

Starting and Building an Institute in Tough Economic Times

Part 1: Four Effective Strategies

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USC's Levan Institute for Humanities and Ethics is a fairly new institute—we are only in our second year of programming—so our challenges are different from more established ethics centers and institutes. Because of a hiring freeze that blanketed USC's campus during the economic crisis of the past two years, our major challenge was effective outreach to the university. How could we create programming that would reach a maximum number of students with limited staff, time and resources?

There are four areas that proved particularly effective for us: 1) unique large-scale events that garner campus attention and university press, 2) utilizing USC faculty and staff whenever possible, 3) adding an ethical component to existing curriculum and programs to reach a larger number of students, and 4) the creation of a Levan Online Ethics Resource Center, an increasingly cost-effective tool for outreach and ethics resources for our students and faculty. The Levan Institute's Research Associate, Dr. Shlomo Sher, built the Online Resource Center over a matter of months this past year and will be sharing insights on the process in detail in Part 2 of this paper. First, we will cover the initial three areas of cost-effective outreach for a new ethics institute.

Unique large-scale events: Public Art Exhibit and Ethics Cup Debate

At a university the size of the University of Southern California (33,000 students), a major challenge of a brand new institute is to make students aware of your mission and programs. We decided to create a provocative theme for each academic year to give cohesion to our programs and get students' attention. Our theme for 2009-2010 was "*It May Be Legal, But Is It Right?*". We approached the dean of USC's Roski Art School to have students in a course on experimental practices in contemporary art spend the semester creating public art renderings of our annual question.¹ We displayed the final artwork with student statements for a week under a large tent with our banner and theme in the middle of campus to reach thousands of passersby.

Public art seemed a terrific way to get students thinking about our question as open-ended and provocative. What does our question, "*It May Be Legal, But Is It Right?*," mean

¹ Professor Robby Herbst did an excellent job incorporating this idea into his syllabus and enthusiastically guiding the students towards exhibition-worthy projects.

to an engineer, a teaching assistant, a pre-law student, or a member of the Greek system at USC? One student's project, "The Uniforms of USC," explored affirmative action. The artist compiled photographs of people on campus with their faces and skin tone blanked out to remove racial identifiers. The images of the people in uniform— a gardener, painter, basketball and football players, for instance —challenged us to examine our ideas of racial identity and roles at the university. What skin color did we visualize as we studied the different images?

The art exhibit was written about in several university publications, which helped students and faculty become aware of our mission. For the 2010-2011 academic year our theme is "*Talking To Strangers: Engaging Disagreement.*" We will kick off the year with a student photography exhibit. A former U.S. Marine who had three tours of duty in Iraq is now a USC undergraduate studying Philosophy, Law, and Politics. Following what he calls a "mental separation," he began taking photographs of average Iraqis and asking about their lives. We plan to display the photos and text in a major thoroughfare on campus during the first week of classes. We've invited several faculty members and the student photographer to talk about mental care for soldiers and veterans at the opening reception.

A second example of a large-scale event that garners huge outreach with little financial commitment is a campus-wide Ethics Cup Debate that we will host this fall. The competition, based on the National Ethics Bowl, will be in collaboration with required writing courses at the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, the Viterbi School of Engineering, and the Marshall School of Business. All USC undergraduates are required to take writing courses, which are designed, in part, to introduce students to forms of ethical reasoning. By collaborating with Writing Programs across campus we will bring our mission to thousands of students at virtually no cost.

Utilizing USC faculty and staff rather than costly outside speakers

Part of the Levan Institute's mission is to engage students with practical ethics on a wide variety of topics. Using talented and popular USC faculty as discussants keeps costs down and increases ties with departments and professional schools, helping to build a community of ethics-minded faculty at USC linked to Levan. We host monthly Levan Coffeehouse Conversations on Practical Ethics, and other monthly speakers series, co-sponsored with the USC Office of Religious Life: *What Matters to Me and Why*, held at a student coffeehouse; *Spirit of the Law*, held at the law school; and *Soul of Medicine*, held at the medical school. For these speakers series, we schedule USC faculty and staff to talk about difficulties encountered, choices made, and commitments solidified. We encourage the speakers to reflect on the values, beliefs, and motivations that connect the personal to the professional in their lives. The law and medicine series also use USC graduates working as professionals in the field to discuss the moral dimension of their work.

Our monthly Coffeehouses pose an ethical question that is addressed by three or four invited faculty and student panelists from different disciplines at USC. We then open the conversation to engage attendees. Past topics include the ethics of eating, our obligations to future and distant people, selling body organs, and internet censorship. The series is directed by Levan Board member Sharon Lloyd, Professor of Philosophy, Law, and Political Science, who usually moderates the discussions.

Adding an ethical component to existing curricula and programs

The University of Southern California has a wealth of educationally significant programs for students. One cost-effective way we increased outreach to students was by adding an ethical component to already successful curricula and programs. Adding an ethics debate to the required Writing Programs courses, mentioned above, is one example. We also offered to co-sponsor the annual High School Leadership Conference, which is hosted by the Teaching International Relations Program (TIRP). The TIRP Program and its annual High School Leadership Conference have existed at USC for a decade. Through this program, over 200 USC undergraduates volunteer to visit local high schools to introduce students to issues in International Relations. Over the years, they have developed a high profile and strong commitment-level from students. By developing an ethical component to supplement existing conference and lesson plans, we were able to reach hundreds of students studying international relations.

Each Spring, several hundred of the participating high school classes visit the USC campus for a day-long leadership conference led by their USC mentors. We offered to help organize the conference and help train the USC students and high school teachers on an ethical dilemma in international relations. The topic of the conference was Foreign Policy and Ethics: US Options with Iran. Student teams learned to represent conflicting worldviews and different ethical perspectives as they deliberated about US policy options towards Iran. USC students mentored high school teams throughout the day as they prepared for presentations and questioning in a final plenary session.

Our goal was to introduce these students to morally thoughtful ways to understand foreign policy debates. The success of the collaboration has led us to build a framework for a linked TEP program (Teaching Ethics Program) that we hope will engage students from the humanities. We would like to use the existing TIRP model to send philosophy, religion, and other humanities students to our area high schools to teach their passion.

Levan Online Ethics Resource Center

The fourth strategy for outreach was to think through creating an online ethics resource for faculty and students at USC. When this idea was given to our postdoctoral research associate, Shlomo Sher, for implementation, it grew into a hugely successful part of our mission and has been accessed by thousands each month. In part two of this paper, Sher will discuss our process of starting and structuring an online ethics resource center.