**In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story**

**About the Documentary**

*In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* draws from footage shot when Jack Abramoff visited The University of Texas at Austin campus in spring 2012 to talk about his experiences and his life as well as corrupt lobbying in Washington, which he is now dedicated to reforming.


As a video case study, *In It To Win* can be used on its own, or as a supplement to topics taught in numerous disciplines, in order to stimulate discussion about ethical issues and lapses. The main objective of this film is to illustrate how well intentioned people can make serious ethical errors (and even commit crimes) if they are not careful.

Most obviously, this documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government, business, and economics. But beyond those areas, it is also appropriate for use in courses on journalism, film, policy, American studies, history, law, communications, and psychology. The film explores the ethics of documentary film-making, the responsibility of the individual to organizations and communities, the relationship between law and ethics, issues of power and privilege, and above all, the potential pitfalls any ambitious person faces when operating within a hyper-competitive environment.

The instructional resources in this series include a feature documentary, *In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* (25 minutes), and six short videos (approx. 5 minutes each) that concentrate on specific decision-making errors people tend to make, as illustrated by Jack Abramoff’s story.
Discussion Questions for In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story

1. What are the key points that this documentary raises?

2. What did Abramoff do that was unethical, even if legal? Why were these actions unethical?

3. The documentary focuses on Abramoff’s role as a lobbyist within a system that is, he argues, more corrupt than ever. To what degree do individuals have a responsibility to act ethically within a morally corrupt system?

4. The documentary raises the point that white-collar crime is generally considered far less problematic than hard crime. Do you agree? Why or why not? What are the long-term consequences of white-collar crimes for individuals, families, society?

5. Do you agree with the UT officials who decided to bring Abramoff to campus in order to speak to students and create this film? What ethical issues were involved in their decision-making process?

6. Compare Abramoff’s situation with the Lance Armstrong scandal. What similarities can you identify? What differences? What character traits do you think led each man to act illegally and unethically? Are their actions representative of ‘everything wrong’ (i.e. hunger for power, money, fame) with American society?

7. Do you think Abramoff’s success as a lobbyist supports the idea that politicians are corrupt or easily corruptible? Should we place blame on Abramoff and the politicians or the system in which they operate? If the system is fundamentally flawed, is it fair for individual lobbyists or politicians to pay the price?

8. In the film, Abramoff notes that he thought he was the ‘moral lobbyist’? Why does he think so and do you agree with him?

9. Abramoff still owes the government $44 million in restitution. Some argue that he is only speaking out against corruption to get past this debt and regain his prior fame and fortune. Others believe his claim that he is in a unique position to expose the corruption of the system. Do you believe Abramoff genuinely regrets his prior actions and is now working hard at improving how our government operates? Or do you think he is just ‘out for himself’? Does it matter whether he’s sincere if his actions lead to important reforms?

10. Do you think you could survive in today’s world if you promised yourself that you would always act honorably? Do you think such a life is possible?
The Jack Abramoff Short Videos Overview

The six short videos that supplement the documentary introduce the following behavioral ethics concepts:

**Framing** refers to the fact that people’s judgments, including their ethical judgments, are affected just by how a question is posed or viewed; for example, people prompted to think of an issue as an ethical issue will tend to make more ethical decisions that people prompted to think of that same issue as a “business” issue.

**Overconfidence Bias** is the tendency of people to be more confident than is objectively justified in their abilities and characteristics, including in their moral character and their ability to act ethically.

**Self-serving Bias** is the tendency people have to gather information, process information, and even remember information not in an objective way, but instead in a way that serves to support their pre-existing beliefs and their perceived self-interest.

**Role Morality** is the tendency many people have to use different moral standards as they play different “roles” in society-- for example, to take ethically questionable actions in their role as loyal employees at work to advance their company's profit goals that they would never take at home to put money in their own pocket.

**Rationalizations** are the excuses people give themselves for not living up to their own ethical standards.

**Moral Equilibrium** is the tendency people have to keep a running scoreboard in their heads that compares their self-image as ethical people to their actual behavior; people who realize they have not lived up to their own standards often seek opportunities to make up for those departures (“moral compensation”), while people who have done something good and are running a surplus in their ethical account sometimes grant themselves permission to not live up to their own standards (“moral license”).
Background on Jack Abramoff

During the Bush Administration, super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff was perhaps the most influential lobbyist in Washington D.C. His excesses led to his downfall and that of Congressmen with whom he was closely connected, including Tom Delay (R-Tex.) who left Washington in disgrace and Bob Ney (R-Ohio) who went to prison.

Because of the access that Abramoff had to members of the Bush administration and their allies, he was at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate. For more information about Jack Abramoff’s life and career, see his Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Abramoff.

Books about the scandal include Jack Abramoff’s own account, Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption from America’s Most Notorious Lobbyist (WND Books, 2011) and an exposé from journalist Peter H. Stone, Heist: Superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, His Republican Allies, and the Buying of Washington (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). Movies about the scandal include a documentary, Casino Jack and the United States of Money (Dir. Alex Gibney, 2010), and a dramatization starring Kevin Spacey, Casino Jack (Dir. George Hickenlooper, 2010).