Mastering Ethics for Work & Life

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Hankamer’s Business Ethics Case Competition challenges students by placing them in real-world situations where they must navigate competing priorities to determine the most ethical path forward for a company.
Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle proposed virtue ethics as a theory of moral decision making, believing good habits are developed by practicing virtuous acts regularly. Christians agree but use Christ’s life as their guide with prudence, justice, temperance, courage, faith, hope and love (charity) as their guiding virtues.

While the philosophy behind ethics may help one build a foundation on which to base decisions, when it comes to making ethical choices in a boardroom, conference room or cubicle, an understanding of ethics beyond the philosophy is only gained through experience. During their time at Baylor, business students grow in character as they engage with ethical issues in their business courses and consider how they will respond in situations that challenge their values.

Through an integrated approach to teaching ethics, students in Baylor’s Hankamer School of Business learn the importance of ethical leadership through core classes, guest speakers and ethics-based competitions, reinforcing their ethical foundations.
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DR. MITCHELL NEUBERT

One of the hallmarks of the business school’s ethics offerings is the Hankamer Business Ethics Case Competition, which centers on a company facing ethical issues. This year’s fictional case was developed around the real-world challenges faced by innovative automaker Tesla. The case centered around the costs of automated vehicles—not the financial cost, but the cost to the safety of its customers, civilians, employees and communities in Africa, Asia and South America where the vehicles’ lithium-ion batteries are being produced.

Divided into consulting teams, students are charged with determining whether or not the issues identified by employees and customers have validity. Then, they must present their recommendations to the company executives—in reality, judges for the competition. They compete for prizes, but the insight they receive from working with others to formulate a plan based on their values and beliefs is where real leadership qualities begin to grow roots.

With leadership and ethics being a key initiative of Illuminate, the University’s academic strategic plan, the business school’s experiential learning opportunities offer guidance when it comes to integrating ethical development and leadership in students.

“From the business school’s perspective, ethical behavior is at the core of a free enterprise system,” Dr. Terry Maness, dean of Hankamer School of Business, says. “While contracts are important in any business transaction, that pertains more to the letter of the law. In many ways, ethics and ethical behavior deal with the spirit of the law, that is, at the end of the day, to do what is right, not just what is legal.”

The business school has worked to integrate practical applied ethics into its curriculum for some time. In 2006, Maness, BA’71, MS’72, appointed Dr. Mitchell Neubert as The Harry and Hazel Chavanne Chair of Christian Ethics in Business and charged him with expanding co-curricular opportunities for students that promote ethical leadership development.

Neubert developed and continues to host a series of experiences that help students “find their ethical voice.”

“I believe that business is designed to be good,” he says. “A business can’t make money and stay open if it doesn’t provide a service, something that people value, and that’s good business. Taken to the extreme, however, by those without clear ethics, the good can be abused and can harm customers and employees.

“We want to develop leaders who have learned how to manage people, serve customers, and produce products in a way that is ethical; that respects the people involved; and treats all stakeholders fairly. We want students to be aware of temptations to be unethical and to act with character. Particularly at Baylor, we want these future leaders to be examples of their faith, ambassadors for Christ in doing what is right and good.”

Several times every year Baylor business students are exposed to opportunities that challenge them to wrestle with practical ethical issues. One of the signature events is the annual two-week Dale P. Jones Business Ethics Forum, featuring keynote speakers such as Baylor Regent Emeritus Drayton McLane, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush and Hobby Lobby President Steve Green; luncheons and case competitions. The forum centers around an annual theme, with artificial intelligence as this year’s theme. Previous years have taken deep dives into the intersections of business and government and business and poverty.

“All business schools are having to talk about ethics, because there have been too many examples of executives who go off the rails,” Neubert says. “It doesn’t mean that business itself is bad, but without constraints, sometimes it can be. Instead of trying to rely on government to install regulations and such, I think it is our responsibility, particularly at Baylor, to focus on the right way to do business.”

In the classroom, business professors are encouraged to include ethics in their lectures. For example, a marketing or finance professor provides ethical scenarios in his or her area of expertise. Three separate business school courses, which most business majors take, require students to delve into ethical dilemmas.

“Every one of my courses—both undergraduate and graduate—have had a lecture on ethics,” MBA student Ginnie Berg, BA’18, says. “I took an accounting test which included an essay question that proposed an ethical dilemma. We had to write a short essay to include identifying the stakeholders, determining who it would affect and what position we would take. I think it is very important for the
business school to integrate teaching ethics because it helps us think about these issues and how our morals and values are going to shape our decisions in the future.”

ETHICAL CHALLENGES
The first opportunity for a student to debate an ethical scenario is during Business 1101, the career development class typically taken by freshmen. In an event known as the Ethics SLAM! competition, students write a memo on how to respond to an ethical situation where someone they know is asking them to do something unethical. They learn to respond without damaging the relationship. The memos are judged, and the authors of the best responses move on to a live competition in front of their peers, where the top four students are awarded cash prizes.

The next opportunity to compete in addressing an ethical challenge is through the Leadership and Organizational Behavior class, MGT 3305, which is required for all business students. For this competition, the Hankamer Business Ethics Case Competition, students are divided into teams and given an actual case to study, often it is based on a current, evolving case, like this year’s Tesla case. The next opportunity to compete in addressing an ethical challenge is through the Leadership and Organizational Behavior class, MGT 3305, which is required for all business students.

The third opportunity to participate in an ethical competition is through the National MBA Case Competition in Ethical Leadership, which Baylor holds annually. This year marked the 12th anniversary of the competition with teams coming from such institutions as Auburn University, Iowa State University, the University of Georgia, and Brigham Young University, which took home this year’s $5,000 grand prize. Neubert and retired Baylor professor Ann Grinols began this competition after attending similar events where judging did not follow ethical practices.

“When I talk with recruiters about why they continue to recruit our students, there is a familiar theme,” Maness says. “They like the values our students bring to the workplace, and they like the work ethic. Our mission lays the foundation for how we strive to do business in the Hankamer School of Business. We cultivate principled leaders and serve the global marketplace, guided by Christian values.”

“Cultivating not just leaders, but principled leaders, is central to who we are, and we strive to serve. At the end of the day, ethics is not about who you are, or what you do when everyone is looking, but it has everything to do with who you are and what you do when no one is looking. That is what character is all about.”

When speaking to students about ethics, Neubert emphasizes that ethics is more about doing good than avoiding doing wrong. He often refers to Philippians 2:4, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (ESV)

Neubert wants Hankamer’s events to reflect that passage, looking at what should be done in addition to what should not be done.

“You should be making decisions that benefit others,” Neubert says. “You should be seeking ways for your business to have a positive impact on society.”

Dr. Matt Quade, assistant professor of management, teaches Leadership and Organizational Behavior and Principled Leadership. Sharing his Christian faith in the classroom is a way Quade showcases ethical leadership, servant leadership and leadership virtues such as hope, love, courage and prudence.

“My Christian faith is really the grounding mechanism in my ethics,” Quade says. “All my ethical views are rooted in my Christian identity. I think that is one of the benefits of Baylor. We really care about our students beyond just helping them get a job, but how they are going to be a well-rounded person who is a contributor to God’s kingdom and to their family and community.”

CHRISTIAN VALUES

“We reinforce ethics not only by hosting the competition but by judging it ethically,” Neubert says. The event showcases Baylor as a leader in business ethics, and participants hear from a guest speaker who speaks from a Christian perspective on ethics.

GIVE LIGHT TO ETHICS

The Ethics and Leadership Suite also houses the Paul J. Meyer Christian Leadership in Business Endowment, Christian Ethics and Leadership Scholarships, the Christian Management Scholars Network, and a variety of additional initiatives that promote ethics and Christian leadership by bringing together business leaders and students.

In order to expand the case competitions, visiting speakers and scholarships in the business school, additional external funding is necessary. The academic strategic plan, Illuminate, calls for growth in ethics and leadership initiatives at Baylor. The Give Light campaign supports Illuminate and the academic priorities of the schools and colleges.

Please consider joining the business school in providing greater opportunities for students to develop leadership ethics. If you or your company would like to learn more about partnering with the business school, please contact Trey_Hagins@baylor.edu.