Meeting the Corporate Sponsors: Bob Laux of Microsoft

For this semester’s corporate perspective, I had the pleasure of speaking with Bob Laux, the BELIEF corporate sponsor representative for Microsoft. In 1983 he got a B.S. in Accounting from Michigan State and then went on to get an MBA in Finance from the University of Houston in 1986. He felt students never got exposed to ethical issues as much as they should have during his education. That is a big reason why he has become such an advocate of the BELIEF program today. His first real exposure to ethics wasn’t until he sat for the CMA (Certified Management Accountant) program. The IMA (Institute of Management Accountants) was big on ethics and the IMA Statement of Ethical Professional Practice has had a big impact on him.

He has been the representative for Microsoft ever since NIU Accountancy professor, and former Lead Advisor, Pam Smith reached out to him and Microsoft asking if they would like to become a corporate sponsor. According to Bob, sponsoring the NIU BELIEF program was a natural for Microsoft; BELIEF is NIU College of Business’ integration of ethics into its curriculum. LEAD, a component, is the student voice for ethics.

BELIEF Itinerary
The Annual NIU Ethics Case Competition (Friday, February 20, 2015) needs judges with business backgrounds. We encourage our alumni, faculty, and other business professionals to contact Dr. William McCoy (wmccoy@niu.edu) for more information.

Annual NIU/John Deere Video Ethics Contest will occur from March 1-March 29, 2015. All students, regardless of major, are invited to participate. Check cob.niu.edu/belief for more details in the month of February.

Meeting the Corporate Sponsors: Bob Laux of Microsoft

Faculty For Ethics Spotlight: Beth Towell

Overseeing the College of Business isn’t easy, but Dr. Beth Towell has been able to handle it for the past five years as the Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Achievement. She has offered many avenues of experience in different ethical dilemmas to the NIU College of Business students. Dr. Towell started off her career as a professional sales woman for six years prior to coming into academia. She began her academic career as a professor teaching software at another university. During her career she received her Ph.D in Management Information Systems.

Dr. Towell has helped sustain and grow the BELIEF Program during her tenure here at NIU. She has been an integral part of making sure ethics is at the forefront of learning here in the College of Business.

I had a chance to sit down and personally meet Dr. Towell to ask her some questions.

What do you believe BELIEF has accomplished well?

Belief Week is the most sustained activity we have for the Belief Program. The way the week
BELIEF Week Breakdown

By Jareshiah Quarles

Over the last couple of years, as soon as the weather gets a little cooler and the days become a little shorter, LEAD turns up the heat and brightens your days with discussions about ethics. This year was no different with a laundry list of business professionals coming back to give you their real world experiences on ethical dilemmas that they have faced throughout their careers.

This year felt kind of different though. I remember last year's buzz around BELIEF Week wasn't as big; it was kind of a murmur. This year I felt the excitement around Barsema Hall; whether it was the word scramble competition or the golfing by the pond experience—I felt people were actually paying attention to ethics throughout the week.

Then came the crème de la crème—what everyone had been anticipating—the keynote speaker on Wednesday. This year's speaker was the President of Nicor Gas and Senior Vice-President of AGL Resources—Beth Reese, and she was just what the doctor ordered. She was charismatic, captivating, and humorous all at the same time. She engaged the crowd and made sure we all felt involved in the conversation. She spoke on relevant topics and gave us words of encouragement. I feel she did a wonderful job in captivating ethical awareness; especially during the Q and A session.

This year's session was also different because it was staged as a conversational panel. To further enhance Beth’s presentation, Paul Shlanta (Executive Vice-President, General Counsel and Chief Ethics and Compliance Officer for AGL) joined Beth onstage to help answer questions. The moderator of the session was our very own Becky Meggesin, Vice-President of Human Resources for AGL Resources and BELIEF Corporate Advisory Board Member. Many thanks go to Altgeld Hall for providing the furniture that lent itself to a relaxed atmosphere. Many thanks also to Nicor Gas for providing both a truck for showcasing and the reception at the end of the keynote session.

The best part of BELIEF Week went beautifully and with that it ended another activity in a year full of promoting ethics in the College of Business. But don’t worry folks; we will be back the same time next year when things get a little cooler and your days a little shorter.
Generally, I do not get much of an opportunity to talk to the alumni of LEAD; especially those that founded the student organization. Many of the founders were transitioning out of the organization when I arrived in 2010, but I firmly understood their prominent and lasting role in the development of the LEAD organization.

You can imagine my delight when I was able to connect with Amber Blatt, who is not only one of the founders of the LEAD organization, but also one of the first competitors to represent NIU at the Eller International Ethics Case Competition in Tucson, Arizona. I was especially pleased to talk to Amber because of the very different path she chose to pursue after graduation, of which I will talk about a little later in this article.

Amber graduated in 2010 with a degree in Accountancy. Her first position as a financial analyst for Combined Insurance served her well in providing hands-on experience in the concepts taught by NIU. Her experience was strengthened when her supervisor unexpectedly took ill over a long period of time and many of his duties were assigned to her. Amber utilized this experience as an opportunity to learn as much as possible and to exercise the full range of knowledge she possessed.

With a vision of her personal and professional development, Amber left after a year of employment to do what most persons would not dream of doing—a year of Peace Corp work in the country of Lesotho (a small country landlocked within the country of South Africa). With no electricity, no running water, and no bathrooms, Amber lived a simple life in a mud hut just like everyone else. She described her experience as being “like a dream” with a “dynamic impact” on her life. When asked what she learned from this experience, she indicated gratitude and patience. The gratitude was a result of being around a population that lived with such meager possessions, yet appreciated the simple things of life so much. The patience was a result of learning how to deal with a slower pace of life where family, friends, and saving face was more important than the hustle and bustle of deadlines and professional expectations.

It was interesting to hear Amber reflect on how her Accountancy degree helped her successfully work in a Tourist Center in Lesotho, where she was able to not only develop income statements and inven-
Alumni Giving Challenge

By Mike Silver

Over the summer, something unexpected happened that would be of great benefit to LEAD. The Director of LEAD, Dr. Bill McCoy, issued a challenge to LEAD alumni to give back. He contacted all the LEAD alumni and issued them the challenge to donate the annual budget for the present LEAD group; in return he pledged to match up to $1,000 of these donations. The alumni really took the challenge to heart and with the help of corporate donation matches, they were able to come up with $925. Dr. McCoy gave a gift of $1,000 anyway, and $1,925 was raised for LEAD’s budget, which gives a lot more leeway and opportunities to create events that will help increase the ethical awareness of students on campus. A special thanks to those who donated: Curtis Batterton, Nick De Jong, Jill & Ross Hayes, Sam Kunde, Wasil Pahuchy, and Hunter Smith.

As a member of LEAD, I was incredibly surprised and grateful when I heard about what Dr. McCoy had done. I was equally as shocked when I heard that our alumni rose to that challenge. Dr. McCoy said his intention for issuing the challenge was to ignite a spark to get the alumni more involved. They have certainly been ignited and have now given us the opportunity to do more than ever before thanks to their donations. Typically, when we get together to brainstorm potential ideas of events and activities to create, there are a lot of financial limitations that can hinder some of the things we would like to do. Having this new source of funding has allowed us to expand upon the things that we already do as well the possibility of adding an additional event or two that we have brainstormed for next semester.

This event has not only given us the benefit of funding, but it seems Dr. McCoy was able to ignite us to stay in touch with our alumni base as well. LEAD really wants to find more ways to keep the alumni close and involved moving forward as a result. We believe they are a valuable resource that could certainly continue to help push the group forward towards greater success. Given they were once in our shoes, they certainly have a lot of common goals and we believe they are more than willing to assist us in reaching those goals.

One way we are considering to achieve this is by having a member of LEAD have the responsibility of communicating with our alumni. This way we can keep people more up-to-date on what we are doing and inform them of any potential opportunities where we may need their assistance. We are also considering inviting them out once a semester to assist us in preparation for some of our larger events, such as the Collegiate Ethics Case Competition, and then eating a meal to better get to know one another afterwards.

There are a lot of things that can be done to help keep people involved once they graduate from NIU, and the Alumni Giving Challenge has certainly sparked LEAD’s interest and attention in ensuring it happens. As for me, I know I personally would like to stay connected once I graduate. Dr. McCoy and I jokingly agreed that there will always be something in the future that will pull me back to the group; it’s something I will be a part of forever.
Eller Collegiate Ethics Case Competition

By: Mike Silver & Eddy Chan

After a year of absence, LEAD returned to participate in the Collegiate Ethics Case Competition. This competition is an international competition, hosted by the University of Arizona’s Eller School of Management, and is designed to test a variety of skills including ethical reasoning and awareness. This year, Dan Moore and Eddy Chan were the competitors representing LEAD. They were also accompanied by Matt McLaughlin, who joined them as an observer in preparation for his participation next year.

A total of 28 college teams gathered to participate in the event this year, meaning competition to be at the top was going to be incredibly fierce. The groups were given three weeks prior to the event to put together a presentation based on the case. Dan and Eddy put in a lot of time and dedication during these three weeks, on top of their respective coursework, to make sure they were in the best position to succeed. Dan and Eddy didn’t manage to place in the top four like they were hoping, but they certainly gained a lot of invaluable personal experience along the way. At the end of the day, that’s what the competition is all about. Allowing for the growth and development of upcoming young professionals is invaluable.

On top of personal experience, they also learned some great tips for succeeding moving forward. The most important lesson was that they needed to commit a tremendous amount of prep time to do well, and that will require personal sacrifices during the first two weeks of prep. One of the great things we have to look forward to is the fact that Matt was able to get a ton of first-hand experience on what is needed to succeed for next year. We currently haven’t confirmed who will be going with him, but there is a chance that Dan will participate again if he believes his schedule will allow him to put in the level of commitment to succeed. There were a variety of small things that the group believes additional assistance will benefit for next time. One thing in particular was that the team struggled with designing the PowerPoint since Dan and Eddy were not very PowerPoint-savvy. Constructing the PowerPoint took a lot more time and energy during their two weeks of prep than they would have liked. In the future, utilizing help from outsiders for small tasks like this will definitely be beneficial to success, whether it be from LEAD, faculty, sponsors, alumni, or just anyone willing to lend a hand. It isn’t always black and white in regards to what the competitors may need help with; but we all agreed that having the assistance of many people throughout this experience is incredibly beneficial.

Additional details about the competition, as well as the four winning videos, are available on the Eller website: ethics.eller.arizona.edu/competition/

Bob’s current position is the Treasury Controller at Microsoft. His role is to manage a staff of approximately 20 professionals that account for a variety of Microsoft’s financial statements. This includes their massive $100 billion Treasury portfolio, their stock-based compensation, and their acquisitions & divestitures. Being heavily involved in Microsoft’s external financial reporting, Bob realizes the ethical impact his decisions may have. He believes that “It is critical that we [Bob and his staff] are always aware of the ethical implications of accounting for transactions correctly and in the spirit of the accounting rules. Given Wall Street’s focus on quarterly earnings, there is always pressure to cast the company in a positive light. However, the constant reminder that we have a fiduciary duty to be aware of the ethical implications of accounting for transactions correctly and in the spirit of the accounting rules helps us manage this pressure.” I believe this is great advice, as it shows how just simply being aware of the implications your decisions may have can greatly help with managing the pressures.

Moving forward he sees that the BELIEF program will only grow more and more important; as business ethics is a critical item in maintaining a company’s long-term sustainability. He believes other universities will continue to learn from and copy strategies from the NIU BELIEF program for this very reason. With that he leaves us all with some great advice: “Think long-term when making day-to-day decisions; what could happen a year from now/five years from now if one makes an unethical decision.”
UBUS 101 “Business and Society” students at Diversity Conference in Chicago at North Park University.

Faces of BELIEF

The BELIEF Leadership Team: Building A Strong Ethical Foundation.
BELIEF Mission

To build ethical leaders through the integration of program development, faculty support, business community involvement and learner engagement. Fulfilling this mission equips the learner with a lasting set of practical tools to apply ethical values in business practices.
Thank you to our corporate sponsors

AT&T  
Caterpillar  
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Microsoft

The National Bank & Trust Company of Sycamore

NICOR Gas/AGL Resources Company  
Northwestern Mutual Financial Network  
Road Ranger USA

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is structured, we are able to bring back corporate sponsors and alumni and let them do the teaching. We always try to get good keynote speakers that will captivate the students.

What do you have in vision for BELIEF in the future?

I would like to see a certificate or minor in the College of Business that focuses on ethics. Although there is already a certificate, I would like it to be more prominent or accessible throughout the College of Business. I would like a professor who has done research on it to teach it.

How do you tackle ethical dilemmas?

The best way to tackle them is by discussion. Through discussion, you are able to perceive the different angles of how people think. Usually our conscience tells us if we are right or not. Recently in the Passport Program, Short and Sweets [a special discussion series on business topics] gave us a structured setting where people could voice their opinion and get a well-rounded view of everyone's opinions.

Blatt

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story methods, but to teach others how to maintain what she developed. A trip of this nature surely changes one in many ways, and Amber was no different. She shared that before the trip she was a bit shy, less confident, and reluctant to take on duties outside of her comfort zone. After the experience in Lesotho, Amber reflected on her newfound gregariousness, her increased confidence, and her willingness to take on more things that were originally outside of her shell.

When Amber returned home, she worked for a while at CMT Asset Management, but is now looking at the opportunity to return to school for a Masters Degree in Social Work. When asked about the influence of LEAD during her time at NIU, she reflected on the professionalism she learned by participating in the Eller International Ethics Competition and the positive influence of Dr. Pam Smith. Amber has continued to connect with several BELIEF corporate board members, including David Templin of Caterpillar. Amber offered three pieces of advice for present LEAD members:

1. If you think you have the answer, you don't.
2. Find balance between perspectives.
3. Take all the opportunities that you can.

I left the interview feeling a bit awestruck by Amber's experiences. Thank you, Amber, for being a shining example of why NIU and BELIEF are so important to business students!