcher asked the questions and provided each participant an opportunity to respond. The interview transcripts were downloaded from Zoom.

The documents used in the analysis were retrieved from universities' websites by performing a Google Search. Documents were retrieved from six universities that were randomly

selected. Course outlines published on the universities' websites were assessed to answer the second research question.

There were no variations in data collection from the plan presented in Chapter Three. For example, the plan was to interview at least 12 participants, as outlined in Chapter Three. Ultimately, the interviews occurred with 12 participants. Also, the 12 participants were subdivided into two focus groups, and document analysis was performed, which promoted data triangulation. During the interviews and focus groups, the researcher used a guide and probing by asking follow-up questions. Probing was particularly appropriate when the researcher had not fully understood a given response, when the answers were ambiguous or vague, and when the researcher wanted more detailed or specific information. No unusual circumstances were encountered when collecting data.

## **Results**

This presentation of results consists of two sections. The first section describes the data analysis procedure and a preliminary overview of the findings. The findings are presented in detail in the second section.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

Data analysis entailed assessing verbatim transcripts of the 12 individual interviews, two focus group scripts, and four documents using NVivo 12 qualitative data analysis software. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step data analysis procedure was applied. The procedure included (a) familiarization, (b) generation of initial codes, (c) grouping codes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining final themes, and (f) producing results (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step of the analysis involved familiarization with the data. The researcher read and reread the data in full while making handwritten notes about the points of potential analytical interest, including

repeated ideas, phrases, and keywords, from which codes were developed in the second step of the analysis.

The second step of the analysis involved generating the initial codes. The researcher identified interpretive labels from the participants' verbatim responses, which could be relevant in answering the research questions. The researcher worked systematically through the datasets, focusing on each transcript and document with equal consideration. The process allowed the identification of aspects of the data items that were interesting and could be relevant to developing themes. The codes are brief but provide readers with enough content to understand the underlying similarity in the data. Table 2 shows the initial codes and the number of response excerpts assigned to each of them, which are the code frequencies.

**Table 2**

*Initial Code Frequencies*

<b>Initial Code</b>	<b>Code Frequency in Interviews</b>
Ethical situations	4
Theory and practice	5
Sense of perspective	2
Ethics class	5
Have an ethical dilemma	5
Mess up the public organization	3
Lose a job	2
Unethical decisions	6
Ethical situations	7
Ethical awareness	4
Range of issues	3
Think about your personal ethics	1
Bribe	3
Lacked the awareness	5
Not being able to use ethics vocabulary	3
Ethical dilemmas do not have a warning	5
Ethical theories	6
Ethical principles/values	7
Multiple obligations	4

Obligation to be transparent	3
Duty to promote privacy	2
Loyal to their organization	4
Uphold accountability and justice	5
16 weeks	3
Ethics sprinkled in	1
Deep philosophical aspects	2
Students evolve	4
Case studies	8
Short papers	3
Reflection pieces	5
Action learning	2
Action research	1
Hands-on	5
Practical application	3
Adult learning	1
Hands-on experience	1
Cost-benefit analysis	1
Moot court	1
Role-playing	2
Mimic real-world scenarios	2
Ethics tied up in the classes	3
Fair amount of integration in other courses	2

*Note.* This table shows the initial codes and their frequencies in the data set.

The third step of the analysis entailed grouping codes. The step primarily combines codes to create themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher grouped codes to form themes. When different codes indicated different aspects of the same broader, overarching idea, the researcher identified them as related and clustered them to form a theme. Table 3 contains the codes and their respective themes.

**Table 3**

*Codes and Themes*

<b>Codes</b>	<b>Themes</b>
Ethical situations, theory, practice, sense of perspective, ethics class, ethical dilemma, messing up the public	Limited Ability to Overcome Complex Ethical Dilemmas



organization, losing a job, unethical decisions, and ethical situations.	
Ethical awareness, range of issues, thinking about your personal ethics, bribes, lack of awareness, inability to use ethics vocabulary, and ethical dilemmas do not have a warning.	Deficit in Ethical Awareness and Sensitivity
Ethical theories and ethical principles/values	Limited Conceptual Understanding
Multiple obligations, the obligation to be transparent, the duty to promote privacy, loyal to their organization, and uphold accountability and justice	Uncertainty Balancing Multiple Ethical Obligations
16 weeks, ethics sprinkled in, deep philosophical aspects, students evolve, case studies, short papers, reflection pieces, action learning, action research, hands-on, practical application, adult learning, hands-on experience, cost-benefit analysis, moot court, role-playing, and mimic real-world scenarios	Course Structure
Ethics tied up in the classes and a fair amount of integration in other courses	Integration with Other Courses

*Note:* A table of the codes combined to create themes.

The fourth step of the analysis consisted of reviewing the themes. The researcher cross-checked the themes against one another to ensure the ideas they represented did not overlap. The researcher also compared the themes to the original data to ensure they indicated patterns in the participants' responses. The fifth analysis step is naming and defining the themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Theme definitions for this study are provided in this chapter's presentation of findings section. The sixth step of data analysis involved presenting the results by writing this

chapter, the report Braun and Clarke (2006) described. As a preliminary overview of the results, Table 4 shows the finalized themes and their respective frequencies.

**Table 4**

*Grouping of Codes into Finalized Themes*

<b>Theme</b>	<b>Theme Frequency in Interviews and Focus Groups</b>
Limited Ability to Overcome Complex Ethical Dilemmas	8
Deficit in Ethical Awareness and Sensitivity	6
Limited Conceptual Understanding	18
Uncertainty Balancing Multiple Ethical Obligations	11
Course Structure	7
Integration with Other Courses	6

*Note.* This table shows themes and respective frequencies in interviews and focus groups.

**Presentation of Findings**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. In this section, the findings in the form of themes are presented and supported by the relevant verbatim responses. In total, six themes emerged from the data were identified. The themes are limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas, deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity, limited conceptual understanding, uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations, course structure, and integration with other

courses. The results of the data analysis are organized by the research questions. The themes are summarized in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Research Questions and Their Corresponding Themes*

<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Themes Used to Answer the Research Questions</b>
What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs?	Limited Ability to Overcome Complex Ethical Dilemmas
	Deficit in Ethical Awareness and Sensitivity
What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course?	Limited Conceptual Understanding
	Uncertainty Balancing Multiple Ethical Obligations
What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses?	Course Structure
	Integration with Other Courses

*Note.* This table shows the research questions and corresponding themes.

***Research Question 1***

The central research question that guided the study is: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs? The aim of the research question was to understand the consequences of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. Answering the research question was based on the perspectives of PA Ph.D. program graduates. An analysis of the collected interview data supported the identification that the ramifications

included a limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas and a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity.

**Theme 1: Limited Ability to Overcome Complex Ethical Dilemmas.** Assessing the interview responses facilitated identifying that the lack of stand-alone ethics courses hinders students from gaining the necessary tools and frameworks to overcome complex ethical challenges. Complex ethical dilemmas often require individuals to understand principles, theories, and application methods, which can be learned in a stand-alone ethics course. In his response, Jake posited that a stand-alone ethics course can profoundly impact reducing the theory and practice gap and overcoming ethical dilemmas through a hands-on approach. Jake explained, "I am glad my program offered a stand-alone ethics course because it helped me bridge theory and practice. In my career, when I was dealing with federal credit cards and contract management, the course knowledge gave me a sense of perspective." Jake explained that the course gave him a perspective that he would not have gained if he had not taken the course. Jake said, "I do not know that I would have that perspective if I did not have the standalone ethics course called Find the Dilemma." Based on Jake's response, the stand-alone course supported his ability to apply the knowledge in real life in his role, such as avoiding conflict of interests. Jake attributed his ability to overcome ethical dilemmas in practice to the perspective gained and developed during the standalone course. Accordingly, the availability of a stand-alone ethics course should not be taken for granted because it influences an individual's ability to translate theoretical knowledge into practice in areas such as contract management and federal credit. Jake's response supports the importance of understanding ethics, reducing the gap between theory and practice, and promoting a culture of ethical awareness and sensitivity.

Different from Jake, Dennis added to the depth of the discussion by indicating that a stand-alone ethics course enables students to gain the ability to overcome ethical dilemmas through personal growth and professional development. Dennis explained that “it just gives you a chance to dig deep, and for me, much of that is as a personal public servant. It can help influence ethical decision-making.” The stand-alone ethics course is particularly important for government or public service individuals. According to Dennis, a stand-alone course enables students to learn about ethics and make decisions without the consequences of making the wrong choice. Dennis explained that “wrestling with ethics in a focused way is helpful to me. I would much rather, as a student, take the ethics class and deal with those issues than to have an ethical dilemma that you mess up on the job.” Based on Dennis’ response, having a standalone course is fortunate, especially if the goal is to work in high-level leadership where everyone is under significant scrutiny. There are significant ethical consequences if a person messes up in the real world. Conversely, losing one point is the only consequence of making an unethical decision in class. Dennis explained that:

In stand-alone ethics courses, you can discuss with your classmates over 16 weeks, and even if you get something wrong, it does not impact your public job. The class is a safe place to explore those topics, where if you make a mistake, you might lose a few points on an assignment, but you will not mess up the public organization or lose a job.

Another respondent, Natasha, added to the discussion by indicating that the lack of a stand-alone ethics course limits graduates’ reasoning and application of ethical theories in final decision-making. Natasha explained that “the reasoning behind the decision is essential, which is usually the focus in most stand-alone ethics courses. If students lack the reasoning, they are unlikely to resolve complex issues that lack clear right or wrong answers.” Per Natasha’s

response, a comprehensive understanding of applying ethical principles is needed to guide decision-making by considering different aspects of a situation, assessing potential impacts, and making the right decision. Ethical education challenges students to question their assumptions when confronted with complex issues and tough decisions.

In his response, Joseph provided a practical example of the consequences of the lack of stand-alone ethics courses among public administrators. According to Joseph, the limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas such as inequity is associated with the lack of a stand-alone program. Joseph explained that “equity is a fundamental principle in public administration because it promotes fair access to public services and resources regardless of race and socio-economic status. The opposite happens because inequity is prevalent in our society.” Joseph argued that the prevalence of inequity is an indicator of a failure of the education system. The respondent, Joseph, continued to explain that inequitable education funding is a significant concern. He explained that schools in wealthier areas get more funding than those in less affluent or marginalized communities. The disproportionality results in unequal educational opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty. The participant provided a case of Norfolk, where he indicated that:

I am in Norfolk, a city that has been segregated since the beginning of time. We have Mori High School, a wealthy White community in Norfolk. There is a big campaign to renovate the school. Meanwhile, Booker T. High School in the Black Community is falling apart. Alright, before me. That is one of the thousands of unethical decisions related to disinvestment that are occurring in the Black community.

In their response, Vlad emphasized the importance of a stand-alone ethics course in public administration. Vlad acknowledges that the lack of a stand-alone program results in

students not being adequately prepared to mitigate ethical issues in government. Vlad explained that “the courses do not prepare graduates to face the ethical situations if you work in government.” Based on Vald’s reasoning, the lack of a curriculum focusing on practical and real-world scenarios results in Ph.D. graduates preferring to be researchers and professors. He said, “Most students would not continue with those scarier tracks [high-pressure roles in public service and government]. So, they become professors at some universities or think tanks.” Vald’s response indicates that although professors’ and researchers’ roles also need individuals to understand ethics, the ethical dilemmas experienced in these positions can differ from those encountered in government. The lack of a stand-alone ethics course limits students from participating in ethically challenging government roles.

Based on the above responses, the participants emphasize the benefits of a stand-alone ethical program, implying that the lack of one results in a limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas. A stand-alone ethics course can provide students with a comprehensive understanding of ethics, decreasing the gap between theory and practice and fostering a culture of ethical awareness and sensitivity in public administration. A stand-alone course influences public servants’ ethical competencies by providing a safe space to explore and learn about different issues, preparing them for leadership roles. The Participants’ responses support the importance of a stand-alone ethics course in enabling PA graduates to translate theory into practice through reasoning. The limited ability to overcome complex ethical decisions results in significant disparities that indicate public administrators failing to uphold principles of equity.

**Theme 2: Deficit in Ethical Awareness and Sensitivity.** The graduates’ deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity is another ramification of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The lack of stand-alone ethics courses results in graduates not being

aware of ethical considerations in their decision-making processes, which leads to a lack of sensitivity. In response, Dennis began by explaining the value of a stand-alone ethics course in allowing students to reflect on their ethics and how it influences decision-making. He said, “I would love to have had the standalone ethics course that I now teach because it would have increased my ethical awareness.” Dennis continued by explaining that “in the course, we spent a lot of time digging deep into, you know, ethical dilemmas on a full range of issues that one could experience whether running a nonprofit or working with local or state government organizations.” Accordingly, Dennis juxtaposed his explanation by indicating that the lack of stand-alone ethics in graduates experiencing real-life ethical dilemmas becomes challenging because they are unaware of how to respond. Dennis said, “The lack of a stand-alone ethics course results in people struggling with ethical dilemmas in real-life situations. Most graduates are moving up in leadership roles in government, where they experience ethical issues for the first time, an indicator of their limited awareness and sensitivity.” Dennis provided a personal anecdote of how the lack of a stand-alone ethics course limited his ethical awareness and sensitivity. He explained that:

At my first job out of college, I worked for the mayor's office in a small city in Kentucky. So, I met this guy. He had some business with the city, but the mayor was not there. I attended the meeting, and we started talking about family, whatever. I told him my dad is from Columbus, Ohio. Then he told me next week, Ohio State is playing UCLA. Do you want tickets to the game? I responded that it sounded like fun. Then he told me to call him for the tickets the next day. Then, the next day, I talked to a friend about the meeting, and he told me I could not accept the tickets because I worked for the city, and it could be perceived as a bribe. I share that story. If I had not talked to my friend and just taken the



tickets, who knows what would have happened? Maybe nothing, but it could have also been a huge scandal. The mayor's assistant gets free football tickets. I lacked the awareness that supports the need to teach ethics as a stand-alone course.

Exploring the different types of dilemmas can help graduates understand that even relatively simple situations can be potentially problematic. Dennis supported the idea that exploring ethics in a class setting allows students to grapple with ethical dilemmas in a safe and supportive environment before encountering them professionally. Notably, Denis asked, "Does having a stand-alone ethics course make them better ethical actors? I want to think so because they increase students' ethical awareness and sensitivity." The insights from the participants support the essence of a stand-alone ethics course in preparing graduates for the real world.

In the interview with Natasha, additional ramifications on the limited awareness of ethics and sensitivity were identified among graduates not exposed to a stand-alone course. Natasha said, "The lack of course results in graduates not being able to use ethics vocabulary to explain themselves and their positions or actions." The lack of ethics and sensitivity awareness hinders students from comprehending and applying the respective theories and principles. The lack of awareness also hinders graduates from explaining their decisions in ethical terms. Natasha explained that "ethical dilemmas do not have a warning, which makes it important for graduates to be aware and sensitive to such situations." Learning ethics on a stand-alone course helps students demonstrate ethical behaviors in their professional lives, establishing them as principled individuals and decreasing the likelihood of them being in compromising situations. In the responses, the participants support the importance of a stand-alone course in promoting ethical awareness and sensitivity, which prepares students for ethical dilemmas in the workplace.

Awareness of ethics and sensitivity to the issues are vital for supporting transparent and accountable decision-making in public administration.

### *Sub-Research Question One*

The first sub-research question that guided the study is: What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? The research question aimed to understand the deficits, particularly in ethical knowledge, among learners who have never been exposed to a stand-alone ethics course. Data to answer the research question were retrieved from participants' focus group responses. Based on the thematic analysis performed, identified ethical knowledge gaps were limited conceptual understanding and uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations.

**Theme 3: Limited Conceptual Understanding.** Based on the participants' focus group responses, it was identified that the lack of a stand-alone ethics course results in a deficit among students about ethical theories, concepts, and principles. The gap limits students' ability to articulate and reason about the ethical challenges that could hinder respondents' ability to overcome ethical dilemmas in their professional lives. Jake indicated that "when studying my doctorate, I felt that we did not discuss in-depth ethical concepts such as theories, such as deontology and utilitarianism. The limited understanding hindered my ability to apply ethical theories to assess administration dilemmas." Another respondent, Joseph, added to the discussion, explaining that "without a stand-alone ethics course, I was often unsure of how to navigate ethical dilemmas when I transitioned into my professional role." Joseph clarified, "I had minimal exposure to the ethical codes of conduct and key ethical principles/values during my graduate studies. It would have been interesting to discuss the codes of ethics with peers." Ashley added to the verbatim responses from Jake and Joseph by indicating that a disconnect exists between academia and practice. The gap between academics and practitioners limits the

transfer of conceptual understanding because of their limited understanding of the ethical dilemmas professionals encounter in PA. Ashley explained that:

In my personal anecdotal experience, there seems to be a gap between people who are researchers, Ph.D. students, and people who are public administrators as practitioners. The gap is in ethics because, as researchers who write as academics, we may not be in the best position to teach the concepts if we do not have that experience. Maybe there is a gap in the actual academia that we need to think about.

Another participant, Dennis, acknowledges the gap in graduates' ethics when there is a lack of a stand-alone course. Dennis explained that:

You can be a great public administrator with a good reflective attitude around ethics. You can also not do so well. If that's missing now, will a standalone class solve that problem for you? Probably not, but I think it gives you a better chance. The goal of a Ph.D. program is to give you the best chance to be successful.

During the discussion, John acknowledged that he would have benefited from a stand-alone ethics course. He explained that "in retrospect, a standalone ethics course would have provided me with a more comprehensive understanding of ethics in public administration. The course would have allowed me to explore ethical dilemmas to support my decision-making capabilities."

**Theme 4: Uncertainty Balancing Multiple Ethical Obligations.** The respondents in the focus groups indicated that the lack of a stand-alone ethics course results in uncertainties in balancing multiple ethical obligations. Ethical obligations include justice, loyalty, accountability, and human rights. The uncertainty results in a lack of confidence and clarity among graduates when making ethical decisions. A limited understanding of ethical principles and theories makes

students uncertain about navigating complex ethical dilemmas. In her response, Nancy explained how the lack of a stand-alone ethics course made her struggle to identify the most appropriate action.

Sakura indicated, "An ethics course would be beneficial to enable students to actively and consciously reflect on ethical situations. The course can allow students to think about ethical problems before actual practice, which could be beneficial in overcoming balance multiple obligations." Joseph explained that in public administration, professionals often experience situations where there are multiple ethical obligations that may conflict with each other. Joseph indicated that "in my role, I experienced challenges balancing my obligation to be transparent or the duty to promote privacy. It was challenging because of the lack of sufficient ethical training." Similar to Joseph; Faith explained that "without a stand-alone ethics course, it is a struggle when one's obligation to be loyal to their organization seems like conflict when there is a need to uphold accountability and justice." Faith believed that a stand-alone ethics course could have given her the tools to overcome the dilemmas effectively.

### ***Sub-Research Question Two***

The second sub-research question answered in this study was: What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? Based on the thematic analysis, the similarities and differences identified were related to the course structure and integration with other courses. Data to answer the research question were retrieved from focus group responses and document analysis.

**Theme 5: Course Structure.** Assessing the collected data facilitated identifying similarities and differences in the course structure of the ethics courses offered in Ph.D. PA programs. The similarities and differences in the course structure reported in the focus groups

and document analysis were related to content organization, instructional strategies, learning outcomes, and learning activities. The subsequent sections present supporting verbatim responses for the focus groups and document analysis.

***Focus Group.*** In the focus group, Denis described the stand-alone ethical course he teaches. In his response, he emphasized that a stand-alone ethics course allows students to focus on the subject over an extended period, enabling learners to reflect and inform their decision-making. Denis explained that “a stand-alone course gives students 16 weeks to think only about personal ethics and how it informs their decision-making.” The stand-alone course focuses on enabling students to think broadly. Denis indicated, “So instead of just thinking broadly about organizations, and then ethics sprinkled in, instead go into the deep philosophical aspects of ethics and ask students challenging questions.” Denis explained how the structure of the 16-week course allows students’ understanding to evolve. Denis responded, “I had students over time in that class say that they thought their professional ethics were separate, and their opinion changed over the 16 weeks. Watching students evolve because my classes are interesting.”

Dennis added to the discussion the structure of his stand-alone ethics course. In the course, he indicated that the learning activities included case studies, short papers, and reflection pieces. Dennis explained, “So in the course I teach, we have five individual modules where the students get to do a case study. At the end of every module, in addition to a short paper, there is a reflection piece.” He emphasized the importance of reflection because it encourages students to think critically about their actions and decisions, enhancing an understanding and application of ethics. He elaborated that “reflection pieces enable students to think about issues in a class with an instructor and other public servants, which provides a great way to explore those topics, rather than getting something wrong on the job.” It is evident from the response that a stand-alone

ethics course provides students with a safe environment to learn and develop their ethical decisions without fearing real-world consequences. Dennis supported the importance of reflection pieces by arguing that:

Working out ethics dilemmas in class makes you a better administrator, in my opinion.

So, reflect and ask questions such as why did you decide? Why did this outcome happen this way? These are all questions we wrestle with in various situations, whether it is handling money, sexual harassment, or other workplace-related issues. Working the issues out in a classroom and reflecting on them makes you a better practitioner.

Ashley introduced the concept of using real-life situations in stand-alone ethics courses to help students understand how to apply theories and principles to situations encountered in their professional roles. Integrating real-life experiences during class discussions ensures that learning is relevant and engaging while providing students with diverse perspectives on ethical issues in public administration. Ashley indicated that:

One of our first-week assignments is an ethical analysis because most of our students are out in the world in nonprofit and public administration-related positions. They often have real-life situations where they approach ethics. We ask students to share their real-life experiences during class and discuss policy actions that would be the most viable or help people. We have different options or strategies in a public administration workplace to deal with ethical situations, such as protesting until you are silenced, using your voice, or expressing loyalty towards your organization. During class, we discuss all these situations.

Consistent with Ashley's and Denis' discussion, Jake supported the importance of the structure of a stand-alone ethics course being interactive. Jake said, "Whenever you structure an

ethics course, it can be standalone and hands-on as much as possible. Suppose you can have a practical application to help bridge that gap between practice research or theory and practice. In that case, it should be implemented.” Jake proposed action learning and research, which would involve solving real-world problems and reflecting on the results, leading to gaining deeper insights into ethics. Jake’s response was “a standalone course that focuses on action learning and action research can help you with an experience-based interaction. In adult learning theory and things of that nature, repetition is good. Also, hands-on experience is good.” The response supports the importance of stand-alone ethics courses to promote higher forms of thinking, making it important for the designed courses to include the elements.

John advanced the discussion by supporting the importance of a stand-alone ethics course structure based on real-world scenarios, such as case studies, promoting reflection. John elaborated, "We discuss duty-based, utilitarian-based, or virtue-based ethics and reflect on that, but we move to case studies that support being reflective and promote decision-making model.” The respondent continued explaining how he applies a cost-benefit analysis in teaching ethics. Cost-benefit analysis is applied as an ethical decision-making tool to quantify the decision-making process. John indicated that:

I tried to narrow ethics down to the use of cost-benefit analysis. Applying a cost-benefit analysis helps quantify the decision-making process. However, the cause and effect are not always monetary because ethical decisions can have far-reaching consequences that cannot be quantifiable. I encourage students to think critically and incorporate real-world scenarios to support their learning.

Nancy added to the discussion by introducing the efficacy of role-playing as a method for teaching ethics in a stand-alone course. The respondent explained that role-playing enables

students to immerse themselves in a situation and perceive it from different perspectives, resulting in a deeper understanding of ethical dilemmas and promoting decision-making. Nancy explained that:

Using role-playing similar to a moot court can let students get immersed and take on that role. The ethical scenarios allow students to take on a different role and perceive things from different perspectives. Role-playing reduces the pressure on students, decreasing the need for them to feel that they have to say the right thing. Through role-playing, students can get into character, allowing them to explore different perspectives and viewpoints without fearing judgment.

Natasha added to John's and Dennis' discussion by supporting the importance of incorporating case studies in teaching stand-alone ethics courses. Natasha said, "the use of real-world cases, such as those related to public policies of the death penalty, provides students an opportunity to explore and debate ethical issues." Based on Natasha's argument, cases are an effective approach for enhancing students' critical thinking and encouraging students to consider different perspectives, question assumptions, and comprehend the complexities of ethical decision-making. Consistent with Natasha, John, and Dennis, Martha supported the importance of case studies as an approach to teaching ethics. Using case studies allows learners to apply ethical principles to real-world situations to gain an in-depth understanding of the subject. Martha said, "I used a lot of weekly case studies where they had to go through a case study and answer specific questions about the people's actions in the scenarios. Afterward, they would reflect on the ethical principles." Case studies provide constant opportunities for students to reflect on ethical principles and their actions in different scenarios. Martha explained that "the use of case studies to teach ethics component required some reflection on a real-world situation.



It involved applying abstract theories about ethics to a situation, to understand what should or should not be done.”

Vlad added to the discussion by supporting the importance of balancing theory and practice by applying different methods. Vlad posited, "We can use case studies, simulations, and discussions that mimic real-world scenarios.” Similar to Natasha’s, John’s, and Dennis’s arguments, the use of case studies helps students think critically about ethics. Vlad elaborated by saying that:

I believe the case method is the best. So, you take a situation, and then you apply certain theories that they learn first to analyze that situation. It makes ethics relevant and practical for them because it allows students to analyze and reflect on ethical dilemmas that might be encountered in their lives or workplaces. It helps them to reflect on those situations in more effective ways.

***Document Analysis.*** Assessing different ethics courses facilitated identifying similarities and differences in the course structures. For instance, Old Dominion University offers a stand-alone ethics course called PADM 823: Ethics in Public Administration. Case studies are used in the course as a form of teaching ethics (see Figure 1; Old Dominion University, 2023).

**Figure 1**

*Old Dominion University's Ph.D. in PA Stand-alone Ethics Course*

## PADM 823 - Ethics in Public Administration

**Description**  
This course reviews the theory and application of ethics in the public sector, identifying public values and how they apply in the administration of government. It reviews sources of values employed in public sector decision-making, and reviews how values in public administration are managed and applied. Systems of professional ethics are reviewed in the context of public professions. **Case studies** and best practices are examined to help the student understand the application of administrative ethics in public management.

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Case studies are also used in another course, Public Administration Ethics, Statesmanship, & Governance – PADM 700 by Liberty University (Liberty University, 2023). The case studies facilitate creating a collaborative experience to discuss real-world ethical cases. The approach can promote students' critical thinking and analytical skills.

**Figure 2**

*Liberty University's Ph.D. in PA Stand-alone Ethics Course*

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## Course Assignment

After reading the Course Syllabus and [Student Expectations](#), the student will complete the related checklist found in the Course Overview.

Discussions are collaborative learning experiences. Therefore, the student will take part in five (5) Discussions. In four (4) of these, the student will conduct a case study of a an observed study in a public administration context. The analysis will be based upon the concepts the student learned and discussed in the previous module's essay assignment, writing 450-500 words in the initial thread.

For the case study, the student is welcome to cite a scholarly source, but if he/she does, it must not be merely a theoretical/philosophical discussion. Instead, whatever source is used for the actual case study must focus on a real-world public administration situation that is being discussed and analyzed in the chosen article. The student will in turn apply concepts discussed in the previous module: week's essay to analyze the situation, in addition to the required reading and presentations from the current module: week.

Then, the student will post replies of 200–250 words each to 2 or more classmates' threads. Each reply must be unique and must integrate ideas (and citations) from the required reading. The reply posts must also integrate ideas and citations from the required readings and presentations for the module: week, as appropriate, and at least two scholarly sources. Each thread and reply must follow current APA format.

Walden has an ethics course: PPPA 8405 - Ethics and Social Justice. In the program, case studies are among the instructional methods. Case studies are used to inform students about the challenges experienced by leaders. Figure 3 describes Walden's stand-alone ethics course (Walden University, 2023).

**Figure 3**

*Walden University's Ph.D. in PA Stand-alone Ethics Course*

**PPPA 8405 - Ethics and Social Justice\* (5 credits)**

**5 credits**

Ethics is a fundamental element of leadership. In this course, students consider some of the leading philosophical bases of ethics as well as foundational social justice themes upon which public service rests. Seminal texts and case studies used to illuminate the tasks leaders face as they seek to serve diverse constituents. Students confront the challenge of ethical decision making and moral action in a world characterized (among other things) by economic disparity, power imbalances, social privilege, and division due to race and/or religion. Applying concepts presented in the course, students engage in an in-depth assessment of emerging or persistent ethical and social justice issues, with the objective of demonstrating an ability to make recommendations which lead to positive social change.

**Prerequisites**

- MMPA 6116, NPMG 6116, PPPA 8000, PPPA 8000i, MMPA 6200, NPMG 6200, CRJS 6000, CRJS 6002, HUMN 8000, or HLTH 8003

\*Students may take this as a non-degree course, which means they do not have to be enrolled in a program. Contact an enrollment specialist [1-866-492-5336 (U.S.); 1-443-627-7222 (toll)] for more information or [visit School](#)

**Close**

Tennessee State University has a stand-alone ethics course: PADM 6390 Ethics and Values in the Public Service (Tennessee State University, 2023). In the course, case studies are incorporated to support learning. Figure 4 contains a description of the course's instructional methodology.

**Figure 4**

*Tennessee State University Ph.D. in PA Stand-alone Ethics Course*

**Instructional Methodology** PADM 6390 section 95 meets on campus alternate weeks with lectures, reading and case study exercises, alternating on campus meetings with on line classes. Students are expected to be prepared and informed participants in class discussions in both delivery formats.

**Theme 6: Integration with Other Courses.** The other similarity and difference identified in the ethics courses in the Ph.D. PA programs is integration with other courses. It was identified that while there are stand-alone ethics courses in some Ph.D. PA programs, there is integration in others. Data supporting the theme were retrieved from the participants' focus groups and document analysis.

**Focus Group.** Participants indicated that ethics are integrated with other courses. Ashley explained that "ethics are integrated in other courses. Even in other programs such as political science or criminal justice related to public administration, I do not think they have stand-alone programs." Notably, the participant acknowledged how ethics is essential in research. Ashley said, "I found that ethics is foundational in all research methods and courses if you think about the Institutional Review Board and the processes that they have to ensure that we are thinking about conflicts of interests and confidentiality." The participant continued by indicating that she learned about ethics in a course called *Public Administration Theory and Foundation in Policy Analysis*. Ashley said, "I took courses such as public administration theory and foundation in policy analysis, and there were a lot of ethics tied up in the classes." Consequently, Ashley posited that "there is a fair amount of integration in other courses, and it

varies from one school to the next because there is no standard public administration curriculum across the country.”

Dennis added to the discussion by indicating that it is common for ethics to be embedded in other courses instead of being standalone programs. He said, “In my Ph.D. program, ethics was mainly discussed in an organization theory course. Ethics were also a component in another course called Public Organizations. Ethics was never taught as a standalone course.” Sakura’s addition to the discussion was that “we also did not have a standalone ethics course. It was integrated into other courses, specifically the one on research methods.” Consistently, Martha said that “there are no standalone ethics courses here.” Similar to Ashley, Sakura, and Dennis, Nancy indicated that “ethics were not MPA or Ph.D. program. Ethics concepts were integrated into different aspects of the program where we would discuss and conduct case studies on different components.”

Faith added to Ashley’s discussion by stating that her experience was that ethics has always been integrated with other courses. As such, she questions whether the faculty would be willing to have a stand-alone ethics course. Faith said, “What is the will of the faculty? Are they interested in it? If tomorrow there were a decision where the NASPAA decided every Ph.D. program must have a stand-alone ethics course, I would assume there would be pushback from some institutions.”

Ashley raised an additional question by inquiring about the purpose of a stand-alone ethics program in PA Ph.D. programs. Ashley asked:

Despite ethics being essential in PA, Ashley, what would be the purpose of having a stand-alone ethics course in a Ph.D.? I do not know the statistics, but I wonder how many people with Ph.Ds. in PA become public administrators. I think most end up back in

academia. That is why we get our Ph.Ds.: we want to do research. It is not that ethics is not important, but if you're thinking about it in terms of ethics for public administrators, then maybe the Ph.D. students are not the people we should focus on with a stand-alone ethics course. Maybe it should be the MPA students who would need a standalone ethics course.

Natasha acknowledged that having a stand-alone ethics course would have been beneficial. She indicated that “a stand-alone ethics program would provide the student the opportunity of actively and conscious reflection on ethical situations, allowing them to think about ethical problems before actual practice.” Conversely, she acknowledged why ethics programs are often integrated into others. She explained that “there needs to be a balance because students are taking a lot of core courses, and you still need ethics so I can see a reason for integration instead of a standalone course.” Sakura added to Natasha’s response by saying that “there has to be some balance because students want to graduate and be done with course work so although a stand-alone course has some benefits, it can cause delays in graduation.”

***Document Analysis.*** Assessing different PA Ph.D. programs facilitated identifying that universities have integrated ethics into different courses. At the National University, ethics is integrated into PUB-700-Public Administration (see Figure 5; National University, 2023). An aspect of the course is analyzing the challenges of ethical conduct and behavior experienced by public administrators.

**Figure 5***National University Integration of Ethics with Other Courses*

The screenshot displays the National University website for the Doctor of Public Administration program. The top navigation bar includes the university logo, menu items for Degrees & Programs, Admissions & Financing, About NU, and Student Resources, along with 'APPLY NOW' and 'REQUEST INFO' buttons. The sidebar on the left lists 'Doctor of Public Administration' and its sub-sections: Overview, Course Details, Program Outcomes, Admissions, and Why National University?. The main content area features a paragraph about SAP and Academic Maximum Time to Completion policies. Below this is a section titled 'Course Name' containing three courses: PUB-7000 – Public Administration (with a minus sign), PUB-7002 – Administrative Law (with a plus sign), and PUB-7020 – Public Management Theory (with a plus sign). A call-to-action box at the bottom left encourages users to 'Take the first step in your National University Journey' and notes that 'Courses Start Every Monday'.

At George Washington University, a stand-alone ethics course is not among the course requirements (see Figure 6; The George Washington University, 2023). At the university, ethics are covered in the research courses. Notably, there is limited emphasis on ethics concerning public administration.



**Figure 6***Integration of Ethics with Other Courses*

<b>Required</b>	
Core Courses	
<a href="#">PPPA 6014</a>	Microeconomics for Public Policy II *
<a href="#">PPPA 8100</a>	Seminar: Literature of Public Administration *
<a href="#">PPPA 8101</a>	Research Methods *
<a href="#">PPPA 8105</a>	Public Finance and Human Capital
<a href="#">PPPA 8174</a>	Seminar: Public Management
<a href="#">PPPA 8190</a>	Philosophical Foundations of Policy and Administrative Research
<a href="#">PPPA 8191</a>	Dissertation Workshop
<a href="#">PSC 8229</a>	Politics and Public Policy *
One of the following to fulfill the intermediate quantitative course requirement:	
<a href="#">DNSC 6274</a>	Statistical Modeling and Analysis
<a href="#">ECON 8375</a>	Econometrics I
<a href="#">ECON 8379</a>	Laboratory in Applied Econometrics
<a href="#">PPPA 6013</a>	Regression Methods for Policy Research *
<a href="#">PSC 8102</a>	Empirical Political Analysis
One of the following to fulfill the advanced quantitative course requirement:	
<a href="#">DNSC 6275</a>	Advanced Statistical Modeling and Analysis
<a href="#">ECON 8376</a>	Econometrics II
<a href="#">ECON 8377</a>	Econometrics III
<a href="#">PPPA 8022</a>	Econometrics for Policy Research
One of the following to fulfill the qualitative course requirement:	
<a href="#">EDUC 8122</a>	Qualitative Research Methods
<a href="#">EDUC 8131</a>	Case Study Research Methods
<a href="#">HIST 6030</a>	History and Its Uses in International Affairs
<a href="#">PPPA 8023</a>	Mixed Methods in Research Design
<a href="#">PSC 8104</a>	Qualitative Research Methods
<a href="#">PUBH 8417</a>	Qualitative Research Methods and Analysis
<a href="#">SOC 6232</a>	Qualitative Methods

In the Ph.D. PA program at Old Dominion University, ethics are integrated into the course titled TLCI 814 Qualitative Research Design in Education (see Figure 7; Old Dominion University, 2023). The ethical issues discussed in the course are related mainly to research. As such, ethics in the context of public administration are likely not taught.

**Figure 7***Integration of Ethics with Other Courses***TLCI 814 Qualitative Research Design in Education****TLCI 814 Qualitative Research Design in Education (3 Credit Hours)**

This course concentrates on the theoretical underpinnings of qualitative research, methodology and methods including identification of ways to collect and analyze qualitative data; examination of ethical issues; development of proposals; and writing up studies.

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The purpose was achieved by collecting data through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Conducting a six-step thematic data analysis facilitated the identification of six themes:

- Limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas
- Deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity
- Limited conceptual understanding
- Uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations
- Course structure
- Integration with other courses.
- Based on the interview data, it was identified that the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs included the limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas and a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity among the graduates.
- The thematic analysis of the focus group responses facilitated identifying the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-

alone ethics course, with limited conceptual understanding and uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations.

- The similarities and differences of ethics courses in the Ph.D. PA program based on the focus groups and document analysis were course structure and integration with other courses.
- In the next chapter, the conclusion is included.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION**

### **Overview**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. In PA, ethics are important in promoting functioning and the public's trust in government (Mukhopadhyay, 2022). The importance of ethics in PA supported the need to understand why the importance of stand-alone ethics courses in the field. In this chapter, five core sections are included. The first section briefly summarizes the findings, where the results answering the three research questions are provided. The second section contains a discussion of the results and implications based on the published literature and theoretical framework. The results methodological and practical implications were included in the third section. The findings were turned into recommendations by assessing how the findings addressed the research questions and the problem statement. When providing the recommendations, the aim was to offer a concise and actionable approach forward based on the results. The fourth section contains an outline of the delimitations and limitations. In the fifth section, the recommendations for future research are provided.

### **Summary of the Findings**

The thematic analysis facilitated the identification of six themes to answer the central and sub-research questions. The identified themes are: Limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas, a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity, limited conceptual understanding, uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations, course structure, and integration with other courses. The central research question sought to be answered is: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs? After performing the data

analysis, two core ramifications were identified. The ramifications included graduates' limited ability to overcome complex ethnic dilemmas and a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity.

The limited ability to overcome complex ethnic dilemmas was associated with the graduates' inadequate understanding of the appropriate principles and theories applicable. The lack of a stand-alone ethics program creates a gap between theory and practice, hindering the ability to overcome ethical challenges, such as conflicts of interest. A stand-alone ethics course provides learners a platform to make unethical decisions and learn from them without experiencing any repercussions. Conversely, the lack of stand-alone ethics programs limits the students' reasoning and application of different principles in decision-making, hindering participants' ability to solve complex problems. Often, the lack of ethical reasoning in complex situations results in PA practitioners making the wrong decisions, which can have significant consequences. The limited ability to overcome complex ethnic dilemmas can be attributed to graduates lacking adequate capabilities to question assumptions or be part of the solution focused on mitigating issues such as inequalities. Participants' responses supported the need for a stand-alone ethics course to mitigate the ramifications of limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas among Ph.D. PA programs. Institutions of higher learning should consider adding stand-alone ethics courses to their PA Ph.D. programs. The courses could help reduce the gap between practice and theories, enhance learners' ethical reasoning, and support graduates' ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas. The findings matter because the program changes could decrease the limited ability to overcome complex ethnic dilemmas among graduates, which could help decrease the prevailing problems in public administration.

The ramification of the deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity among graduates limits their ability to reflect on personal ethics and make informed decisions. The lack of a stand-alone

ethical course hinders graduates' awareness and sensitivity culture in public administration concepts, resulting in the learners struggling with various ethical dilemmas in real-life situations. A stand-alone ethics program can allow students to explore various dilemmas and understand the likelihood of issues occurring. The lack of ethical awareness and sensitivity limits graduates' preparation for the real world, increasing their susceptibility to unethical workplace decisions. The finding that the lack of stand-alone ethics courses can result in a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity among graduates matters because it supports the essence of such modules in public administration and other fields. The courses could promote ethical decision-making capabilities and enhance professional integrity.

The first sub-research question answered in this study is: What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? The perceived gaps in ethical knowledge include limited conceptual understanding and uncertainty in balancing multiple ethical obligations. The participants reported that the lack of a stand-alone ethics program resulted in a limited conceptual understanding of ethical theories, principles, and concepts among students. A lack of conceptual understanding limits individuals from rationalizing their decisions, which should be based on sound practices. Based on the findings, introducing a stand-alone ethics program could assist graduates gain a comprehensive understanding of ethical practices and their applicability in real-world situations. Understanding ethical best practices is essential in enabling graduates to be reflective and make ethical decisions. The findings matter because they support decreasing the prevailing gaps in graduates' ethical knowledge. Education has a multifaceted purpose, some of which are knowledge acquisition and skill development. Accordingly, if education does not achieve this purpose, changes should be made to mitigate the gaps.

The second sub-research question was: What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? Similarities and differences were identified in course structure and integration with other courses. In Ph.D. programs with stand-alone ethics, it was identified that their course structure included using real-life situations through case studies, reflections, role-play, and discussions to support higher forms of thinking among students. Using real-life situations supports students in questioning their assumptions and making decisions in a safe environment. Making unethical decisions in class when role-playing helps students to learn without fearing the far-reaching consequences of wrong decisions in the real world. The instructional methods in the stand-alone ethics courses enable students to explore various perspectives and viewpoints without fearing being judged, which supports engaging in collegial discussions and debates about prevailing ethical issues. The identified similarities are that case studies, reflections, role-play, and discussions matter because they provide information on what the programs should contain to promote learning.

The other similarities and differences were related to integration with other courses. The content is integrated into other units in Ph.D. PA programs that did not have a stand-alone ethics course. In some cases, ethics is only learned in the context of research rather than concerning public administration. The lack of stand-alone ethics courses results in increased integration of ethics into other units, but participants acknowledged that the limited focus hindered their understanding. Identifying that in some of the program's ethics is taught as an integrated course with others was important because it supported the need for the gaps and ramifications posited by the participants, which can be attributed to this issue. A need exists to have stand-alone ethics courses.

## Discussion

### Research Question One

The central research question in this study was: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs? The goal was to understand the consequences of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The focus on the ramifications supported understanding the consequences of not having a stand-alone ethics course. The two ramifications identified are a limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas and a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity.

#### *Theme 1: Limited Ability to Overcome Complex Ethical Dilemmas*

In this qualitative study, participants explicitly indicated the lack of a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs results in a limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas among the graduates. The interviewed participants posited that lacking stand-alone ethics courses limits graduates from decreasing the gap between theory and practice. Also, the lack of a stand-alone ethics program hinders graduates from having broader perspectives and competencies to avoid issues such as conflict of interest. The results confirm published literature because it has been supported that learning ethics enables graduates to argue and reason around ethical conflicts and resolve dilemmas (King et al., 2021). Consequently, the lack of ethical learning hinders graduates from overcoming complex ethical problems. Another study identified that the lack of stand-alone courses hinders students' ability to handle ethical issues and moral conflicts that emerge in public administration (Santos et al., 2018). The results in this study extend previous research by resulting in the identification that the lack of stand-alone ethics programs limits the students' reasoning and capabilities to apply ethical principles to promote decision-making.

#### *Theme 2: Deficit in Ethical Awareness and Sensitivity*



Another ramification of the lack of a stand-alone ethics course is a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity among graduates. The deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity among graduates hinders overcoming ethical dilemmas, resulting in consequences that can adversely affect the person or their organization. The findings corroborate those in the published literature because a limited understanding of ethics can result in a lack of moral sensitivity and judgment among graduates (West & Buckby, 2020). The results of this study confirmed the finding in the literature because the PA Ph.D. graduates indicated that a ramification of the lack of a stand-alone ethics program is a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity among students. Accordingly, the results in this study add to the existing literature by supporting a stand-alone ethics course that can increase graduates' awareness and sensitivity, preparing them to overcome dilemmas in their workplace by promoting transparency and accountability in their decision-making.

### **Sub-Research Question One**

The first sub-research question answered in this study is: What are the perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? The perceived gaps identified include limited conceptual understanding and uncertainty in balancing multiple ethical obligations. Based on the identified gaps, it is essential to have an ethical, stand-alone program to mitigate the gaps.

### ***Theme 3: Limited Conceptual Understanding***

Based on the assessed data, the PA Ph.D. graduates indicated that the lack of a stand-alone in their program limited their conceptual understanding, hindering their ability to overcome dilemmas. The lack of conceptual understanding limits effective decision-making, especially during complex situations. The results in this study add to published literature by

supporting the idea that a stand-alone ethics program is essential to support graduates' understanding of the principles, values, and codes of ethics, helping decrease the gap between academia and practice.

#### ***Theme 4: Uncertainty Balancing Multiple Ethical Obligations***

In this study, it was identified that the lack of a stand-alone ethics program creates uncertainty in balancing multiple ethical obligations. Participants expressed that balancing obligations such as transparency and duty to enhance privacy can be challenging. The results corroborate published literature because it has been supported that the lack of training in ethics can result in decreased respect, fairness, transparency, and behavior (Bhana & Suknunan, 2020). Other researchers argued that public administrators experience challenges and moral dilemmas in their professions, which makes it essential for them to possess moral competence to overcome the problems (de Souza & Rasmussen, 2019; Martins et al., 2020). Accordingly, without stand-alone ethics programs, individuals find it challenging to promote accountability and justice.

#### **Sub-Research Question Two**

The second sub-research question was: What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? The similarities and differences were identified in the course structure and integration with other courses. The results facilitated understanding the current state of ethics courses in Ph.D. PA programs.

#### ***Theme 5: Course Structure***

The Ph.D. graduates in this study indicated that in the implemented stand-alone Ph.D. PA programs, engaging instructional methods, specifically case studies, reflections, role-play, and discussions, are used in learning, which support higher forms of thinking. The findings advance Kolb's EL theory by supporting that the instructional methods used in stand-alone Ph.D. PA

programs are consistent with the framework's concept of (a) engaging learners in tangible events (Do), (b) replicating events (reflect), (c) formulating answers based on experiences (think), and (d) articulating responses to ethical dilemmas (apply) (Butler et al., 2019). In their study, Che et al. (2021) supported that the aim of EL is to develop positive modification in academics to assist students in applying the concepts learned in the real works. Consistently active participation in a learning task improves learning (Boggu & Sundarsingh, 2019). The finding is supported in this study because it was identified that using case studies enables participants to actively engage in learning about ethics by sharing real-life experiences and incorporating them into the process of gaining knowledge. The results show that in stand-alone ethics programs, engaging approaches such as role-playing, moot courts, and case studies help graduates gain knowledge in the complex concept, which provides additional evidence to Kolb's EL theory. In the published literature, Hylving et al. (2023) and Sholihin et al. (2020) supported that EL enables students to understand the complexities of ethics and enhance their self-efficacy in overcoming complex dilemmas. Consistently, results in this study extend previous research by supporting that EL, involving the use of real-world scenarios in the form of case studies or role-playing, provides learners with the freedom to explore different perspectives, supporting their ability to comprehend the complexities of ethical decision-making.

#### ***Theme 6: Integration with Other Courses***

The role of ethics courses in public administration is undervalued because the concepts are either taught as part of other courses or ignored in their entirety (Fuertes, 2021). In another study, Raji et al. (2021) identified that ethics courses are often exclusionary. Similarly, Loue and Loff (2019) argued that extensive stand-alone ethics courses focusing on principles and processes are lacking. Accordingly, it is well supported in the published literature that ethics

courses in PA Ph.D. programs are largely fragmented, hindering learners' exposure to the relevant principles (De Graaf & Van der Wal, 2017; El Baradei, 2021; Puiu, 2015). Integrating ethics into other courses can create the perception that the subject is unimportant (El Baradei, 2021). As such, learners do not pay much attention to the concepts taught.

Similarly, the findings in this corroborate published literature because participants indicated that ethics concepts are mainly integrated with other courses in the focus groups. Based on the document analysis performed, it was identified that ethics was missing in most of the PA Ph.D. programs. In the programs where ethics was taught, it was mainly related to research rather than public administration. Notably, the increased focus on ethics research instead of PA in the Ph.D. programs can be because of the assumption that most of the individuals enrolled in the degrees want a career in academia and be public administrators. Limited evidence exists on the career paths of individuals who earn their PA Ph.D., which hinders a comprehensive understanding of the need for stand-alone ethics courses.

### **Implications**

In this section, the implications of the information on how and why the findings are important to PA in general are included. The implications were based on the study's findings. The implications are categorized as theoretical, empirical, and practical.

#### **Theoretical Implications**

The study's findings support the importance of case studies, reflections, and role play in promoting an understanding and application of ethical principles. The results are consistent with the concepts suggested in Kolb's EL theory, which reinforces the essence of stand-alone ethics courses in PA Ph.D. programs. Case studies, reflections, and role play provide practical and

interactive approaches for students to engage with ethical issues, improving their ability to understand and apply ethical principles in real-world contexts.

Another theoretical implication is that the results support the importance of having a stand-alone ethics program that is engaging and experiential in helping students reflect on real-world ethical scenarios in a safe space. Engaging and experiential learning promotes students' reasoning and ability to overcome complex dilemmas that can be detrimental to a person's career, the organization, or the public. Stand-alone ethics courses are crucial in enhancing learners' competencies.

The other implication is that the findings support the essence of reflecting on real-world ethical scenarios. The reflection process enhances students' reasoning capabilities and ability to navigate complex dilemmas. The process can enhance students' decision-making skills and prepare them for possible ethical issues in their organizations, careers, or public roles that could have significant consequences.

### **Empirical Implications**

In the published literature, the researchers posited that a gap exists regarding the lack of standards and best practices for approaching ethics education (Bautista-Beauchesne & Garzon, 2019; Brown & Mitchell, 2010; Frederickson & Ghore, 2014). Accordingly, the empirical implication is that the results in this study confirm the findings from researchers on the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course, which includes a limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas and a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity. Another implication is that the findings in this study support that the lack of a stand-alone ethics course results in gaps in graduates' conceptual understanding and ability to balance multiple ethical

obligations. Overall, the findings advance existing empirical literature by supporting the importance of ethical education in PA.

The findings fill the gaps in the literature by empirically confirming the consequences of not having a stand-alone ethics course. The results in this study provide empirical evidence supporting that the absence of stand-alone ethics courses in Ph.D. PA programs result in limitations in overcoming complex ethical dilemmas and cause a deficit in ethical sensitivity and awareness among participants. In addition, the findings extend the existing literature by identifying additional gaps in graduates' conceptual understanding and capability to balance multiple ethical obligations because of the lack of a stand-alone ethics course. The results are significant because they highlight the essence of ethics education in providing a comprehensive understanding of ethics issues and obligations.

### **Practical Implications**

Based on the findings in this study, stand-alone ethics courses can support the development of ethical leaders. An implication for universities is that they should support introducing ethics stand-alone courses in their programs to promote students' awareness and sensitivity. Per the responses by the participants, deficiencies in critical thinking, self-reflection, and personal growth are associated with the lack of an ethics stand-alone course. Hence, the implication for university professors responsible for developing the course to include experimental learning and engaging aspects to increase students' competencies. More is needed to support students in learning ethics by providing a safe and supportive learning environment, providing guidance and feedback, and promoting a culture of open discussion and mutual respect.

In this study, some participants questioned the need for an ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. Although the participants acknowledged the importance of ethics in PA, they questioned whether having a stand-alone course would be more suitable in a master's of public administration program rather than in a Ph.D.. The participants' rationale was that it is probable that most Ph.D. graduates are more interested in the research and academic aspects of PA. Comparably, most master's students are public administrators, which makes a stand-alone ethics program more relevant in their context. Despite the arguments, the results of this study support that studying ethics is essential at all levels of education and across different fields, not just those who want to become public administrators. A stand-alone ethics program enhances students' critical thinking, fosters responsible conduct, and provides students with the tools to overcome complex moral situations. As such, the implication for the PA programs accrediting bodies is to provide guidelines on how stand-alone ethics programs should be incorporated into PA. Even though it is unknown whether PA Ph.D. program graduates end up in academia or working for government and non-profit organizations, the curriculum offered should prepare the students for diverse career paths. As such, the stand-alone courses can focus on improving students' ethics competencies in research and public administration-related learning.

### **Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations are related to the scope of a study or boundaries, which can include the population, sample size, and timeframe (Ross & Bibler Zaidi, 2019). A delimitation of this study is that the researcher focused on the PA Ph.D. program, in which ethics is equally important in other areas such as education, law, public policy, and health care. As such, the sample size was delimited to PA Ph.D. graduates who had experienced a stand-alone or integrated ethics course. Another delimitation was that the document analysis was based on publicly available university

website course descriptions. Hence, the study was delimited to universities publishing course descriptions on their websites. The research sample size affected how broadly the results could be applied to the population. Although in qualitative research, the focus is usually not to generalize, caution should be exercised when extrapolating the results to different educational settings. The researcher provided adequate descriptions of the participants and data analysis to help the readers determine the results' transferability to their settings.

Additionally, the study was limited as the findings cannot be generalized to the target population due to methodological limitations, requiring readers to assess their transferability on a case-by-case basis. Qualitative research tends to focus on understanding a population's context, attitudes, and experiences rather than aiming for broad generalizations. Thus, although this qualitative research's findings may not apply to a population, they can contribute to broader knowledge and provide a basis for further research. Another limitation is that this qualitative study involved a small sample size of 12 participants. In qualitative research, the sample size is usually small because the focus is to collect in-depth data. The limitation was mitigated by ensuring data were collected up to saturation point.

The other limitation is that the documents used in this analysis were based on the content published on the universities' websites, the accuracy of which was not assessed. The unverified content from universities' websites about their ethics courses was a limitation because the results could misinform the readers. The limitation was reduced by ensuring the information about ethics courses was retrieved from up-to-date university websites. Another limitation is that qualitative data, which is often regarded as subjective, were collected in this study compared to quantitative data. Data triangulation reduced the limitation to promote the results' dependability. Also, participants were informed that there was no correct or wrong answer to reduce the



influence of social desirability on the study findings. Another limitation is that the participants were purposefully sampled, which could have resulted in selection bias. Selection bias was reduced from occurring by using inclusion-exclusion criteria when recruiting participants.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

A recommendation for further researchers is to conduct studies through a quantitative methodology to assess the impact of learning ethics on graduates. There is a need to conduct a study assessing the impact of learning ethics on graduates using a quantitative methodology it will help establish stronger causal relationships and better understand the impact of having stand-alone and/or integrated ethics courses. An additional need is that quantitative methodologies through correlational designs to compare students who have undergone the integrated ethics course with those who have not can provide valuable insights into the specific effects of the intervention (Kusumaningrum et al., 2019). The reasoning for conducting a quantitative study is that the approach can help measure the unique contributions of the ethics course to students' ethical competencies and professional practices. The outcomes that the researchers can measure and present in numbers include the impact of ethics on the learners' sensitivity, awareness, and moral competencies.

Future researchers can focus on understanding the career paths of PA Ph.D. students. The study can involve qualitative research to determine how many PA Ph.D. students become public administrators or academics. The need for focusing in PA Ph.D. students' career paths is that the findings from the study can help support the type of content that should be included in stand-alone ethics programs. The reasoning for proposing the qualitative research is that it will facilitate determining the most appropriate content that should be included in stand-alone ethics programs. For instance, if in the future it is found that many PA Ph.D. students transition into

academia, then the content in the stand-alone ethics courses can focus on research ethics. Comparably, suppose the findings are that most of the PA Ph.D. graduates end up being public administrators. In that case, the introduced stand-alone ethics courses can be focused on the factors influencing the administration of governments and non-profits. In the case that it is identified that some PA Ph.D. graduates end up in academia. In contrast, in others in public administration, the relevant ethics concepts should be integrated into the stand-alone ethics programs, ensuring participants gain adequate knowledge of the concepts.

The other recommendation for future researchers is to conduct a qualitative study focusing on students who have undergone a stand-alone ethics course. The need to conduct the recommended study is that the findings can help understand whether a stand-alone ethics course helps eliminate the identified ramifications and gaps in this study. The reasoning for the proposed study is that when it is conducted it could help determine whether enrolling for a stand-alone ethics improved PA Ph.D. graduates' ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas, ethical awareness and sensitivity, conceptual understanding, and ability to balance multiple ethical obligations.

An additional recommendation for future researchers is to conduct a study on the same topic but use a mixed-methods approach to gain insights into the phenomenon's qualitative and quantitative perspectives. The need to conduct a study using a mixed-methods methodology is that it could help overcome the limitations of relying solely on self-reported data. Hence, by combining qualitative methods with quantitative measures, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the topic of study (Göçoğlu & Demirkol, 2023). The reasoning for conducting a study using a mixed-methods approach will help reduce the limitations of this research and facilitate quantifying the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics program by assessing

participants' competencies. A mixed-methods study will facilitate collecting data in numerals and words, which could help expound the importance of ethics as a stand-alone course in PA Ph.D. programs. Particularly, after identifying the ramifications, perceived gaps, similarities, and differences of PA Ph.D. programs, a quantitative aspect can be added to quantify the extent.

In the future, researchers could expand the scope of this study to include not just Ph.D. programs in public administration but also undergraduate and master's level programs. An expanded scope could provide a more comprehensive understanding of stand-alone ethics courses across different educational levels. Instead of primarily focusing on students, future researchers could focus on the programs and schools. The process could involve studying the curriculum, teaching techniques, and institutional policies related to ethics education.

An interesting approach that future researchers could use is to study individuals who have acted unethically to identify whether they received any ethics training. The study findings could provide insights into the efficacy of ethics education in preventing unethical behavior. If resources permit, researchers can perform longitudinal studies to assess the impact of stand-alone ethics courses. The study would involve following students from the time they are in school to their professional careers to determine how ethics education influences their decision-making in the long term.

### **Summary**

The problem of focus in this qualitative study was the lack of required stand-alone ethics training in PA Ph.D. programs. As such, the purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. The research questions answered in this study are: What are the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs? What are the perceived gaps in ethical

knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course? What are the similarities and differences of the Ph.D. PA program ethics courses? Kolb's EL theory was applied to provide this study with a theoretical underpinning. Applying a qualitative methodology supported collecting data using semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Data for the interviews and focus groups were collected from PA Ph.D. graduates. The data used in the document analysis was retrieved from the websites of universities that offer PA Ph.D. programs. Based on the thematic analysis conducted, six themes were identified: Limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas, a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity, limited conceptual understanding, uncertainty balancing multiple ethical obligations, course structure, and integration with other courses.

The ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs are limited ability to overcome complex ethical dilemmas and a deficit in ethical awareness and sensitivity. The perceived gaps in ethical knowledge among graduate students from PA Ph.D. programs without a stand-alone ethics course limited conceptual understanding and uncertainty in balancing multiple ethical obligations. The similarities and differences of ethics courses in the Ph.D. PA programs were related to the course structure and integration with other courses. The findings in this study were identified to be concurrent with the published literature. The results add to the literature by providing insights into the ramifications, gaps, similarities, and differences associated with stand-alone ethics courses. The results advanced Kolb's EL theory by supporting the importance of case studies, reflections, and role-playing in increasing students' ethical competencies. The study findings have theoretical, practical, and empirical implications. Although the study had some limitations and delimitations, they did not impact the relevance of

the study findings. Additional research on stand-alone ethics courses in public administration and other programs is needed.

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## APPENDIX A: IRB APPROVAL

Date: 4-17-2024

IRB #: IRB-FY22-23-1009

Title: Ethics as a Requirement Among Ph.D. Graduates in Public Administration

Creation Date: 2-3-2023

End Date:

Status: **Approved**

Principal Investigator: Daniel Scott


Review Board: Research Ethics Office

Sponsor:

### Study History

Submission Type	Initial	Review Type	Limited	Decision	<b>Exempt - Limited IRB</b>
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### Key Study Contacts

Member	Eugene Belmain	Role	Co-Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Daniel Scott	Role	Principal Investigator	Contact	
Member	Daniel Scott	Role	Primary Contact	Contact	

**APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT POST**

ATTENTION FACEBOOK FRIENDS: I am conducting research as part of the requirements for a Doctoral Degree at Liberty University. The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, public servant who are Ph.D. graduates from public administration different CHEA-accredited universities and have worked in your respective public service department or organization for at least 3 years. Participants will be asked to participate in telephone/virtual, audio-recorded interview (60 minutes) and review and validate transcribed interview responses via email (20 minutes), which should take about 80 minutes to complete. If you would like to participate and meet the study criteria, please click here (include hyperlink to online survey). A consent document is provided as the first page of the survey followed by demographic questions to ensure that you qualify with the inclusion criteria. A copy of the consent form will be given to you at the time of the interview.

## **APPENDIX C: INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

**Title of the Project:** Ethics as a Requirement among Ph.D. Graduates in Public Administration  
**Principal Investigator:** Daniel U. Scott/Doctoral Candidate, Helms School of Government,  
 Liberty University

### **Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must be 18 years of age or older, public servant who are Ph.D. graduates from public administration different CHEA-accredited universities and have worked in your respective public service department or organization for at least 3 years. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

### **What is the study about and why is it being done?**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to understand the ramifications of not having a stand-alone ethics course in PA Ph.D. programs.

### **What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to do the following:

1. Participate in a telephone/virtual, audio-recorded interview (60 minutes).
2. Review and validate transcribed interview responses via email (20 minutes).

### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include providing evidence whether Ph.D. programs offer ethics as a stand-alone course or whether ethics courses are integrated within the other major units in public administration.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### How will personal information be protected?

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies or shared with other researchers. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Data will be stored on a password-locked computer. After three years, all electronic records will be deleted.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for three years and then deleted. The researcher and members of his doctoral committee will have access to these recordings.

### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

The researcher conducting this study is Daniel U. Scott. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact him at [phone number and/or email]. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, [name], at [email].

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB. Our physical address is

Institutional Review Board, 1971 University Blvd., Green Hall Ste. 2845, Lynchburg, VA, 24515; our phone number is 434-592-5530, and our email address is [irb@liberty.edu](mailto:irb@liberty.edu).

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### **Your Consent**

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record me as part of my participation in this study.

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Printed Subject Name

---

Signature & Date

**APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Please tell me about yourself and how you would introduce yourself to someone for the first time.
2. How about your occupation? Tell me about your employment and how long you have held that position.
3. Did you hold any other professional positions before your current position? Please tell me about them.
4. Please talk about your current position in public administration.
5. What is your perception about stand-alone ethics education program for a Ph.D. in public administration?
6. Please walk me through the ethics courses that you had during your Ph.D. in public administration.
  - a. Was it stand-alone ethics courses?
  - b. How was it taught?
7. What is your perception about the ethics-related learning you received? [Ask if they learned ethics]
  - a. Was it effective in instilling ethical lessons in you as a Ph.D. student?
  - b. Please explain why you thought it was effective.
  - c. If not, do you think it is necessary?
8. What is your perception about the influence of an ethical program in your ability to handle ethical dilemmas?
  - a. Was it effective in helping you gain the skills to overcome ethical issues in public service? Please elaborate.

9. In what ways do you think ethics-related learning in Ph.D. programs could be improved?
10. We have covered a lot in our conversation, and I appreciate your time. As a final question, what else do you think would be important for me to understand about how higher education institutions structure their ethics education programs in public administration?



**APPENDIX D: FOCUS GROUPS INTERVIEW PROTOCOL**

1. Kindly provide a brief personal introduction to acquaint yourself to the other members of the focus group.
2. Can you describe the structure of the ethics courses in your Ph.D. PA program?
3. What were the main topics covered in your ethics course? How did these topics relate to your field of study?"
4. What were the teaching methods used in your ethics course? How effective were they?
5. What aspects of the ethics course do you think are most beneficial for students in the Ph.D. PA program?