

ETHICS TO GO

McCOMBS' ONLINE *ETHICS UNWRAPPED* PROGRAM EMBRACED BY EDUCATORS WORLDWIDE

by Samantha Harris

FOUR YEARS AGO, a business professor and a filmmaker embarked on a hopeful experiment. Robert Prentice, chair of the Department of Business, Government and Society at McCombs hired film producer Cara Biasucci to create a first-of-its-kind business ethics education program. It would be free of charge, available online, and built on a foundation of web-based videos.

The impetus for this program was a \$500,000 anonymous donation to McCombs, with a mandate that the money be used to advance ethics education. The contribution came in the wake of business ethics scandals from Enron and WorldCom to the devastating misdeeds of Bernie Madoff and Jack Abramoff in which the business world seemed to be the stage where the most unthinkable of ethics dramas played out.

So, even though ethics is a subject traditionally taught in philosophy or religion departments, the time seemed right to reach a wider audience of students with the principles of ethical decision-making.

Biasucci was an ideal person to lead the program. She is a documentary filmmaker and teacher, who worked previously as a media production instructor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. With an undergraduate degree in philosophy from Bowdoin College and an M.F.A. in film and media production (UT '99), she brought exactly the kind of background to the task that Prentice wanted. She says she was captivated by Prentice's straightforward, entrepreneurial approach to disseminating guidance about practical morality to a mass audience.

"It's unique for a business school to be spearheading this effort," says Biasucci, "because traditional business education has focused students on the bottom line, often causing the ethical dimensions of business decisions to be overlooked."

At the time of the donation there were few ethics videos available, and they were generally of poor quality, very expensive, or both, she says. So, with the goal of successfully reaching the generation that grew up on YouTube, Biasucci produced her first series of short, high-quality, easily digestible ethics videos and launched the *Ethics Unwrapped* website in fall 2012.

Since then, Biasucci has produced 48 videos and related teaching



ABOVE: The *Ethics Unwrapped* video series features students discussing how ethics concepts play out in their own lives.

tools. They have garnered numerous awards and been increasingly adopted into the curricula of institutions across the world. Top users of the videos and curriculum materials outside UT Austin now include New York University, Indiana University, Pennsylvania State University, Michigan State University, and the University of South Wales in Australia.

Ethics Unwrapped viewership has more than doubled each year with nearly 300,000 YouTube views to date. The majority of the videos range from five to 10 minutes in length, featuring a blend of animation, expert content, and student commentary to explain how ethics concepts are manifested in their own life experiences.



Each video presents a specific concept of behavioral ethics ranging from role morality, conformity bias, and ethical fading to incrementalism, loss aversion, moral equilibrium, and overconfidence bias. One series includes a case study on former lobbyist and convicted felon Abramoff, and another, called *Giving Voice to Values*, is based on a pioneering curriculum by Mary Gentile, a leading research scholar in management education and leadership development.

Schools and professors across the UT campus are working with Biasucci to introduce *Ethics Unwrapped* materials into their curricula. The

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Colleges of Liberal Arts, Fine Arts, Education, Undergraduate Studies, and Communication at UT all utilize *Ethics Unwrapped* videos and teaching tools.

Associate Professor Minette Drumwright from the College of Communication ties *Ethics Unwrapped* videos to current events, uses them in both her 300- and 30-person classes. She assigns videos for viewing outside the classroom and then discusses the concepts during the next class or uses the beginning of a video as a discussion starter.

“From a professor’s perspective, *Ethics Unwrapped* makes it feasible for those of us outside an ethics discipline to explain complex ethics concepts,” says Drumwright. “People usually think of ethics as boring and dry, but these videos make it interesting and applicable to people’s daily lives.”

TOOLS TO TACKLE EVERYDAY SITUATIONS

THE TRADITIONAL MODEL for teaching ethics is rooted in the belief that human beings are rational, says Biasucci. But research has shown we’re anything but. Rather, we often have an instinctive or emotional reaction, then we rationalize our decision to make it fit the circumstance.

“Ethics Unwrapped aims to make people aware of their own psychological biases and prevalent social and organizational pressures and equip them with the tools they need to tackle everyday situations — whether that’s an overbearing boss, a make-or-break exam, or an aggressive sales target — and respond ethically,” says Biasucci.

According to Prentice, who serves as the faculty director of *Ethics Unwrapped*, “research shows that most of us want to be good people and think of ourselves as good people, often not realizing that like everyone else, we frequently depart from our own moral standards.” Absent education, Prentice says, “most people are not prepared to cope with the social and organizational pressures and

cognitive biases that make it difficult for even the most well-intentioned people to always do the right thing.”

So far, it’s been successful: 92 percent of students surveyed find the videos helpful in understanding complex ethics concepts. “That is a pretty powerful statement to me,” says Biasucci. But she isn’t content to stop there. Next year, she plans to add a robust ethics glossary to the program’s website and develop more resources for instructors to help them integrate ethics directly into their

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specific courses.

And because the program operates on a shoestring budget, Biasucci is always looking for the next round of funding. “We have a long list of topics we would like to cover, and I would love to be able to do all of what we’ve envisioned — and more.”

To learn how you can support Ethics Unwrapped visit ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu. For information about serving on the Ethics Council, contact dianne.bangle@mcombs.utexas.edu.

BELOW: Filmmaker Cara Biasucci has produced 48 *Ethics Unwrapped* videos for McCombs since she started four years ago. The series has garnered numerous awards and been increasingly adopted into the curricula of universities and companies throughout the world since its introduction.

