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The BELIEF Program at Northern Illinois University

“What would Mom think?” is a common question that individuals ask themselves when caught in an ethical dilemma, but also a question, or “test,” that one college of business teaches its students to consider in their decision making process. The “Mom test,” is just one of the many ways the Building Ethical Leaders Using Integrated Ethics Framework (BELIEF) Program at the Northern Illinois University (NIU) College of Business (COB) hopes will instill an ethical mentality in its students.

In 2004, NIU’s College of Business identified the need for faculty to have open and honest discussions primarily with its undergraduate students in regards to ethics. Subsequently, the school charged an Ethics Task Force (ETF) with the mission to integrate ethics college-wide, ensuring that the next generation of managers have a solid ethical foundation. The ETF (currently named the Faculty for Ethics Committee) initially comprised a cross-functional team of faculty and staff from departments across the COB. Dr. Pamela A. Smith, KPMG Professor of Accountancy and NIU Board of Trustees Professor, is one of the developers of the BELIEF initiative and describes the creation of the ETF as resulting from forces within and outside the program. Business leaders encouraged the college, “to treat ethics as a business fundamental rather than discussing it in an abstract philosophical manner,”¹ and the ETF responded.

Over the years, BELIEF has evolved from an “initiative” to now being considered a sustained program within the COB, which called for the strong leadership and support of BELIEF Program Director, Dr. William McCoy. Early activities focused on observing the best practices of other institutions, as well as gathering feedback from students and faculty concerning the challenges they faced with integrating ethics into the curriculum. Students voiced frustration with the abstract nature of philosophical ethics courses, favoring a method for learning how to apply the process of ethical reasoning to business situations. Integrating this initiative with faculty members’ existing courses, according to Smith, was and remains one of the biggest and most important challenges with BELIEF. The ETF recognized that most faculty members felt uncomfortable or unqualified to teach stand-alone business ethics courses. A 2004 survey conducted by the ETF indicated that 70% of faculty had some component of ethics in their course syllabus; however they were struggling with how to integrate ethics-related issues. The feedback led the ETF to conclude that a stand-alone course within the COB would, in theory, make ethics seem important but that it would be more difficult to demonstrate a significant link between ethics and its application to the business disciplines of accounting, finance, information systems, management, marketing, and operations management.²

In 2006, the BELIEF Program was fully launched. The program incorporated two core learning objectives – to increase awareness of ethical issues and strengthen the students’ decision-making – and seven supporting elements:
1. Common framework and handbook
2. Faculty development workshops
3. Corporate sponsors
4. Student organization
5. BELIEF Day
6. Assessment
7. Program Director

The 30 page *NIU College of Business Ethics Handbook: Building Ethical Leaders* and the *Decision Card* represent the most pragmatic tools the students receive within the program. Both are distributed to students during their first semester, junior-level business core course and are partially available electronically on the COB website. This “dream book,” Smith recalls, was created by the task force after finding it was unable to identify an existing ethics book that was adequately transferable to the program’s objectives. As a way to emphasize the importance of this tool, students are required to pass an online test covering its contents before they are permitted to register for subsequent courses. The purpose of the *Handbook* lies more in helping students recognize ethical dilemmas, make decisions, and take action, rather than teaching students how to be ethical; it serves as a “decision making guide to help evaluate alternative courses of action.” This guide was developed using various sources and “common sense,” and it is “intended to be a mechanism to thoroughly think through an issue and evaluate the consequences of an action.” The *Handbook* is unique in that it covers topics that students are likely to face in business, showing real cases where companies have exhibited unethical behavior and the consequences. It also aims to function as a tool in promoting good conduct in everyday life, outside the realm of business.

The *Decision Card* is a credit card sized replication of the decision model presented within the *Handbook* that students can carry with them. The card also lists 12 different “tests,” each providing a question(s) for the decision-maker to apply to when considering alternative actions. For example, the reversibility or “Golden Rule” test asks the decision-maker to consider the questions: “Would I still think this option is good if I were one of those adversely affected by it?” and “How would I want to be treated?”

**Continuing Development and Support**

Faculty, student, and course development and support are the major drivers of all BELIEF activities. As mentioned earlier, faculty play an important role in making the BELIEF Program systematic throughout the college. While most faculty agreed with the importance of integrating ethics into the curriculum, the need for more support was clear. Workshops focus on a myriad of topics, including classroom delivery, how to handle academic misconduct, using the BELIEF framework in class, as well as panel discussions.
Obtaining corporate feedback and perspectives are routinely arranged for faculty. The workshops are annual meetings with growing attendance by faculty. New faculty are also introduced to BELIEF during the faculty orientation. The Faculty for Ethics Committee and Program Director meet every other week to discuss ongoing issues related to the BELIEF program.

In addition to the Handbook, Decision Card, and course content, various activities through the BELIEF Program heighten awareness among students about ethics in business. For example, in every fall semester a day is designated as BELIEF Day with the purpose of promoting discussions about dealing with ethical dilemmas in all classes. During the week of BELIEF Day, every faculty member is encouraged to discuss ethics as it relates to their discipline, and guest speakers (which are representatives from the corporate sector) are invited to speak on ethics as it relates to a variety of disciplines.

The student organization, Leaders in Ethics and Academic Discipline (LEAD), was established in fall of 2009 and represents the student face of the program. The organization’s goal is to inform and educate students’ peers on ethical dilemmas that can occur in business, and to encourage them to act as ethical leaders. Students are invited annually to apply and interview for a position within the organization. As LEAD members, they provide an important link between student education, faculty instruction, and corporate support. LEAD members make presentations about BELIEF to student organizations, contribute to Faculty for Ethics Committee discussions, attend BELIEF Advisory Board meetings, and represent NIU annually at the University of Arizona National Ethics Case Competition. Dr. McCoy notes that the University’s recent Internal Case Competition was created largely due to the enthusiasm that the students expressed after participating in the case competitions in Arizona. Both McCoy and Smith speak fondly and proudly of the current group of ten junior and senior level students in LEAD who demonstrate leadership and excel academically, with 60%-70% on the Academic Dean’s List. Smith also points out that LEAD’s alumni members continue to be involved, with one still attending Advisory Board Meetings and others involved in current LEAD activities.

Companies such as Target, Caterpillar, and Microsoft make up the list of Corporate Partners of the BELIEF Program, which are carefully screened and selected on the basis of how that organization handles ethical dilemmas and the types of culture and values that govern its organizational behavior. They play a major role in funding the program, supporting the production of the Ethics Handbook, creating opportunities for special events and activities including faculty development and guest lectures on business ethics topics, and partially funding a BELIEF Director to champion the initiative. This funding allows the program to progress on its goal of becoming self-funded by 2014, which McCoy notes is halfway there. Each corporate sponsorship commitment lasts for three years with the possibility of renewal. However, sponsorship is more than funding: corporate representatives are part of the BELIEF Advisory Board, which played an active part in the development of the BELIEF vision statement, mission,
and strategic plan. To assure communication between NIU and its corporate partners, sponsoring organizations are asked to designate a liaison to the Advisory Board. Corporate representatives are an invaluable resource who participate in faculty workshops and BELIEF Day, assist students with preparation for the national ethics case competition, and visit the campus 5-6 times in an academic year.

Assessment

Prior to implementation of BELIEF, the task force constructed a series of discipline specific vignettes of ethical dilemmas that are used to assess the students’ awareness of the issues as well as their ability to identify alternatives and identify who is impacted by the decision. Five of these dilemmas reflect ethical issues specific to a business discipline, with the remaining two addressing general business and academic integrity-based ethical dilemmas. A rubric is used to rate the degree of ethical awareness in the student responses using a three point scale. A baseline pre-test of about 1,000 students the semester before BELIEF started was completed and is compared with the post-BELIEF assessment to determine if there is a change in students’ ethical awareness decision making. Preliminary analysis of data suggested that BELIEF has had a positive impact on students’ ethical awareness and decision-making skills, and a new baseline will be developed for Fall 2011.

Future Objectives

BELIEF’s outlook on the future remains ambitious with the goal of creating more awareness among students within the college and university, and extending that awareness to other institutions as well. McCoy recalls visiting a sophomore class at the COB to determine the second-year students’ familiarity with BELIEF, which as expected was low. However, he predicts that in a year that will not be the case due to the amount of visibility BELIEF is gaining within the broader university community. Plans include increasing Corporate Partners from 7 to 10, identifying a roadmap for the establishment of an Ethics Center, expanding LEAD activities, and planning involvement in more outreach activities. One notable project that McCoy points out is the work completed by the Experiential Learning Center (ELC) to create an electronic repository of ethics information for faculty and students. The ELC team created this long lasting repository over the course of the NIU Spring 2011 semester with the objectives of (1) providing BELIEF with the resources to continue increasing awareness of the program and (2) providing faculty with a useful tool to streamline ethics education into their courses.

The BELIEF Program has plans to extend its reach to NIU’s campuses across the state, as well as to guide the evolution of CSR and ethics courses in its MBA programs. With such student, faculty, and sponsor enthusiasm and their dedication to ingraining ethics throughout curricula, the BELIEF Program is
bound to receive recognition as an exemplary business school initiative on a topic that has become so vital in the business world.

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End Notes