

Ethics for the Global Enterprise: Creating a Course Across Colleges

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Abstract

A critical aspect of engineering ethics is the tenet that “engineers shall hold paramount the health, safety, and welfare of the public.” As enterprises increasingly operate 24 hour a day around the world, engineers and business professionals encounter interpretations of business and employee relations including health, safety, and welfare that may differ from those which with they are familiar. Much as in economic analysis of outsourcing, one finds varying perspectives on what to do.

One well-known model is the set of principles developed by the Reverend Leon Sullivan. These principles, now known as the Global Sullivan Principles, were developed in 1977 while Sullivan was a member of the board of directors of General Motors. They address issues such as worker treatment, environmental concerns, fair competition, and supplier relations. Such issues are, by their nature, interdisciplinary and require the knowledge and skills of engineers, managers, accountants, systems analysts, and others.

Another increasingly popular approach is for organizations to become registered to SA 8000, a standard for social accountability. SA 8000 is developed and maintained by Social Accountability International. This standard also addresses issues of the workplace such as environmental safety & health, fair labor standards and labor practices—key issues in ethics for many practicing engineers and business professionals.

This paper reports on the development of a course, to be offered jointly by two faculty members of New Mexico State University’s College of Engineering and the College of Business to address the issue of corporate social responsibility. The development of this course was partially funded by a grant from General Motors to promote interdisciplinary education in the Global Sullivan Principles. In this paper, we discuss the challenges of partnership in interdisciplinary classes along with the institutional boundaries that must be crossed. We conclude with recommendations for those considering such a project.

1. Introduction

As many interdisciplinary projects do, this project began with a chance phone call. Author Dr. Bobbie Green was interested in submitting a proposal to The United Negro College Fund (UNCF)/ General Motors (GM) on the Sullivan Principles. She visited Associate Dean of Business Kevin Boberg who called author Edward Pines and asked, “Ed, who in engineering does anything with ethics?” with the response, “Oddly enough, I do.” Several meetings and a lot of writing eventually led to a successful proposal. The proposal had two components focused on education experiences based on the Sullivan Principles—one for faculty and one for a student to be selected by the faculty.

The Sullivan Principles (1977) are a set of principles for the ethical conduct of business. Used in multinational settings, the Sullivan Principles address issues of interest to both engineers and business professionals, i.e., managers, accountants, human resources, etc. Originally, the principles were applied to operation in South Africa. Subsequently, their use has grown as global enterprises have grown.

2. Our Proposal

We developed a proposal (Green and Pines, 2005) to the United Negro College Fund/ General Motors that was funded. The proposal included \$5000 in scholarship funds for a student who would also be selected for a special GM summer internship and \$5000 in funding for a faculty member. Additionally, GM sponsored a faculty workshop in April 2005 for the selected faculty.

To select a student, GM required that we choose from a pre-selected list of undergraduate student candidates. We invited the students to participate in a competition in which they would make a presentation on their interest in participating in the program. Four students responded and the selected student was Felicia Guerrero of Mechanical Engineering. Ms. Guerrero was invited to participate in a special summer internship with General Motors and has continued to remain involved in our effort.

Although NMSU faculty members emphasize professional ethics in a variety of courses, we believed a concentration on ethical performance in the information-based workplace was critical to our students’ ability to function as engineers, systems analysts and business professionals. Too frequently, students take ethics as part of a discipline, e.g. engineering ethics rather than as integrated teams focusing on business decisions. Concepts such as virtual firms and Internet-based markets are significant new ethical challenges.

A critical aspect of engineering ethics and leadership is the tenet that “engineers shall hold paramount the health, safety, and welfare of the public.” As engineering

becomes increasingly a 24 hour a day global profession, engineers encounter interpretations of health, safety, and welfare that may differ from those which they are familiar. Much as in economic analysis of outsourcing, one finds varying perspectives on what to do. One increasingly popular approach is for organizations to become registered to SA 8000, a standard for social accountability. SA 8000 is developed and maintained by Social Accountability International. Its registration model is similar to those many engineers already encounter such as ISO 9000 for quality management systems or ISO 14000 for environmentally conscious manufacturing. This standard addresses issues of the workplace such as environmental safety & health, fair labor standards and labor practices—key issues in ethics for many practicing engineers.

The below is quoted from Social Accountability International's web site.
(www.sa-intl.org)

SAI's first social accountability system is SA8000, a tool for retailers, brand companies, suppliers and other organizations to assure just and decent working conditions in the supply chain. SA8000 is a leading workplace standard and verification system because it offers a unique combination of attributes that make it highly credible and efficient:

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◆ A standard that covers all widely-accepted international labor rights (see below for details).

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◆ Independent, expert verification of compliance – certification of facility compliance by independent, SAI-accredited auditing bodies. SAI accreditation ensures that auditors have the procedures, resources and expertise needed to conduct independent, comprehensive, consistent and in-depth audits.

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◆ Factory-level management system requirement to foster ongoing compliance and realize gains in productivity, quality and worker recruiting and retention.

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◆ Involvement by all stakeholders – participation by all key sectors - workers and trade unions, companies, socially responsible investors, nongovernmental organizations and government - in the SA8000 system including the Advisory Board, drafting and revision of the standard and auditing system, conferences, training, and the complaints system

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◆ Public reporting – SA8000 certified facilities are posted on the SAI website. Companies that join the SA8000 Corporate Involvement Program - Level Two (see below for details) release annual SAI-verified annual progress.

Meeting consumer, investor and government concerns – SA8000 Certification and Corporate Involvement Program help consumers, investors and government to identify and support companies assuring labor rights in the supply chain.

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Benefits of SA8000

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Along with humane workplaces, the implementation of SA8000 offers more benefits to workers, companies and others:

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<u><i>Benefits for Workers, Trade Unions and NGOs</i></u>	<u><i>Benefits for Business</i></u>	<u><i>Benefits for Consumers & Investors</i></u>	
<u>Enhanced opportunities to organize trade unions and bargain collectively</u>	<u>Putting company values into action</u>	<u>Clear and credible for ethical purchasing</u>	Formatted: Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt Formatted: Bullets and Numbering
<u>A tool to educate workers about core labor rights</u>	<u>Enhancing company and brand reputation</u>	<u>Identification of pro-ethically and companies committed to ethical sc</u>	Formatted: Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt Formatted: Bullets and Numbering
<u>Another opportunity to work directly with business on labor rights issues</u>	<u>Improving employee recruitment, retention and performance</u>	<u>Broad coverage of categories and product geography</u>	Formatted: Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt Formatted: Bullets and Numbering
<u>Public awareness of companies committed to assuring humane working conditions</u>	<u>Better supply chain management and performance</u>		Formatted: Font: Times New Roman, 12 pt Formatted: Bullets and Numbering

Source: Social Accountability International

We proposed the development of a three-credit course that would meet for approximately 30 sessions of 75 minutes over 16 weeks. This course would be structured as a joint Business/Engineering elective that we planned might eventually be offered through New Mexico State University's General Education program as a Viewing a Wider World course. As such, it would be available as an elective to all students. Thus, the students are provided an opportunity to have an integrated experience with students from a variety of majors able to participate in team activities.

This course will be based on the development of a technology-driven international business with facilities throughout the world. Students will do a variety of projects in addition to attending lectures and group discussions. Projects would center on application of the Sullivan Principles to resolve a series of values conflicts, ethical conflicts and day-to-day business.

We also planned to investigate the use of distance education technologies to make this class available to a wider audience. As a result, we would be able to share our developments through mechanisms such as Web-based and video education. As engineering and business programs become increasingly available in distance education formats, this would become a better option.

3. Our experiences

As we are writing this paper, we are scheduled to offer this class as BA/IE 490 in Spring Semester 2006. Thus, we can only report on developing the class. We plan to report on offering the class at a later date. We offer here some observations on the process to date.

First, when doing developing an interdisciplinary course, institutional support is a must. A significant commitment must be made by each department head to invest in this new course. And, when creating and offering an interdisciplinary course, the accounting for faculty load must be addressed in a meaningful way. Our solution, to be discussed below, was to use two course department prefixes for this class. Additionally, because of the relatively low dollar amount of the proposal an approach of being conscious of what is best for the students and other constituencies is useful. Our motivation to create this course was our ability to deliver a timely and topical course for both engineering and business students.

Experience in the advising and curricula strategies of different departments is required. For example, to make the course more easily accessible through NMSU's system we decided to use a joint course number rather than one course number. Our goal in the proposal of developing a cross disciplinary course with team projects was of significant interest to the funder. This is, however, also of significant interest to the various constituencies of the business and engineering programs, e.g., the employers of our graduates, alumni, etc.

Our experience to date has been extremely positive and we would encourage those considering such a venture to engage the support of their management and go forward. And, such cooperative ventures lead to other opportunities as the relationships developed through doing this course will also lead to developing a marketing plan for the newly approved undergraduate degree in engineering/master of business administration integrated degree plan.

5. References

General Motors (2005). Request for Proposal: GM Sullivan Fellowship.

Green, Bobbie and Edward Pines (2005). Proposal to United Negro College Fund/ General Motors GM Sullivan Fellowship.

Social Accountability International. www.sa-intl.org.