

A Landscape Study of Public Universities with Undergraduate-Focused Ethics Education

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Abstract

Little is known about the aims and impact of university-based ethics centers. Less is known about how centers leverage their unique campus positions to engage undergraduates in transformative ethics education. This article provides a foundation for future research on university-based ethics centers. First, this article addresses the history of ethics education in higher education, the rise of university ethics centers, and the factors necessary for successful ethics programs. Next, this piece shows the geographic distribution of ethics centers and which centers provide undergraduate-focused ethics education. Finally, this article enables future research on effective ethics center structure, leadership, and outreach.

Article Word Count: 2726

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Little is known about the aims and impact of university-based ethics centers. Less is known about how centers leverage their unique campus positions to engage undergraduates in transformative ethics education. This article provides a foundation for future research on university-based ethics centers. First, this article addresses the history of ethics education in higher education, the rise of university ethics centers, and the factors necessary for successful ethics programs. Next, this piece shows the geographic distribution of ethics centers and which centers provide undergraduate-focused ethics education. Finally, this article enables future research on effective ethics center structure, leadership, and outreach.

History and Importance of Ethics in Higher Education

The Hastings Center, a nonprofit credited for establishing the field of bioethics and producing scholarly research in philosophy, law, political science, and education, first reported on the path of ethics in higher education in the late 1970s. What began as a capstone course taught only by university presidents slowly transitioned to courses siloed away in philosophy or religion departments (Elliott, June 2018, 13). Then, as the turn of the century approached, there was a renewed interest in student character and leadership (Hanson 2021, 48)(Dalton, Crosby 2011, 1). This interest resulted in university mission statements, strategic planning documents, and policies rife with value-laden language (Elliott, June 2018, 12). Administrative value signaling transformed quickly into an “ethics across the curriculum” movement, the interdisciplinary approach to teaching moral reasoning in all departments.

Ethics across the curriculum is still widely present today (Weber 2006, 25). At the same time, there has been a new interest in engineering, medical, and legal ethics, as well as increased attention to already present military ethics and character development (Hanson, 2021, 48). Ethics education now focuses on providing the tools to perceive ethically complex situations, consider the weight of actions, and make difficult decisions where there is no easy answer (Mellon, Kolb, Beauchamp 2020, 38)(Evans et al. 2021, 38)(Sternberg 2012, 41).

Most importantly, practical ethics education encourages students to move beyond classroom discussions and live the values they find themselves to have (Sternberg 2012, 43)(Bush, Smith, Bush 2013, 114). Current, successful ethics pedagogy, both in and out of the classroom, includes: field-specific guest speakers from local organizations, current real-world cases, TED talks, role play, case studies, personal reflections, experiential games, internships, roundtable discussions, symposiums, lectures, travel grant opportunities, workshops, student organizations, campus partnerships, research grant opportunities, and fellowships (Mellon, Kolb, Beauchamp 2020, 43)(Sternberg 2012, 39)(Evans et al. 2021, 139)(Bush, Smith, Bush 2013, 115-116)(Doorley 2020, 197-199)(Ferguson, Louder 2018, 96)(Spino 2021, 215-216).

Fortunately, students want to assist in an ethics-related curriculum (Sternberg 2012, 43). When asked, students voice interest in discipline-specific real-world case studies, role-play, and discussions – and the opportunity to bring their own experiences under the microscope and evaluate their lived experiences (Mellon, Kolb, Beauchamp 2020, 43)(Bush, Smith, Bush 2013,

116). Such interactive and engaged learning, the kinds of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities ethics centers are apt to provide, differs from typical lecture-style courses.

Several motivating factors emphasize the need for a better understanding of the impact of ethics education on university campuses. First, despite growing interest in providing ethically rigorous education, universities are still, overall, rife with unethical behavior and prone to moral failings (Gaudet 2020, 22). Second, students are unknowingly behind on their ethical skills (unable to intelligently explain what it means to be good while claiming they are moral agents), more concerned with making a "big impact" than complying with moral standards. Third, graduates show little proof of behaving ethically in their first jobs after college, even when scoring highly in ethics courses (Sternberg 2012, 37)(Stekelenburg et al. 2020, 13)(Garcia, Newman 2019)(Bush, Smith, Bush 2013, 35).

A Call for Ethics Centers

One of the many roles of higher education is to mold good citizens, preparing students to be competitive in the job market upon graduation. Transformative education requires harnessing interest in living a meaningful life and connecting coursework to values, identities, commitments, and experiences. Molding students into good citizens also requires disambiguating university-espoused values and teaching students to embody such traits (Dalton, Crosby 2011, 2). Whether students internalize and live by a set of moral codes affects not only individuals on campus but also the social justice and equity of surrounding communities and beyond (Evans et al. 2021, 138).

A primary goal of university ethics centers is to build and promote an ethical culture and community on campus. Building such a community can be done by providing initiatives such as campus-wide discussions, panels, and training (Brand, Potthast 2021, 170). These initiatives invite ethical dialogue, problem-solving creativity, and a general spirit of ethics (Green et al. 2020, 224). As such, there is an argument for having one central location for the ethics center, a "space" for ethics on campus, and a location for the "interchange of ideas" on morally sensitive topics (Doorley 2020, 197)(Ferguson, Louder 2018, 97). By existing outside of classrooms, ethics centers allow for interdisciplinary collaboration and connections to a broader community, signaling that ethics is for everyone (Pritchard, Borden 2021, 152)(Meyers 2021, 147)(Doorley 2020, 186)(Ferguson, Louder 2018, 97).

Factors Seen as Necessary for A Successful Ethics Program

University Buy-In/Culture

According to some researchers, ethics centers need university buy-in to be successful. Universities must have mission statements and codes within which they have written and function (Weber 2006, 25). Mere words on a website are not enough; there must be a genuine commitment to the values and ideals in the mission statements and public-facing documentation (Procario-Foley, Bean, 2022, 103). Researchers argue that beyond belief in mission statements, there needs to be a campus-wide recognition that ethics is essential. Students and donors need ways to get involved (Brand, Potthast 2021, 168).

Administration Support

Some argue that campus leaders must share their commitment to ethics widely and often. From volunteering time and expertise to ethics center initiatives to opening faculty lines for ethicists, there must be a commitment to ethics from the top (Gaudet 2020, 224) (Weber 2006, 27). Such transparent support will engage stakeholders across campus (Ferguson, Louder 2018, 97).

Finances

University finances can be hard to come by and even harder to secure. However, too much money from any location can undermine an ethics center's objective legitimacy. While helpful, grant funding directs the center's path and is often constrained to a few years. Endowments can be appealing but often have strings attached to the donor. Finding financial security is a constant stressor for many ethics centers, hindering their ability to plan far in advance and innovate quickly (Pritchard, Borden 2021, 157 – 158).

Adequate Staffing

The character of an ethics center is important (Spino 2021, 184). A multifaceted and dedicated staff is vital to an ethics center's success (Weber 2006, 35)(Brand, Potthast 2021, 162)(Doorley 2020, 189). Staff members must be skilled in coordinating campus-wide initiatives, balancing the many stakeholders of the center, and setting the direction of the center (Gaudet 2020, 215). The leader must have experience in discipline-specific matters and ethical reasoning. They must be able to teach, research, lead, and run an often resource-stressed center, which is rare to find in one person (Meyers 2021, 144)(Brand, Potthast 2021, 169).

Structural Location

Physically and administratively, researchers argue that an ethics center needs a home within the university (Ferguson, Louder 2018, 99). Centers should be where they can nudge the idea that ethics is for everyone, not just within a housing department (Pritchard, Borden 2021, 155). A central location also improves access to resources since the center can reach across campus to ask for support. The location will also affect the mission and direction of the center. When housed in a department, there may be more subject-specific topics. In contrast, if an ethics center is directly under Administration leadership, it may experience the effects of top-level turnover (Meyers 2021, 155).

While there is still much to learn about the effectiveness and capacity of ethics centers, this study seeks to provide a perspective on the current landscape of ethics centers at public universities. The following sections provide insight into which universities house ethics centers, the population these institutions serve, and where these centers exist within campus structures. Then, there is data on which centers provide undergraduate-focused ethics education. The goal of this project is to create a starting point for future research on ethics centers and their role in providing extra-curricular ethics education to undergraduates.

Methodology

In 2020 the National Center for Education Studies (NCES) reported on 6440 Institutions of Higher Education in the United States. This project focuses on a subset of those institutions, public, four-year universities in the contiguous United States (N=557). This subset was selected

to capture a broad understanding of the opportunities provided by each state. Using appropriate search terms, websites for all Institutions of Higher Education with an active ethics center were identified (“ethics,” “morals,” or “values” in the name.) Ethics centers being organized but have yet to open officially (N=2) were also identified, though not included in the analysis. Centers that had been established but subsequently closed (based on severely outdated websites or “goodbye” messages from center staff) were also noted separately (N=8) but not included in the analysis.

Each ethics center website was examined for evidence of recent (within the last five years) undergraduate-focused ethics education initiatives outside the classroom. If there was evidence of such initiatives, the center was classified as having ethics education. Undergraduate-focused ethics education was defined as actively engaging undergraduate students in moral reasoning development outside the classroom. For example, if a center’s only undergraduate-focused initiative was an annual essay contest, it did not count since a one-off competition is a passive way to encourage moral reasoning. Examples of active undergraduate-focused ethics education included but were not limited to: an Intercollegiate Ethics Bowl team, center-sponsored ethics clubs or student organizations, access to ethically-focused internships, cohort-based programs such as fellowships or intensive scholar programs, annual funds to implement student-created ethics projects, events geared explicitly toward undergraduates such as a day-long “Ethics Day” or regular speakers series, and opportunities for students to contribute to academic research in ethics (such as white papers).

Limitations

Only public, four-year universities were considered in this analysis. While the narrow scope proved manageable for an initial project, it left out approximately 90% of institutions of higher education in the United States. Data on other institutions, (for example, religiously affiliated private ones) may provide different insights and conclusions. Furthermore, collecting data on *all* U.S. institutions would provide the most comprehensive view of ethics education across the country. However, for the purpose of an initial review, the sample was purposefully small.

This study relied on ethics centers to have prominent, active, updated, and understandable web pages. If there was not an easily identifiable ethics center on the first five pages of a Google search or within the first ten hits from a search on the institution’s website, it was assumed there was no ethics center. For example, the results did not include a consortium of ethically minded scholars listed on an outdated Facebook group. Similarly, if the only indication of an ethics center was a broken hyperlink on a departmental page, it was not included. Therefore, there may be additional ethics centers whose website is deep within university subpages or does not effectively illustrate the existence of a center.

Since research focused on centers with names including words like “ethics” or “values,” there may be additional centers whose missions and aims are similar to the ethics centers included but are framed too differently to be included. For example, centers focused on “leadership,” “civic education,” or “social justice” blurred the line between ethics and other fields. In those cases, a quick look at the center’s mission statement determined whether or not it should be included in these results. Attempting to cover all instances of ethics-related education, even when keywords are absent, is outside the scope of this initial project. Research compliance centers (even when containing the word “ethics” in their name) were often not included. This is because the centers

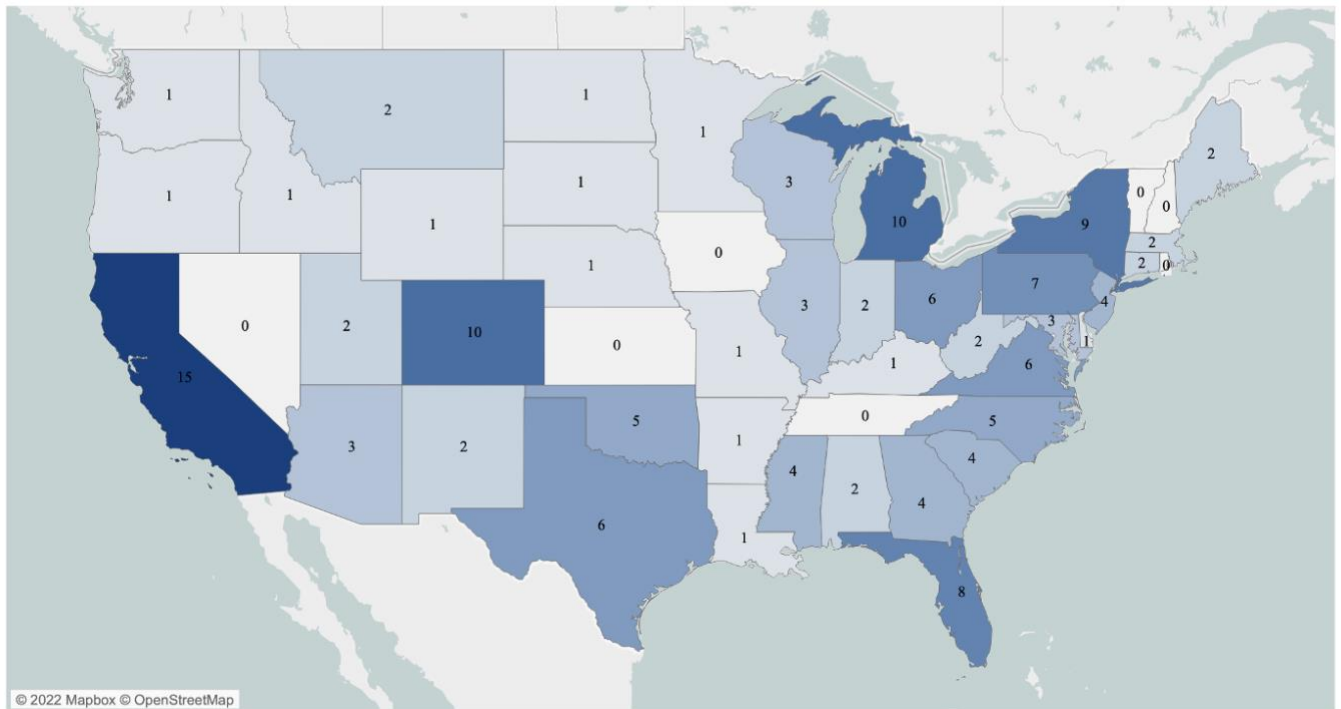
typically focused more on compliance than the philosophical moral exploration of interest in this project.

Results

Overview (Ethics Centers)

Online evidence of 146 ethics centers exists, representing 128, or 23%, of the relevant public universities. For example, Michigan State University has four ethics centers. In addition, the Universities of Maine and Southern Maine have a joint center. Below is a map showing the number of ethics centers per state.

Number of Ethics Centers by State



Institution Characteristics

It is important to consider which kinds of universities house ethics centers. Two notable university categories are land-grant and liberal arts institutions. Land-grant universities “teach agriculture, military tactics, and the mechanic arts as well as classical studies” in exchange for federal funds (Association of Public & Land-Grant Universities). Each state has at least one land-grant university, and several have multiple. Less than half of public land grant universities house an ethics center (43%). Conversely, a liberal arts college or university provides students with “general knowledge” and “develop general intellectual capacities [...] as opposed to professional or vocational skills” (Merriam-Webster). Only 13% of public liberal arts universities have an ethics center.

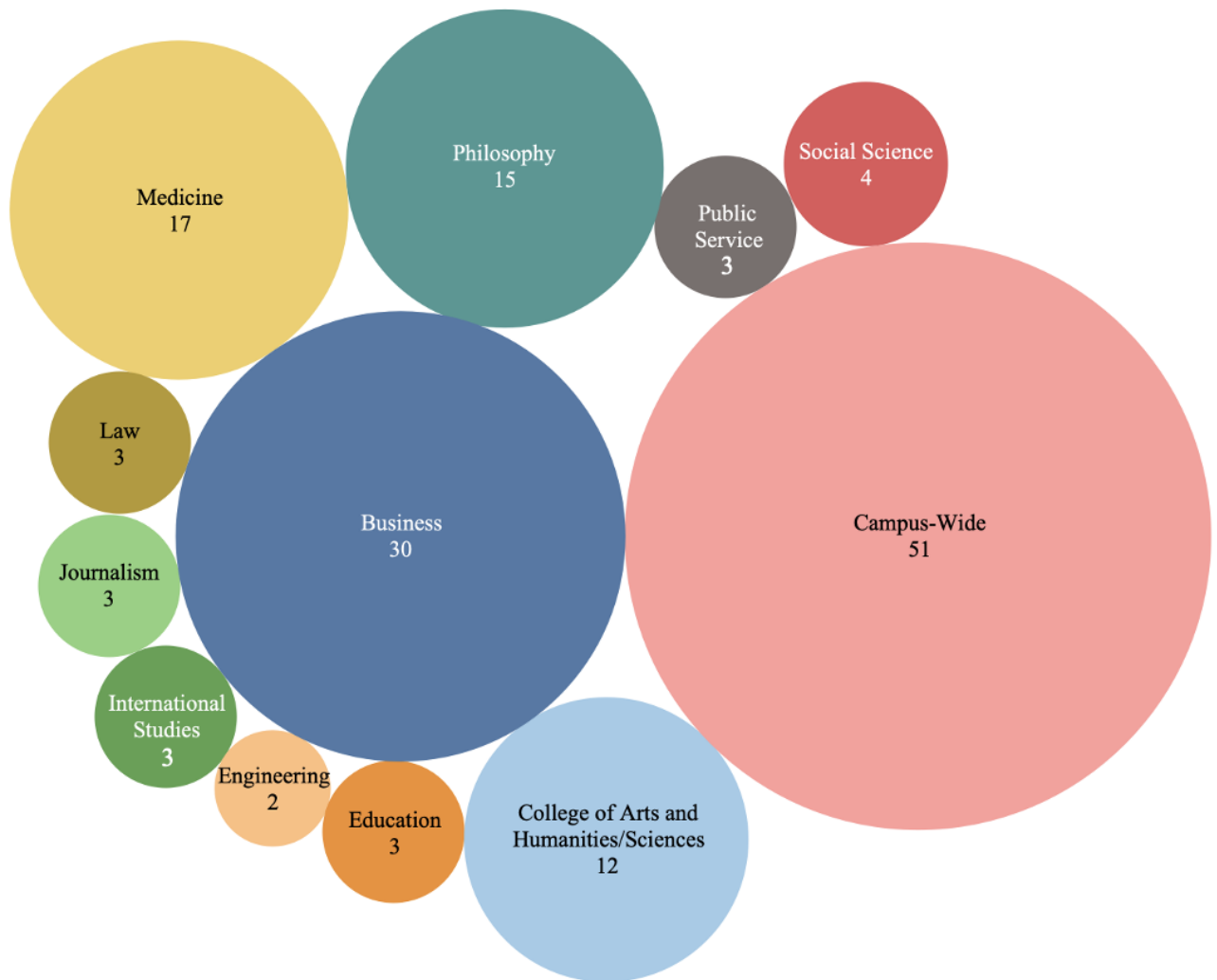
In addition to the teaching focus of an institution, the target student is important. Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are institutions “established prior to 1964, whose

principal mission was, and is, the education of black Americans” (White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity through Historically Black Colleges and Universities). The Hiram Rhodes Revels Center for Ethical Leadership at Alcorn State University is the *only* ethics center at an HBCU. Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) “maintain, preserve, and restore Native languages and cultural traditions” (White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence and Economic Opportunity for Native Americans and Strengthening Tribal Colleges and Universities). There is only one TCU in this population, and it does not have online evidence of an ethics center. Finally, Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs) are those where Hispanic students make up at least one-quarter of the full-time undergraduate population (White House Initiative on Advancing Educational Equity, Excellence, and Economic Opportunity for Hispanics). Of public HSIs, 28% have at least one ethics center (the University of Central Florida has two ethics centers).

Location within universities

Ethics centers exist in various campus locations and reporting systems. Ethics centers are usually either campus-wide initiatives (36%) or within Business Schools (21%). Other popular locations are Schools of Medicine (11.6%), Philosophy Departments (10%), and Colleges of Arts and Sciences (8%). Finally, there are four or fewer ethics centers in Social Science, Education, International Studies, Journalism, Law, Public Administration, and Engineering spaces. Below is a graph showing where and how often ethics centers occur on campuses.

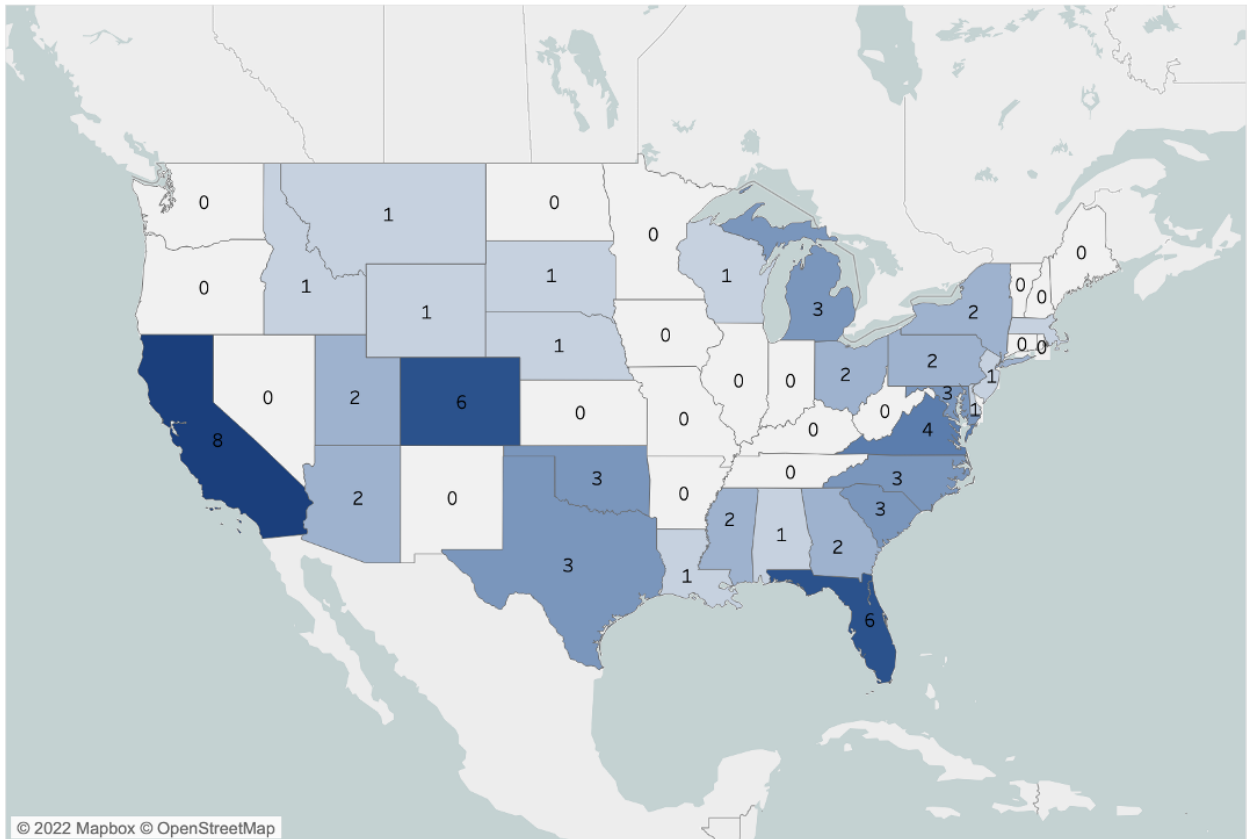
Administrative Location of Ethics Centers at Public Universities



Overview (Undergraduate-Focused Ethics Centers)

Of the 146 ethics centers found, 67 have an undergraduate focus, making up 61 or 11% of the relevant public universities. Of land-grant institutions with ethics centers, 23% target undergraduate students. Only 5% of liberal arts universities have an ethics center which cater to undergraduate students. There are no public HBCUs or TCUs with undergraduate-focused ethics education. Only 13% of public HSIs have undergraduate-focused ethics education. Below is a map showing the number of undergraduate-focused ethics centers per state.

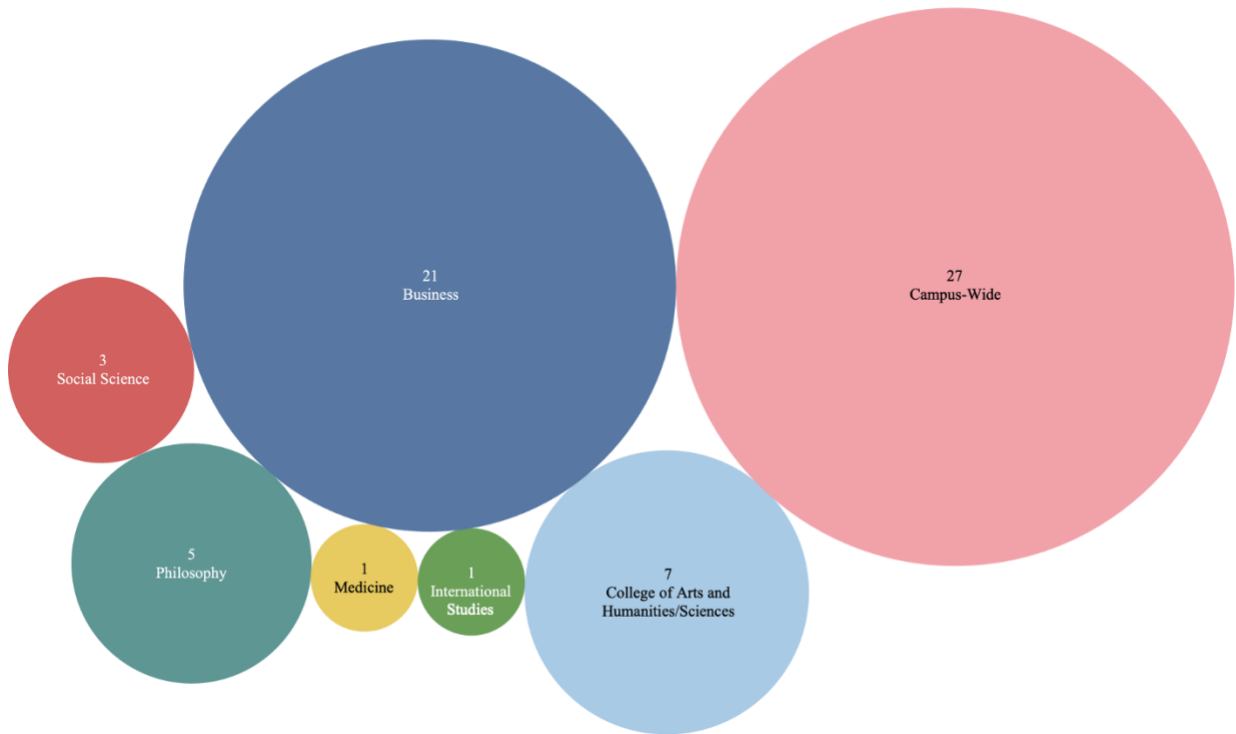
Number of Ethics Centers with Undergraduate-Focused Ethics Education by State



Location within Universities

The location of undergraduate-focused ethics centers within their universities is similar to that of all ethics centers, though at a smaller scale. Most undergraduate-focused ethics centers are either campus-wide initiatives (40%) or within Business Schools (31%). Other locations are Colleges of Arts and Sciences (12%), Philosophy Departments (8%), and Social Science Departments (5%). Finally, only one undergraduate-focused ethics center is present in an International Studies Department, School of Medicine, or Public Administration Department. In addition, Education, Engineering, Journalism, and Law spaces have ethics centers but not undergraduate-focused initiatives. Below is a graph showing where and how often undergraduate-focused ethics centers occur on campuses.

Administrative Location of Ethics Centers with Undergraduate-Focused Ethics Education



Conclusion and Next Steps

It is tempting to provide conclusions based on the data presented. However, the central aim of this project is to provide a descriptive account of ethics centers and undergraduate-focused initiatives at centers at public, 4-year universities. Additionally, without analyzing the collected data with pre-existing data and higher education theories, most conclusions would be overreaching and unsubstantiated.¹

Future research should include collecting information ethics centers at all higher education institutions (private, 2-year, community college, etc.), a deeper dive into the goals of existing centers, whether the administrative location of centers affects their ability to achieve their goals, the effect of undergraduate-focused initiatives on participating students, and how to create centers at institutions which currently do not have any.

¹ I thank an anonymous reviewer for this point.

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