



# INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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## CENTER FOR ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT AT TACOMA COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Most of us can render a reasonable definition for the term “ethics,” and we can articulate what “being ethical” means. To some, it is the difference between right and wrong; to others, it represents standards for how we behave in society; to others, ethics is law. Our communal voice embraces the scripture, “Do unto others as you would have others do unto you.” And often our policies, procedures, and rules for organizational management are framed by what we believe are ethical parameters and principles. In all instances, we conduct business based on society’s laws, interpreting the moral implications of our actions through policies and guidelines.

The leadership team at Tacoma Community College (TCC) has been engaged in an on-going conversation about ethics in higher education. We are disturbed by data from recent surveys of American teens indicating that youthful perspectives on a wide range of unethical behaviors are cause for alarm and response. We recognize that the college’s mission must encompass expectations related to the cultivation of an ethical environment.

TCC has taken an innovative approach to ethical leadership and curriculum development. This initiative emerged from casual discussions among internal and external communities, and subsequently became known as the Center for Ethical Development (CED)—a department focusing on development of curriculum and on core competencies for ethics and development of leadership skills and ethical decision making.

### Innovation at TCC

TCC is one of the first Washington colleges to reshape its strategic-planning processes using the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, an inclusive process for bringing together disparate ideas and concepts to formulate common themes and strategies built on past successes and

future goals. The original notion for a Center for Ethical Development emerged in 2001. Prior to the Center’s establishment, the president engaged the college community in discussions on the role of ethics in maintaining the college’s academic and social contract, and suggested the inclusion of ethics as a learning outcome. Much of this work transpired during the fall 2003 quarter, with a focus on moving the college community to embrace ethics as one of its seven collegewide student-learning outcomes. The president appointed an advisory board of faculty members from philosophy, science, and business programs, as well as community leaders from investment banking, global businesses, human service agencies, faith-based institutions, and health care providers. This group collectively developed the vision, mission, strategic plan, and coordinating fund-raising activities to support CED’s development and operation.

### Linking Ethics and Curriculum

Community colleges must address the issue of ethics and embed the basic constructs of ethical behavior across the curriculum. TCC’s Center focuses on developing ethical competencies in academic, medical, research, business, and leadership ethics areas. To some extent, this is accomplished through the college’s Speakers Bureau, where faculty members can access resources and speakers on ethical topics, and the community can access well-developed curriculum on ethical development and behavior for use in civic activities.

Those of us in higher education recognize that the creation of a department or a center that focuses on the study of ethics will not solve current ethical dilemmas. Decisions still evolve from an individual’s sense of right and wrong, directed by an internal moral compass, putting into practice that which we intuit. The CED provides a testing ground—a sort of hothouse for exploring ethical decision making—for sharing ideas on how we can implement decisions that rest on the edges of right and wrong. Additionally, the college offers resources and consultation services to area organizations and businesses to help them write organizational policy on ethical issues.



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## Linking Ethics to Leadership

A critical function of the CED will be the exploration and development of ethical decision-making. Through on-going dialogues with internal and external communities, faculty and administrative staff will expand their understanding and awareness of what it means to be an ethical leader. Additionally, the CED will host a variety of regional and national conferences, workshops, and seminars focused on the study of ethical leadership in higher education. A database of current literature that supports topics associated with ethics and leadership is housed on the Center's web site, and occasionally articles will be prepared to review current trends in higher education leadership.

## Final Thoughts

During the past 20 years, the creation of an Ethical Will has emerged as an important document, often more significant than a living will—that legal document that identifies the disbursement of material items to loved ones. An Ethical Will passes on things of value; it represents a living legacy, suggesting greater meaning can be found by focusing on what we want someone to *know*, rather than what we want someone to *have*.

Perhaps organizations should also prepare Ethical Wills. Sharing a college's history with future generations of students may prove to be a real asset. Such a will would represent information rich in lessons learned; it would communicate a sense of shared values and beliefs; and, most importantly, it would link past challenges to future expectations. At TCC, we hope that the CED becomes part of our Ethical Will—a conduit for creating the college's legacy. We recognize that such initiatives not only improve our awareness and understanding of ethical standards, but also give us a sense of who we are and who we may become.

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