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Behind The Scenes With 'Ethics Unwrapped' Director Cara Biasucci

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Director Cara Biasucci reflects on her experiences with the newly launched "Ethics Unwrapped" video series, a project of the McCombs Department of Business, Government & Society.



Cara Biasucci interviews Jack Abramoff for 'Ethics Unwrapped.' After more than a year of developing, filming, and editing "Ethics Unwrapped," a new video series from the McCombs Business, Government, & Society department, the countdown to the highly anticipated launch date is over. The series aims to provide a high-quality, entertaining educational resource for those who teach or want to learn about ethical decision-making and behavior.

*A team of filmmakers, editors, professors, and students has contributed to the project, according to director **Cara Biasucci**. But despite that impressive pool of talent, "Ethics Unwrapped" wasn't without its challenges. In this interview, Biasucci talks about her behind-the-scenes experience with the project, including the role McCombs students played in shaping the series, what it was like working with a convicted felon, and how leading the project has influenced her own ethics.*

Q: Why was it important to incorporate students' perspectives on ethics into the videos?

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A. If we don't know the sentiments of the people we are trying to teach—if we don't know what students are thinking about ethics and what they're feeling about the current state of affairs in the world today—then we're missing part of the picture. So including their voice in the video series is really an essential piece of the story that we're telling.

Q: Why did you choose to get convicted felon Jack Abramoff involved in the project?

A. When we were identifying topics for the video series, one of the things that came out of the research I did was that the presentations of white-collar criminals on campus have a significant impact on students—it's what they remember in their ethics education experience. So we thought it would be good to do a video that included a convicted felon, someone who had been convicted for a white-collar crime, and also offer it as a resource for students at smaller universities where they may not have the budget to bring in someone in person to speak.

Q: What was your experience working with Abramoff for the documentary?

A. In reading his book and learning about him, I recognized that I came from a completely different perspective than he did. We have pretty much opposite views politically, and so I wasn't sure what kind of commonality I would find when I sat down to interview with him. You have to establish some sort of rapport with your subject to get a good interview. So I was nervous about being able to relate to him. Plus the things that he had done, in my estimation, were completely unethical and a clear violation of what I think is good and right.

What surprised me was how forthright he was, how reflective he was about his own behavior and the things that he did, and I was pleased by how he accepted responsibility for his role in creating the mess he found himself in. But mostly I was struck by his desire to genuinely make a difference now, to really reach out to people and help them understand how corrupt our system is and how easy it is to fall into that, and the passion he brings to political reform.

Q: Which UT professors were involved in this project, and how did they lend their expertise to the various topics?

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A. My team and I collaborated very closely with the four professors who are on the advisory board for the "Ethics Unwrapped" video series—[Robert Prentice](#) [1], [Howard Prince](#) [2], [Minette Drumwright](#) [3], and [David Spence](#) [4]. Prentice, for example, brought expertise in the area of behavioral ethics. Drumwright, who comes from the College of Communications, really brought her expertise to bear as it relates to how people perceive others who have done things wrong, and how the media either encourages or perhaps distorts that perception.

Q: What kind of feedback did you get from the professors?

A. All of the professors gave feedback throughout the various stages of production, and sometimes there wasn't complete agreement among them. For example, there is a part of the documentary where we referenced that Abramoff may be doing all of this simply to support a better image of himself with the public. But after every event, students came up to him and wanted to have their picture taken with him. When I cut that into the documentary, the professors were somewhat uncomfortable with seeing that. They thought it made Abramoff look like a rock-star celebrity.

I compromised with the faculty, because I didn't want to make him look like a rock star, but at the same time I wanted to show the positive reaction students had to Abramoff—so I used images of him shaking hands instead of having the pictures taken. I still get at the fact that students are thanking him, but I took out some of the aspects that the faculty thought were leaving a wrong impression about his visit to campus.

Q: How has the process of putting this series together shaped your own views on ethics?

A. I certainly think about it a lot more now that I'm working on ethics, and in fact I scrutinize my own behavior more closely because I am becoming aware of all these concepts—especially the organizational pressures and psychological biases—that we all carry with us and are in operation pretty much unconsciously all the time. I give myself a lot less leeway to slack off because I feel that I should be modeling the content of the series. It's important for me to live those values, not just make films about them.

Filmmaking isn't always ethical. There are ways in which we can misuse the footage that we shoot, like cutting something to make it work for us, whether

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or not it was really in the spirit of what that person was saying or thinking or feeling. And while I have worked with integrity over the last 10 years, I certainly know that there are opportunities not to have integrity with my subject matter and with the people who give to the series. So I'm extra careful to make sure I'm ethical in my filmmaking.

Q: What do you hope this series will achieve in the classroom and what do you envision for its use by other professors around the country?

A. First of all, I hope that students learn from watching the videos. I think that the ideas and information that we are providing in the videos is very new material. There may be a paragraph in a whole ethics textbook dedicated to the concepts we are talking about. So without this video series, I don't know that students will really be exposed to the material that we've included in the series.

I also hope that the video series will make teaching ethics more attractive to professors. The series is designed to support the professors by including teaching notes and questions for discussion, and I hope the professors will go beyond their own comfort zones to reach out to their students with new material.

And I hope that it creates a new generation of leaders that act more ethically. If we can start building the consciousness and awareness in students at 18, 19, and 20 years old, then in 10 years we may have leaders that have a greater grounding in ethical action and a stronger commitment to act ethically.

The hope is that by engaging through entertainment, that the concepts and ideas will stick. If you can offer a story, something that engages and entertains, then a moment of insight that's funny but at the same time true is much more likely to stick than if you give it as text on paper.

*The first portion of the "Ethics Unwrapped" series, which includes over a dozen animated short videos and a 25-minute documentary on notorious lobbyist and convicted felon **Jack Abramoff**, is now available to view for free on the "Ethics Unwrapped" website ^[4]. Ethics Unwrapped is also on Twitter ^[5], Facebook ^[6], and LinkedIn ^[7].*