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Albers Ethics Week Provides Valuable Learning Experience for Students

Ben Wiley, Author

Seattle University's Albers School of Business and Economics held Albers Ethics Week May 10-14, an annual event during which guest speakers from both the Seattle and national business community visit Albers classes to talk to students about ethical issues in business.

This was the 10th year of ethics week, which started as a one-day event. The theme of this year's program was COVID-19 and the Future of Responsible Business. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, both this year and last year's ethics weeks were conducted virtually. As a result, guest speakers joined Zoom classes rather than speaking to students in person as they did in years past. Additionally, two keynote speakers talked about ethical issues relating to the theme.

On May 11, Alex Rajczi, Novack Professor of Ethics and Leadership at Claremont McKenna College, discussed ethical questions that the healthcare business faced during COVID-19. Then, May 13, Michael Santoro, Professor of Management at Santa Clara University, spoke about how the COVID-19 vaccine development has influenced for-profit pharmaceutical companies.

Jeffrey Smith, a professor of business ethics and the Director of the Center for Business Ethics within Albers, has led ethics week since 2015, organizing the keynote events and reaching out to guest speakers. He highlighted the importance of the week.

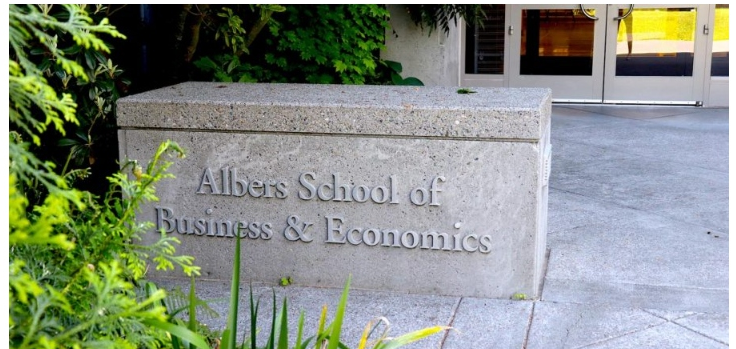
"The biggest objective of this week is that students recognize that business ethics is not just one isolated course. Rather, it's something that can be integrated with all other disciplines—accounting, finance, economics, analytics. I want ethics to be integrated into every aspect of education and the fabric of study at Albers," Smith said.

Joseph Phillips, Dean of Albers School of Business and Economics, further emphasized why the study of ethics and Albers Ethics Week is important for business students.

"Ethical behavior is a theme in our program, as undergrads take a required business ethics class and ethics issues are brought up by faculty throughout the curriculum. Albers Ethics Week is one of the ways that we reinforce ethics and doing the right thing," Phillips said.

Phillips also mentioned that the event is about more than discussing problems, but offering solutions for students preparing for the workforce and fostering new networking opportunities.

"Discussions are not simply about ethical issues; they also get into career advice and reflections that alums might have," Phillips said.



Naomi Olson

As the Dean of Seattle U's business school, Phillips highlighted the ethical dilemma that he is facing regarding weighing the needs of both faculty and students in order to make the decision of when and how to return to in-person learning. Albers is currently deliberating the percentage of classes which will be in-person in the upcoming fall quarter, whether faculty will be required to return to the classroom and several other administrative problems with both health and business ethics.

Similarly, Smith noted the challenges of ethics week being virtual for a second spring. He said that the number of guest speakers decreased this year due to some classes being asynchronous and some guests not wanting to be recorded. However, he revealed that over half the classes were able to welcome a guest speaker, many of whom are Seattle U alumni that appreciate Jesuit educational values.

Smith emphasized how the guest speakers connect to and enrich what students are studying.

"Many themes such as social justice or sustainability are part of the course content. So, if a guest speaker comes in from a place like Costco, they can talk about their business' sustainability program and show students how they can put it in practice. It fits the outcome of being something that is actionable education," Smith said.

As a graduate assistant for the Center for Business Ethics at Seattle U, Brooke Carlisle, a graduate student pursuing a masters in business with a focus on ethics, helped Smith during ethics week. She connected professors with business professionals, helped them if they had any questions and ran the Zoom webinar during the two keynote speeches. In addition to the experience that she gained from helping Smith, Carlisle is one of many Albers students who appreciated the ability to learn from and network with members of the Seattle business company during Albers Ethics Week.

"As a student, I find business professionals in classrooms valuable. I had two of them in my classes and both of them led valuable conversations. Professionals have good advice and it's a great opportunity to learn about ethics in the real world," Carlisle said.

Business ethics has seen an increased profile in traditional business spheres in the past several years, as the concept of "Corporate Social Responsibility," which stresses the importance of community-oriented business practices, has grown more popular. Younger consumers are more likely to change their purchasing habits based on the social responsibility of companies—9 of 10 millennials will change the way they shop for social/political reasons. This has created an economic incentive for companies to pivot their practices in a manner that is more popular with consumers.

In addition, events like Albers Ethics Week have caused young professionals moving into the workforce to become more aware of the ethical ramifications of their employment decisions. Companies with clear goals and internal ethical regulations are more likely to attract young business people.

While the majority of guest speakers visited the virtual classrooms, the two keynote speeches were open to all. The second keynote speaker Santoro talked in-depth about how the for-profit pharmaceutical industry has thrived over the past few months due to the race to research and develop all the COVID-19 vaccines that are currently being given to the masses. He also addressed the vaccine distribution disparity, stating that the U.S., Canada and Western Europe have three-to-five times more vaccines than other places in the world such as India, Africa and other countries in the global South.

"We care about living and surviving more than anything else, so when put in that situation we are not exactly generous. We want to blame the pharmaceutical industry that the South has no drugs, yet the fault is ourselves. From COVID-19, we can learn that the problem is nations, not businesses," Santoro said.

Throughout the event, he stressed the need for the government and the private sector to work together to solve public health crises in the future.

"We need to engage everyone equally. The lesson of COVID-19 is that free markets and private capital can work in an extremely helpful way in dealing with social problems," Santoro said.

Connor Mackenzie, a second-year Computer Science major, underscored the importance of Santoro's discussion of the global responsibility to assist others during the pandemic.

“One thing I appreciated was Santoro’s framing of our obligation to help other countries when it comes to COVID-19 as an issue of human rights. He was met with minor backlash on it with someone bringing up that we understand human rights as an obligation from a government to its citizens and therefore it can’t be applied internationally. I appreciated that Professor Santoro was sticking to what I would understand as a more traditional or Kantian understanding of human rights,” Mackenzie said.

The conversation highlighted the diverse array of perspectives within the discipline of Business Ethics, and the division between national and metropolitan business perspectives.

With all the ways that the COVID-19 pandemic has changed how businesses operate, Albers students will likely be able to take what they learned during ethics week with them as they prepare to enter the workforce and make their mark in the business world.

Now that Albers Ethics Week is over, the next large event on Albers’ calendar is the business plan competition finals June 4, during which undergrad and grad Albers students, other Seattle U students and alumni compete to be awarded the best business plan of the year. Planners hope that Albers Ethics Week will return to being in-person so that Albers students can get the opportunity to meet business professionals in-person and more guest speakers can partake in the event. Albers will continue to explore the ethical dilemmas which litter the modern economy.