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The faculty of the School of Business at George Washington University (GWU) have long been proponents of a robust ethics component to their program curricula. Dr. Doug Guthrie, dean of the George Washington School of Business (GWSB) for the past year, says that his predecessor Susan Phillips took a strong lead on this issue, and that he intends to see that ethics and corporate social responsibility continue to be strengths of the curricula at the GWSB. One of the primary vehicles available at the school to aid in this endeavor is the Institute for Corporate Responsibility (ICR).

The idea for the ICR grew out of a 2004 gift to the GWSB from A. James Clark, chairman of Clark Enterprises, to establish the Lindner-Gambal Professorship in Business Ethics in honor of two GWSB alumni, Colonial Parking co-founder Sergius Gambal and his longtime business partner Thaddeus Lindner. Then-Dean Phillips indicated at the time that filling this professorship could help provide the impetus for launching "a research center focused on business and ethics."1

According to Dean Guthrie, the recruitment of Dr. Timothy Fort to fill the position did just that, and in October 2006, the Institute for Corporate Responsibility officially received its charter from the university.2 Dr. Fort is now the executive director of the ICR, and heads its Business and Peace Program, one of the four primary research areas at the Institute. The others include Environmental Sustainability, Corporate Governance, and Global Stakeholder Strategies.3

The purpose of the ICR is threefold. As a research institute of the GWSB, it is focused on the development and dissemination of intellectual contributions to the field of ethical leadership, responsible management and sustainable business practices. In addition, the Institute has a strong focus on outreach at local, national, and international levels. Aided by the prominence of its location in Washington, D.C., the ICR is able to reach out and form linkages between the academic, business, government, and NGO sectors to enhance both the scope and impact of its research output. Finally, the Institute has been instrumental in the GWSB’s ongoing quest to ensure that content pertaining to ethics and corporate responsibility is integrated throughout its program curricula.

Knowledge Creation

The ICR has successfully attracted a strong base of faculty in the fields of ethics and corporate social responsibility (CSR). Including Dr. Fort and the heads of the other three program areas, 15 GWU faculty are currently associated with the Institute. Most are from the GWSB, but other academic units at the university are also represented, including the Elliott School of International Affairs, the Trachtenberg School of Public Administration and Public Policy, the School of Engineering and Applied Science, and the Departments of Economics and Philosophy.4 Faculty associate with the ICR based on self-selection and research interests.
In addition to faculty, doctoral students interested in ethics and CSR are heavily involved in the ICR, according to Dr. Fort. He notes that the faculty of the Institute “work with doctoral students a great deal. We involve them in all the areas... helping with faculty research, sponsoring their own research, having them as researchers for our partnerships with the other sectors, giving them the opportunity to present at conferences, many of which turn into special issues, academic papers, or books. It’s a great opportunity for them and it is a great resource for us as well.”

The research output of the ICR is indeed prodigious. Various books, papers, journal articles, and other intellectual contributions of the faculty and doctoral students associated with the Institute have made a demonstrable impact on the field of business ethics and sustainability. For example, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency selected a paper by Dr. Jorge Rivera, an assistant professor of strategic management and public policy associated with the ICR, as one of the top ten examples of excellent research available on compliance and environmental behavior literature in 2007. As a result of such research, the support of the Institute’s research activities has grown more varied. Dean Guthrie says that in the early days, approximately two thirds of the ICR’s funding came from the GWSB Dean’s Office and one third from the university’s Vice President for Research. Now, however, enough of the Institute’s research is funded by external grants from corporations and other entities that only one third comes from the GWSB.

The point of the ICR, however, is not simply to perform and disseminate research on corporate social responsibility and related issues, Dr. Fort maintains. While he acknowledges that the ICR is a research institute at its core, he notes that “being in Washington, that takes on a particular meaning. GW's Dean of the Elliott School of International Affairs likes to make the analogy that schools around the country do a great job building bridges between their schools and public policy impact, but at GW, we don't build ANY bridges. Instead, we use the sidewalk.”

Location and Outreach

The ICR faculty work tirelessly to create synergies between academe and business leaders, policy makers, NGOs and other third sector organizations, says Dean Guthrie, and the results are nothing short of vital to the impact of the Institute and its work. Dr. Fort, himself well known in government circles, says that one of the greatest advantages of the Institute’s location is being in close proximity to so many organizational headquarters upon which the faculty of the ICR can draw for knowledge, such as the Center for International Private Enterprise, the World Bank, various U.S. government agencies, etc. It also gives the GWSB and the Institute the ability to attract participants from various sectors for
workshops, conferences, and other events more easily. “[E]veryone is willing to come to Washington for an event,” notes Dr. Fort. “It has terrific convening power.”

He further says of the ICR, “[W]e like to take advantage of that to host events, not just to disseminate information, but to bring together people from all sectors - business, government, NGO, academia - to look at issues. Inevitably new insights arise out of this. Obviously, this means that creating academic-business-government-NGO partnerships is important to our work.” He cites as a prime example of cross-sector partnership creation the Task Force on Business and Peace that the ICR co-convenes with the Center for Sustainable Economies at the U.S. Institute of Peace.

Since its beginning in the summer of 2010, the Task Force has been charged to develop clear and effective strategies that align business activity in fragile/conflict-affected regions with sustained efforts to promote lasting peace. The Task Force has conducted a number of activities in pursuit of that goal, including a three-session eSeminar on Business and Peace in March 2011, which was attended online by over 1,500 people from 93 countries around the world. Discussions ranged from understanding the nexus of business and peace-building, to how to leverage the power of business to come up with innovative solutions to the challenges presented by conflict-affected areas.

“[O]ur Task Force has retired four star generals, former CEOs of major companies, academic leaders, and NGO leaders as members,” Dr. Fort says. “And just that mix of people - most of whom have not been in a room with all these different kinds of people - produces a rare dynamic and new insights. That’s core to research and it’s hard to replicate anywhere other than a place like Washington.”

Creating a Robust Ethics & Sustainability Curriculum

The ICR and its work have also been instrumental in promoting the development of ethics and CSR content for the programs at the GWSB. Dean Guthrie says that the school underwent a period of major curricular reform in 2008, surrounding the development and launch of GWSB’s full-time Global MBA program. The program includes a first-term core course developed by Dr. Fort and his colleague Dr. Mark Stark, head of the Environmental Sustainability research program at the ICR, and taught by Dr. Fort.

The content of the course, entitled Business Responsibility and Sustainability, includes the research of both professors and specifically incorporates the ICR’s mission of developing and disseminating scholarship pertaining to corporate responsibility. The objectives of the course include learning and understanding the various perspectives necessary to ethical decision-making, and applying the skills required to address issues of business sustainability. Dr. Fort sees particular success in one unique means by which this is accomplished in this, and in the other core courses in the MBA curriculum as well.
He works with the faculty who teach the core courses to create ethics video commentaries on cases or issues selected by those faculty. “By having ethics videos in all the classes,” says Dr. Fort, “we keep the issue of ethics alive in every course and tie decision-making on ethics back to the open-module so students have a consistent message of how to approach ethics issues, no matter where those issues arise.”

In addition to the required course content, the ICR has developed other ways by which GWSB MBA students can gain further experience with ethics and sustainability-related activities. In concert with the U.S. State Department’s Economic Empowerment in Strategic Regions (EESR) Program, the Institute has created the Business Development in Conflict Zones Program. In this program, MBA students gain the opportunity to work with ICR faculty and individual entrepreneurs from conflict-affected nations, helping them develop their business ideas in such a way as to aid in the economic recovery of such regions, while meeting global standards of excellent business practices and social responsibility.

The Institute has also incubated a certificate program in responsible management to be offered in tandem with the GWSB’s MBA programs, based on the UN Global Compact’s six Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME). Requirements for earning the PRME Certificate in Responsible Management include participation in a group blog about contemporary issues of corporate responsibility, community service and service learning volunteer hours outside the classroom, a five-page reflective essay, and six elective credit hours of coursework in the areas of business ethics and CSR, all of which are overseen by a faculty member. There is no set list of electives that may be chosen, so long as the student is able to pick out and blog about the relevant concepts. Dr. Fort says that though the program is young yet, he expects that “this year… roughly 10% of second year students will pursue this and probably that many, maybe a few more, of first year students will do so.”

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End Notes

17 Fort, Timothy. (2011) Personal communication, August 8, 2011.