Tulane launches technology ethics course bridging science, business and the humanities

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When Rosalind Picard, a pioneer in artificial intelligence and emotional computing at MIT, visited Tulane University in 2023 to receive an honorary doctorate, she did more than deliver a commencement speech. She inspired an idea for a Tulane class that would spark campus-wide conversations about the urgent need for ethical

reflection in an era of rapid technological change. Tech Ethics: What Is A Better Future? (BUSG-4360 / ENGP-3460) is a groundbreaking new interdisciplinary course co-taught by Professor Matt Escarra of the School of Science and Engineering (SSE) and Professor Rob Lalka of the A. B. Freeman School of Business.

Debuting this fall, Tech Ethics: What Is A Better Future? is cross listed between SSE and Freeman, marking a unique academic collaboration between the two schools. The course challenges students to engage deeply with the ethical dimensions of emerging technologies, preparing them to become thoughtful leaders in fields where the stakes—human, social, and environmental—are higher than ever.

As SSE Dean Rajan notes, “This course is a perfect example of what we excel at here at Tulane, bringing faculty and students together across disciplinary boundaries to have thoughtful conversations about a forward-looking topic. Ethics in this era of rapid technological revolution is one such topic, perhaps one that is poised to have the greatest impact on humanity.”

Freeman’s Dean Goes comments that, “Ethics has always been an important part of business education, but with technology impacting our lives in new and unprecedented ways, it’s taken on an even greater urgency. I’m excited to see the subject of technology and ethics being addressed from an interdisciplinary, cross-school perspective, because if we’re truly in the business of educating transformative leaders and building a sustainable future, we need to give students the tools they need to understand new technologies and analyze how they’re affecting our lives.”

From a Lunchtime Conversation to a New Academic Offering

The course’s origin story is as interdisciplinary as its curriculum. During her Tulane visit, Picard joined a luncheon with faculty from across disciplines at Escarra’s home, where she discussed not just the frontiers of AI but also the ethical questions that accompany its development. Picard also shared insights from a course on technology ethics she co-developed at MIT, supported by Yale University’s Life Worth Living program.

Inspired by Picard’s approach, Escarra and Lalka envisioned a similar course at Tulane, one that could bridge the technical rigor of science and engineering with the strategic and societal concerns of business leadership, all centered on a deep

exploration the questions that determine what matters most. They applied for and secured funding from Yale's Life Worth Living initiative in 2024, which provided not only financial resources but also guidance in developing the course's syllabus and pedagogy.

"This course brings Freeman and SSE students together to tackle big questions at the intersection of business and technology," Lalka said. "It draws on proven models from what's worked at Yale and MIT, and it's designed specifically for the in-depth discussions and debates that are hallmarks of the Tulane experience."

Asking the Right Questions Before Tackling Big Tech Topics

The course structure is intentionally divided into two parts. The first six weeks are grounded in materials from Yale's Life Worth Living curriculum, where students grapple with fundamental ethical questions such as: What is worth wanting? Does the good life require suffering? Who do we answer to? This phase encourages students to reflect on their personal values and assumptions before engaging with the complex ethical dilemmas posed by technology.

"[What] we're hoping to do is basically bring the dorm room conversations, which happen at 2:30 in the morning, into the classroom at 2:30 in the afternoon," Lalka explained. "If college is about understanding not just what you'll do with the rest of your life – but how you should do it, and who you should be as you're doing it – then those topics should be addressed in a structured environment, explored with peers, and guided by professors who can lead you through them."

The second half of the semester transitions into specific technological domains where these ethical frameworks are applied. Students will examine issues like the future of labor in the age of AI, ethical dilemmas surrounding autonomous weapons, the environmental and societal impacts of energy technologies, and the challenges of regulating social media and other platforms. Each topic is explored through a dual lens: the technical capabilities and the human consequences.

"Oftentimes, you see technologists that will, instead of asking, 'Should I? they ask, 'Can I?" Lalka said. "From this science and engineering perspective, there is an important need and opportunity to approach the 'Should I' question as much as the 'Can I' question."

A Unique Business Perspective on Ethics

While courses on technology ethics often emerge from engineering or philosophy departments, Tulane’s version is unique in its integration of business ethics. Lalka, who authored The Venture Alchemists, an award-winning book on business ethics and entrepreneurial decision-making, brings a pragmatic lens to the classroom.

The course doesn’t approach these topics through judgment or ideological binaries. Instead, it encourages an attitude of curiosity and critical engagement. “It's not about villainizing and demonizing or lionizing and the hero worship that often happens in entrepreneurship,” Lalka added. “But rather, we learn from those examples and debate: ‘What would you do in that situation?’ and ‘What will you do in future situations?’”

Engaging Projects with Real-World Impact

One of the course’s central assignments tasks students with selecting a technological topic they are passionate about (whether listed in the syllabus or proposed independently) and analyzing it through the ethical frameworks developed in class. Students will present their findings at the end of the semester, creating a peer-learning environment where everyone gains from diverse perspectives.

“We're not going to try and come to consensus or come up with one answer,” Lalka said. “We will engage with the tough issues, directly, honestly, openly, [and] candidly.”

A New Model for Interdisciplinary Education at Tulane

For Tulane, this course represents more than a single offering. It’s a model for future interdisciplinary collaborations. The course has received broad support from across the university, including grants from the Yale Life Worth Living program and the Tulane University Innovation Institute. Classes will be held in the newly opened Schwartz Family Business and Experiential Learning Center, a state-of-the-art facility designed to foster hands-on learning and cross-disciplinary engagement.

“We're planning to offer it in the fall, at least for the next few years. So this is not a one-time offering,” Escarra said. “We hope to grow the idea with sections and smaller class sizes in a seminar format.”

Initially, the course fulfills elective requirements for the Entrepreneurship Minor in the Freeman School and counts toward the Engineering Physics major in SSE.

However, Escarra and Lalka envision it expanding into other parts of Tulane’s curriculum over time.

“Technology ethics is an area where we can build even more capacity within SSE, and there's strong interest in doing that,” Escarra said. “Some of our [SSE] courses already touch on these topics, but this class gives us the chance to engage with them in a sustained and focused way, with personal reflection, technical insight, and a view on societal impact that our business colleagues bring, all helping our Tulane-trained technologists create a future we can be proud of.”

A Timely Course for a Critical Moment

In a world where technologies like AI, genetic engineering, and autonomous weapons are evolving faster than regulatory frameworks or societal norms can keep up, the need for ethically grounded leadership has never been more urgent. Escarra and Lalka believe that Tulane students are uniquely positioned to lead these conversations, not just within academia, but in the boardrooms, laboratories, and public forums where future decisions will be made.

As the initial offering this fall semester approaches, Escarra and Lalka hope to see more students, especially those who may not yet see themselves as “ethics people,” take a chance on a class that could change how they view their role in the future of technology.

“We would rather [students] are asking better questions, smarter questions, more thoughtful questions, than rushing to answers,” Lalka said. “That is exactly the substance of the class.”