With ongoing press reports of federal scandals involving senior executive branch officials, such as the admitted ethical misconduct with a female subordinate of the decorated veteran and former head of the Central Intelligence Agency, General David H. Petraeus, intertwined with a Federal Bureau of Investigation inquiry into e-mail exchanges of potentially confidential communications and the NATO commander in Afghanistan, examination of the ethical climate of federal public servants could not be more timely.1

Entering and valuably contributing to our understanding of the “atmospherics” of the ethical climate of federal public servants is the analysis completed by Professor Eric D. Raile and contained in his article “Building Ethical Capital: Perceptions of the Ethical Climate in the Public Sector.”

Drilling down into self-reported survey data of federal employees and officials across the executive branch conducted by the Office of Governmental Ethics (OGE), Professor Raile explores ethical climate and perceptions of ethics at the federal level among public servants themselves. He also actively invites further avenues of academic research into the viability of educational and advisory remedies to deter unethical misconduct. To conduct this analysis, Professor Raile ambitiously frames nine hypotheses of the ethical perceptions of federal employees and officials across executive branch agencies and some potential drivers of those perceptions. In so doing, he readily acknowledges that his data are derived solely from self-reported surveys that embed some clear statistical challenges.

If ethics regimes are to be successful in any sector, they must have widespread support among those regulated and strong perceptions of their integral importance to positional duties. Professor Raile’s article importantly contributes to our understanding of both.

Having served for more than two and half decades in an executive branch ethics oversight role, and having taught on either end of that service in both law and business graduate college programs in directly related fields, I believe that Professor Raile’s analysis provides valuable insight for advancing the academic ethics literature, as well as for applied ethics practice. It is insight that not only substantiates the understanding of ethics climate and attitudes framing the ethical culture of those doing the public’s work at the federal level, but also, in my experience and anecdotal awareness, analysis that further underpins applied ethical governance. Many of Professor Raile’s important survey observations are applicable to state, national, and even international ethics jurisdictional levels. Dividing the analysis among survey respondent status and work tenure provides logical separation of the data results.

In his hypotheses, Professor Raile highlights the impact of ethics education (I am not a big fan of the characterization of ethics information as “training,” often reminded of the reported C. S. Lewis quote that “Most people don’t need to be taught. They need to be reminded.”) and ethics advice. These are welcome explorations of the data to the limited extent Professor Raile notes the data provide. They are also dependent on the manner of deployment of the educational (and advisory) duties across federal agencies under the OGE umbrella and his awareness of the work done by the OGE.

Professor Raile’s extended hypotheses to perceptions of ethics education, as he suggests, are critical to the inherent value to the public of codifying ethical responsibilities. Education (and advice that he explores) are remedial mechanisms widely utilized and recommended as tools and drivers of enhancing the ethical performance of public sector duties to citizens. In my experience, educational efforts that were perceived as clear and practically understandable in nontheoretical and nonbureaucratic or legalistic jargon were invaluable. In fact, self-reported changes in perceptions for some were framed in such positive terms as to reaffirm belief in a higher import of performing public service. Finding that education can be a
does not possess would suggest that perceptions of the uniformity or absence of accountability measures for senior public officials have a significant impact on their view of ethical climate, particularly among those serving longer in the workforce, in a highly understandable, often negative trajectory. The impact of accountability on ethical perceptions likely deserves additional research as well.

Professor Raile has certainly advanced the literature on the general subject of the ethical climate and governance of those serving in federal executive branch roles and responsibilities. His analysis provides key insights into perception as a driver of ethical behavior in the public sector. In addition, it correctly segments and identifies the need for more research in its examples of ethics education and advisory mechanisms that significantly aid both perceptions and adherence to ethical standards. While important questions and streams of research are opened for further inquiry by Professor Raile’s efforts, any of us engaged in ethics governance or policy are valuably informed by his contribution.

Notes
1. The commentator’s title transposes the phrase “perception is reality” that is often attributed, among others, to a quotation from Lee Atwater, of infamous and controversial ethical character in federal campaign circles, and in a PBS Frontline video posted on November 11, 2008, at http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/atwater/.
2. Serving as a member of an international Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) team in a joint learning study with the Kingdom of Jordan in 2009, we developed a number of joint recommendations that relied on education, disclosure, advisory mechanisms, and accountability measures to increase uniform ethics code adoption and buttress anticorruption efforts; see http://www.oecd.org/gov/fighting-corruptioninthepublicsector/45916428.pdf.