

Ethics in a troubled world

Former Enron exec, professors discuss ethics on campus and why students should be concerned

By: Jeremy Reynolds/Features Writer

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Lynn Brewer does not work for the CIA, but she has first-hand knowledge of espionage. She never received a degree in ethics, but she has written a book about the lines that are drawn in the sand regarding ethical decisions.

Brewer, a former employee and whistle blower for the Enron Corporation, said most students who graduate from Texas Tech eventually will end up in a company like Enron, but she said her experience could teach college students what to look out for.

"If it doesn't feel right, then it probably isn't," she said. "It's better to leave a company than stay and fall under prosecution."

Brewer did just that when she found out about the underhanded dealings of her co-workers. She said she offered her letter of resignation twice in the course of working for the Houston business.

"Enron's world was not about producing power," she said. "It was about stealing it."

Investors in Enron lost about \$90 billion in a little less than a month, Brewer said.

"No one in this company told me to cook the books," she said. "They said find me the revenue."

With college students leaving the safe harbors of their universities in the years to come, Brewer's story, along with all the other sound bites of corruption and fraud in the industry, have become bedtime stories for business majors about what to avoid.

Concern about ethics on college campuses is so strong these days that more classes have been devoted to the study of it, said Bernard Appel - a lawyer in Fort Worth at Appel Associates, who deals with cases involving business ethics.

Coming up with a solid definition of ethics is almost impossible, Appel said. The idea of someone being unethical is strictly based on how he or she is viewed by other people.

"The easiest person to in the world to lie to is yourself when you're looking into a mirror," Appel said.

The ethical problems Appel said students could face ranged from plagiarism to cheating on tests.

"I don't think students are any different nowadays than they were 20 years ago," he said.

What a student believed was ethical in the 1980s still holds true for today, he said. If a student cheated back then, then it is safe to assume a student would cheat now, and future students 30 years down the line would cheat.

"The opportunity to be unethical is greater now," Appel said.

Students are able to copy and paste papers directly from the Internet when they are under a deadline, and with smarter calculators, people are able to program answers into the devices before the tests, he said.

Howard Curzer, a professor of ethics at Tech, recognized the problem of cheating on tests and plagiarism, but said there is a bigger problem plaguing students at Tech.

"The more serious problem is an ignorance or blindness to the suffering going on around us," Curzer said. "It's sad that people do not read the newspapers anymore."

One of the problems Curzer pointed out was a lack of knowledge about the war in Iraq, and the blind faith students put on other people.

"People are morally responsible for knowing what is going on in the world around them," he said.

The ethical problem among students who do not read the paper is whether they truly are being morally responsible. Curzer said since these students are in college, and are adults, they should start to recognize it is time to start being morally and ethically accountable for the events around them.

Curzer said students learn ethical beliefs from their parents or other people they see as having authority.

"They shouldn't be getting the information from untrustworthy or ignorant people," he said. "A lot of people trust their parents, but they are adults now, and it's time to turn around and look at your parents and ask, 'Do they know what they're talking about.'"

Another usually unreliable source for students are churches. Curzer said there are many people in the church who claim they know the material they are preaching about, but sometimes that is not always the case.

Jonathan Marks, director of the ethics initiative at Tech, said students on campus have a glaring

unethical opportunity in front of them in the form of A-Plus Tutoring.

The A-Plus Tutoring center is located on University Avenue and caters to a variety of classes.

There, students are able to pay a fee and see a set of questions and answers that usually are similar to the ones they would see on their test the next day.

"We don't guarantee an A, but if you study, you'll get one," said Shaik Ahmed, manager of A-Plus Tutoring.

Ahmed said he has heard the complaints against his business and their practice; he has even heard his business be called unethical.

"Oh, it is not unethical," he said. "It's also not cheating. We are helping students prepare for tests."

Ahmed said he gets all his tests from the Internet, because a lot of departments post the tests online.

"Students, especially freshmen, do not know where to find these tests," he said.

On average, Ahmed said his business would get 300 students coming in every semester to look at tests.

"That's less than 1 percent of the student body," he said.