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Andra Gumbus  
*Sacred Heart University*

Jill Woodilla  
*Sacred Heart University*

Christopher C. York  
*Sacred Heart University*

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## Jane's Decision: Her Experience as a Plebe<sup>1</sup>

**ANDRA GUMBUS**

Sacred Heart University

**JILL WOODILLA**

Sacred Heart University

**CHRISTOPHER C. YORK**

Sacred Heart University

Jane (a pseudonym) describes her experience as a first year student at one of the military service academies sometime during the period 2000-2005. She portrays the rigors of training to be an officer in the US military service and the special burdens of being a good-looking, high-achieving woman in this environment. She provides an insider's perspective on the academy culture, including the importance of the honor code, and spoken and unspoken rules against fraternization and for protecting "one's own." At the end of the case Jane must make a decision that could change the course of her life. The case is written in the first person and students should read it as if Jane were speaking to them directly.

I was ecstatic when I received my letter of acceptance to the military academy! In high school I was a tom-boy and liked structured activity, and when I visited a family friend who went to West Point, I fell in love with the idea of attending a military academy. I the academy as very prestigious and the opportunity as a challenge—I just knew that that route was for me. I had quite a different opinion about the military back then. I was very excited at the prospect of being an officer some day and saw life in the military as something for me. I never really stopped to think what that meant. I was completely wrapped up in the fact that everyone (Dad especially) was so proud that I was interested in going to a military academy. It's funny because I never really had a very close relationship with my parents and they were never really involved in anything I had ever done before but for this they jumped on the bandwagon 110 percent.

I applied to several of the military academies <http://www.defenselink.mil/faq/pis/20.html>. As part of the application to one of them, I was interviewed by an alumnus. I remember that this man, well into his 60s, spent my whole interview telling me that because I was a rather attractive female that the military was not for me—not just that branch of the service, but the United States military as a whole. I remember being furious and almost wanting to cry on my drive back home. I just could not believe that I had sat there for an hour or so just to have this man tell me (in my mind) that I could not do this. With my stubborn personality and need to always prove people wrong, I was even more determined! I continued with my application and was admitted to one of the maritime academies. I knew that after my education I would have to do active or reserve duty, but the advertisements made the time at sea sound like a Carnival cruise!

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<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Editor Steve Meisel, two anonymous reviewers, and participants in a session at the 2007 Organizational Behavior Teaching conference for their insights and contributions.

Now, almost a year later, I couldn't believe how everything had gone so wrong. Could I ever focus again on my studies and resume my friendships with my fellow cadets?

### **A member of the regiment**

I was so proud to join “the regiment” or “corps of cadets,” which is the name for the student body at a military academy. Students are organized into companies, battalions, brigades, or wings, or whatever is the way in that branch of the service, and the regiment is lead by student officers – this is considered to be the most important way of learning leadership. These officers have ranks and titles similar to the “real” (professional) officers. None of the first year students, or plebes as we were commonly called, were officers. The officers who had the most contact with us – the plebe officers and training officers – took their job of indoctrinating us into the ways of the military service very seriously. They wanted to build cohesion, instill absolute obedience, and prevent any problems from escalating up the chain of command. The indoctrination process was the first, and most important, part of accomplishing this mission.

### **Indoctrination**

The first few weeks at the academy is known as the Indoctrination Process. This is boot camp time – “boot camp” is the name given to basic training for military recruits. Every morning drill instructors woke us up by yelling into bull horns, smashing garbage can lids together, and so on. We had only fifteen seconds or so to get out on “the line” outside our rooms in PT (physical training) gear and with whatever random item they were yelling for—toothbrush, canteen, cup filled with water, or something else. Because we only had this short time to do something we could not prepare for, we slept in PT gear and tried to sleep with our sneakers on as well. This was not allowed and if a drill instructor came to check in the night and found you sleeping in your gear there was trouble for the entire company.

During this time we had limited time to do every task. The instructor might yell, “You've got 30 seconds to use the bathroom and get back on my line!” Then we would scramble down the hall, use the bathroom, and try to make sure our clothing was in the same order it was in when we were sent scrambling from that same line that we were now racing back to. Or he might say, “You've got 45 seconds to get in that shower and clean your ...” We learned tricks to help us, like putting shampoo in our hair before we got out on our line in our robes for the shower and using the shampoo in our hair to wash our body as best we could in the 20 seconds or so that we had under the water in the shower. We got used to cold showers – because we only had 45 seconds to shower there was no time for the water to get warm. To make matters worse, a guy on our deck slipped on the floor and hurt himself so we were actually instructed not to run from our line to the showers and from the showers to our line again. Now we had even less time in the shower!

Each morning around 4:30 AM, after we were out on our line in PT gear, our drill instructors led us out to the “grinder” (a concrete area for calisthenics surrounded by pull-up bars, dip bars, and the offices of our instructors, training officers, and commanding officer) for our grueling physical training with the Regimental PT Officer. This workout normally started with a group

stretch, run, and calisthenics, the severity of which was determined by the officer's mood that day. If someone was caught lying the day before or was caught with contraband or was caught at 2:00 AM shining his shoes by a penlight, then we knew we were in for a treat that day. They enforced plebes not having anything – no contraband food, no civilian clothes, no cell phones, no phone privileges, no music, no privacy, etc. This was something that the deck officers enforced rather strictly with random inspections and searches of rooms. They enforced plebes not being able to leave campus for anything, not even to work-out in the beginning.

At the end of the PT session we all filed into the mess hall for breakfast – sweaty and smelly in our PT gear. You might think that at a military academy healthy food would be a priority; however breakfast at the academy was one of the unhealthiest meals I have ever tasted. Chocolate glazed donuts, bacon, sausage, French toast, pancakes, grits, potatoes, and scrambled eggs cooked in bacon fat – you name it, it was there! There was cereal and a bowl or two of fruit, but it was difficult to eat a healthy meal.

After breakfast we regrouped in our specific companies and worked on drilling, went to band practice, had an educational session with our drill instructor on how to shine our shoes, polish our buckle, wear our shirt stays properly, and worked out more if our drill instructor thought we needed it. We all hated lunch. Unlike breakfast, we had to sit at assigned tables with upperclassmen who were officers. This meal was not eaten in complete silence like breakfast; instead it was spent answering random questions that the upperclassmen barked out about the menu, the academy's history, names and rankings of officers at the academy, and common academy knowledge.

The afternoon consisted of the same type of activities as in the morning. Then, before we could have a shower, we had dinner. This meal was similar to lunch but more formal because there were actual officers at our table.

The whole process was just as I had imagined it would be, and I loved it. I was able to overcome this first hurdle to my dream career.

When we first entered the academy some upperclassmen offered us advice. One piece of advice that I ignored was that you don't want to stand out by being different or excelling at a task or assignment. I don't think it is humanly possible for me not to strive to be the best. At the academies, however, you need to perform mid-range otherwise you stand out. And women stand out just because they are women. The main thing that I did not realize is that the "old boys club" mentality impressed on the midshipmen by the regiment still exists and it promotes an all-male school. If you are strong you stand out and people want to break you down. If you are a strong woman you stand out and you threaten every male there. They want to see you fail and suffer. There is something called "The Pick". The drill instructors and upperclassmen who are there when the plebes arrive their first day pick one female who they think will be the biggest threat to the class and to the male population. Then every time that woman walks into the mess hall all the men turn and stare at her. Any time she is somewhere with upperclassmen, someone is staring at her. The goal of the senior males is to single out, harass, and challenge this female to the point that she wants to leave the academy. If she makes it to recognition day – the point at the end of the year when the 4th class cadets are recognized as midshipmen and not treated as

plebes any more – then they let up and stop harassing her and let her stay with the class. That woman was me for my class – so I was told by a female upperclassman much later in the year.

### **The Honor Code**

If you have never been in the military it is hard to understand the importance of the Honor Code. Every branch of the service and every academy makes a big deal of it. When we officially entered the academy we had to sign an Honor Oath, administered by the officers of the Honor Board that bound each midshipman to uphold the honor code at all times, in all hemispheres of the globe, and on all oceans. Basically the code said that we would not lie, cheat, or steal, and if we witnessed a possible honor violation, we must personally confront the individual, verbally report the incident, and complete a formal report. Even more important, if a midshipman failed to take action, he or she would be awarded demerits for failing in duties as an officer in training. We worked off demerits by completing special work or drill activities.

A male in my company who was a real “do gooder” found out that his roommate was cheating on a test and turned him in. This kid was ostracized. Even though the honor code preaches honesty, tell the truth and do not cheat, there are illegal copies for almost every test that circulate and everyone uses them to study for the test. Most of us did not consider this cheating. Upperclassmen passed down questions from old tests to us to study from.

The honor code was the most visible rule, but there were many other military customs that ruled our lives. One was the way we had to address all officers and upperclassmen to make sure that we adhered to proper military hierarchy and maintained the discipline of the ranks. Within ranks we were fiercely protective of our peer group and were drilled never to rat on one of “our own.” We were also explicitly forbidden from fraternization or any contact with upperclassmen beyond that required for official regimental purposes. This meant that even a male 4<sup>th</sup> classman (a freshman in a civilian college) on the football team was forbidden from hanging out with his upper-class teammates. However, male-female fraternization came under special scrutiny. After some of our special plebe sessions the women would be asked to stay behind so we could receive a separate lecture on not having upper-class boyfriends.

Even though we knew it was a punishable offence, everyone in the company turned a blind eye to having a boyfriend or girlfriend in an upper-class, provided you did not get into trouble for anything else. For example, one of my roommates had been dating a senior officer of our company since before college, and he occasionally came to our room to see her. It was a known fact in our company that they were dating; however there was never a need to investigate my roommate, so her fraternization did not matter. But if she had been caught drinking or defacing property or reported by another midshipman, then she would have been investigated. The fact that she had this upperclassman in her room on such and such a date would have been a charge, the fact that she communicated with him via email would have been investigated, the fact that she met him off campus and they hung out in the city would have been investigated.

### **Everyday life at the academy**

Once our indoctrination (“boot camp”) period was over and the upperclassmen returned for the fall semester, we settled into normal academy life. We woke up later, around six, and went to the band room to play colors at morning reveille. At breakfast we were allowed to talk to one another, but we still had to sit exactly six inches on our chair and address all upperclassmen in the proper military way. Our academic classes then began, which meant that we had very long days. The classes were like high school – everyone had the same schedule and we were all together as we rotated in the hallways and between buildings.

We still endured the random questions from upperclassmen, special plebe sessions, walking six inches from the walls, squaring corners, having to march in a section if we were traveling across campus in groups of five or more, and so on. It was also drilled into us that if one of us messed up, fell out of line, or slacked, then we would all be punished. If someone among the plebes was caught doing something unacceptable, it wasn't only that person who was punished but the entire class. We had quiz and drilling sessions in our auditorium every week-end when the regimental officers would quiz us on material that we were supposed to know. They would either praise us and encourage us to perform as we did that week, or tear us down if some things were going on in the plebe class that they did not like. We often would be punished and taken to our individual decks (residence hall floors) where they would shut off the fans (our only source of cooling the dorms in the very hot conditions of July and August) and forced to do pushups, mountain climbers, six inches, and other exercises until we were working out in our own pool of sweat. We would have to hold our push up positions until our drill instructor told us differently, and if one person slipped in their sweat and fell that meant the whole deck would have to start all over again. This is just one example of how this “mob mentality” was impressed upon us. We should not stand out at all and if we did everyone else was punished as well.

We started to interact with the upperclassmen. Some would want to be friendly; however this was highly frowned upon and severely punished. Around this time we were all scheduled to go to the medical clinic on campus to get shots, tested, and all that. I had a medical issue because I had my period all the time due to the high amounts of activity, weather, change in diet, change in stress, and so on. So I asked to be given some type of medication. The medic immediately put me on the (birth control) pill. I thought it was strange and really didn't think it was necessary and that there had to be another way. When talking to other women in my class I found that we were practically all put on the pill. It was the academy's cure-all that was really a disguise for the fact that they wanted to make sure no women got pregnant. They knew what went on when the regiment was not looking or just chose to look the other way. There were very few women at the academy and the men (especially the underclassmen) were restricted to the campus or ships for months at a time. You can just imagine the environment -- the men were a bundle of testosterone.

Life in the dorms was stressful. At first my roommates and I were not allowed to sleep with our doors closed. However after an attack on a female classmate in the middle of the night by a midshipman they allowed us to close and lock our doors. Having our doors locked really did nothing for us because our upperclassmen officers – the CEOs (chief executive officers) and COs (commanding officers) – had keys to our rooms. And after they had been out drinking – “drunken nights” as we called them – they still had access to our rooms whether we locked them

or not. I remember this happened one night. It was a big party night for the seniors and we were terrified because the guys were trying to open our door and we were putting dressers against our door to hold them back. Finally, after we had held them back for some time, they went away. They probably stopped because a CO or Officer on Duty walked by.

After the indoctrination process we were allowed to look around and not straight ahead as we entered the mess hall. As I walked in looking around for the first time I realized that all eyes of the male midshipmen – there was a ratio of 10 men to every woman -- were looking at me. I have never felt so “naked” in my life! I felt like a “piece of meat.” I had heard this expression before and knew what it meant in an abstract way, but the way the women were looked at was absolutely the definition of the term. You cannot really understand what it means until you experience it. It is a very unnerving feeling. The feeling comes back and still sends shivers down my spine when I think of it. These people that I live with and am supposed to trust and bond with, are looking at me like this?

### **The good times**

But I didn't let the stares of the male upperclassmen get to me. I really liked it at the academy. I had been successful so far within the regiment, and had earned an honor ribbon. I was doing well in classes, and I had a boyfriend that I was crazy about. I met him on campus. He was on the football team with one of my plebe friends. He had seen me around campus and asked my classmate for my email and began contacting me. We talked for a while via IM before we even met. When we did meet it was never on campus. He lived in a different state, but relatively close-by, so we would go to his home. I joined the choir and sang for church on Sunday, and I also joined the softball team.

### **The event that turned my life upside down**

It all started after a choral trip into the city. This was an event where we could wear civilian clothes off campus, but as soon as we returned to campus we were expected to be in uniform. After the concert we all went out to a restaurant to get some real food and the guys ordered some beer. The taste of beer has always made me sick, but I accepted a glass and had a few sips, but mainly I let it just sit there. The guys had quite a bit of beer and were a little reckless. When we got back to school I was changing in the women's bathroom of the chapel when a midshipman came in and started to attack me at the sink. I immediately started fighting him off and yelling at him to get out. He pushed me up on the sink and slammed my head against the mirror above the sink. I just kept on kicking and punching and screaming and when we heard the sound of voices coming down the stairs to the bathroom area he ran out.

There is a whole attitude about “ratting on your own.” It is the biggest taboo. I did not know what to do. If I ratted on my own I could imagine what would happen to me. We had been told so many stories about midshipmen who had ratted on their own -- that after one person ratted his life was ruined and he was harassed so badly that he left, and another person was shunned so much that she left. I was very scared.

I stayed quiet about my attack for a few days but my boyfriend could tell something was up with me. He finally made me spill it and he was furious. Later that evening he went out with some friends and had a bit too much to drink and on the way back in stopped in my attacker's room and told him that if he ever came near me again he would suffer serious consequences. I didn't know my boyfriend had done this.

The next thing I knew the Gunnery Sergeant was pounding on my door at 12:30 at night yelling, "Tell me what is going on." The Gunnery Sergeant was a terrifying big bully who ran the Marine Corps Ops program. He was the one person that the entire regiment dreaded. I was startled and, to an audience of all the other cadets on my floor who had woken up because of his shouting, told him about my attack, only to hear that he did not care about that, but wanted to know what was going on between me and the midshipman I was dating.

### **The aftermath**

The following morning I formally reported my attack; however, no one seemed to care about it. Instead, to my amazement, I was the one under attack. I was the one being investigated for fraternization while my attacker walked around care-free. I was summoned first to this official's office and then to that official's office. I was cornered by this officer and that officer. I was called into the 4<sup>th</sup> Company's commanding officer's office many times, and lectured as if I was a prostitute who deserved what she got. My treatment after I reported the incident was absolutely appalling. The investigating officers were all men and I sensed they wanted to get rid of me. I was messing up with their boys' club and they did not like it. I was dismissed as the president of my class ring committee, and relieved of the position of designing the class ring. I was sent hate emails from "anonymous" email accounts that could only be traced if I reported them to the police – which I was pressured not to do. I had trouble completing class projects that required group work because no one was willing to include me in discussions or group meetings. After word got around that I had reported my classmate and that he would be getting in trouble my name was cat-called with derogatory comments during lunch. My name was scratched into lunch trays with drawings and nasty comments – and these were the same trays that were being used by every regimental officer, every commanding officer, every naval officer, even the Commandant of the Academy.

### **The Honor Board**

My attacker was investigated and it was found that he did in fact attack me as I had stated, and he was given a class two for misconduct while I was still investigated for fraternization. Shortly afterwards I had an honor board hearing. There were seven officers who heard the arguments before making a recommendation to the Commandant and Superintendent of the academy.

There definitely was legitimacy to the fraternization charge; however this should not have been connected to my attack. It was a completely separate incident that came out through the attack. This was my boyfriend, and we never met on campus. I knew it was wrong – however I saw others doing it and getting away with it, so I didn't take the rule seriously. I believed as long as

you are not seen together on campus or close to campus it does not really matter. Almost everyone at the academy is guilty of fraternization. Unless you are outwardly fratting – for example, hanging out in an upperclassman's room, being caught off campus with an upperclassman, talking to an upperclassman anything other than answering their regimental questions – there was no way to prove that you were fraternizing so no one ever did anything about it. Fraternizing is one of those things that the regiment ignores until you are caught doing something wrong (whether it has to deal with fratting or not). Then fraternization becomes very important. If you do one thing that causes waves for the regiment your whole life at the academy is investigated and you are charged with anything that anyone can find.

Not many people were supporting me. My roommates were definitely not my support group. They were two very spiteful females. The other two women on my deck were very supportive though. There were a few female upperclassmen in my company who offered supporting words every once in a while but they did not want to get involved in the matter. Over the next few weeks I felt that the few people that were supporting me got tired of sitting with me at breakfast or walking with me and being treated horribly as well, so I lost a lot of support that way. I could just imagine how they felt. I hated the way I was being treated, and it was ridiculous that they were being treated the same way just because they would walk with me or sit with me or work out with me. My deck officers, who were my direct chain of command, never did anything. If they reported what I told them it would seem that they were taking sides with me and helping me cause a stir. Their job was to solve and quiet the issues that were a problem for the regiment before they got to a higher level. I had support from the commander for logistics, but he did not carry as much weight as a company commander.

The most supportive individuals were those outside of the regiment. A couple of professors were very concerned; one was a career officer and he was appalled that the regiment was doing nothing to help me. The other was a civilian, and he could see what the harassment was doing to me when it came to my schoolwork. My softball coach really stuck up for me when it came to the harassment that I was receiving from the gunnery sergeant. The gunnery sergeant would come and interrupt our practice to start yelling at me or pull me out or just stand there and watch me. My coach really stood up for me and told him to back off. There were some midshipmen – especially the guys from the football team and my boyfriend's friends – who had watched out for me. All these people had seen first hand the acts against me and had put their necks on the line and were harassed along with me for standing by me. But it was hard because I had a good part of the regiment against me.

At the honor hearing no one spoke in my defense; there was no one that was on my side anymore. My peers all testified against me because I had already turned on one of their own. Many of the officials thought I looked guilty because I did not report the attack immediately. I did not because I was afraid of what might happen – how I would be ostracized by my classmates – and this is exactly what happened.

I was charged with a class one for fraternization and also a class two for underage drinking, even though I was not the one who ordered the beer and I had barely drunk any of it. My boyfriend was also investigated and brought before the same honor board. He was charged with a class one for fraternization and was given demerits.

## The decision

Afterwards the harassment got worse. My coach wanted me to go to the police after a vile message was scrawled across my softball picture in the main corridor. I was not able to talk to most of the people I had been friends with because not many people wanted to be seen with me. I was suffering -- I was working off my demerits as well as putting up with the harassment and trying to keep up with my school work. My grades started to fall. My boyfriend was afraid to leave me at the academy when he went out to sea. He wanted me to leave and at that point I wanted to leave as well. My parents did not want me to leave because they thought the military academy was such an important place for me. Also they were furious with me because they thought the man I got in trouble with for fraternization was unsuitable to be my boyfriend. My boyfriend said that if my parents would not let me leave I could go to live with his family and go to school there. A few officers who were concerned about my situation told me that it probably wasn't going to get any better. It had gone on for months and it was only getting worse. My friends from back home also thought I was crazy to stay. But it is not easy to leave the military; when you join you sign papers making a commitment for the length of service required for your free education and the time to repay the cost of your education.

I sat in an empty classroom for a long while, trying to decide what to do. Could I put the whole incident behind me, concentrate on my studies, and resume my friendships with my fellow midshipmen? Should I do what my boyfriend suggested, go and live with his family and go to school there? Did I have any other options? I needed to make a decision.

\* \* \* \* \*

## Jane's Decision Case Part B - Epilogue

**To be read after students have responded to topic questions or completed the ranking activity.**

### **Jane continues her story.**

I decided to stay. But I continued to be ostracized by my classmates. I cannot put into words how I felt when all the other students on campus -- all my classmates -- looked at me with disgust and hate. I had professors who were not a part of the military hierarchy take me aside and express concern for my well-being because they had heard what was going on. They knew that I used to be a stellar student before I tripped up. I couldn't sleep at night. I was sick to my stomach with the stress. I was afraid to walk down hallways late at night for fear I might be jumped by some of my own as punishment for ratting. I could not leave my laundry to dry without worrying about coming back to find it missing, ripped up, in the garbage, or somewhere else. I reported the threats that were slid under my door at night to my officers but they did nothing. I came back to my room to find my roommates rummaging through my computer and desk trying to find some dirt about me. (Later I found out that this was encouraged by officers in my company).

Finally I went to the police. It wasn't even about wanting what was right anymore; I was afraid for my own safety. One day I walked out to our guard house where the local police had a station. I took all the evidence I could find and walked in and told them my story. I went to the police office a few more times to talk with them about it. Within days of the regiment finding out that I had gone to the police about the harassment and telling them how every officer on campus knew about it and many permitted it, I was dismissed from the school for "academic reasons."

I went home and started going to school at a local community college to try to figure out what I was going to do next. I worked with the police a little by phone, but they told me that it was really difficult to do anything because I was no longer enrolled, so I dropped my complaints against the academy. I just wanted to put this horrible experience behind me. I married my boyfriend. He is still in the military. I'm working full-time and finishing my degree.

If I met any women who were thinking about applying to a military academy, I would tell them, "Watch 'GI Jane', watch 'Courage Under Fire'. That happens. There are so many other ways to be an accomplished, intelligent female in the world. The military is not ready for women in the service academies."

I recently went back to the academy for the first time since I had been dismissed several years earlier. It was the graduation ceremony and President G.W. Bush addressed the graduating class. According to tradition, anytime a president visits a US Service Academy he has the power to lift all demerits. President Bush did this and there was a loud roar from midshipmen sitting behind the graduates – they would no longer have "black marks" on their record. I sat there and thought to myself, "If he had come when I was there and lifted my demerits would it have been different? Then I would have only had my academics and the regimental hardships and not the demerits as well?" "No", I thought. "The damage was done. The ostracizing had begun and was never going to stop. A woman who rats on her own in an academy had better forget about her career, it's practically over. There was a recent story in the news of a woman who had compromising pictures taken of her by a fellow classmate at a military academy. He blackmailed her, reminding her that if the photos got out... her career was over.... If she told... her career was over." It's a no-win situation

I had done the right thing. As I watched the few women walk across the stage I felt a bit of heartache as well as happiness for them, knowing what a great place this was and wishing that it could have been me up on that stage shaking the president's hand. But, then I thought about what it would have cost me, not standing up for myself when I needed to, and instead just sitting back and keeping quiet. Not standing up for myself was not me, and will never be me, and I was I was proud of myself for acting the way I did.

Andra Gumbus received her Doctorate in Educational Leadership from the College of Business at the University of Bridgeport. She teaches courses in organizational behavior and business ethics. She has published numerous articles on performance management emphasizing the use of the corporate balanced scorecard. Her research in organizational behavior includes articles on human resources, career development and ethical issues in business. Andra can be reached at [gumbusa@sacredheart.edu](mailto:gumbusa@sacredheart.edu)

Jill Woodilla received her Ph.D. from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is Associate Professor of Management at the John F. Welch College of Business, Sacred Heart University. Jill's ironic perspective provides her with a critical view of the multiple realities of any situation. Her current research interests

include power relationships in design management and donor decision-making in charitable giving. She has published several articles on organizational discourse, teaching cases on organizational change and hidden disabilities, and co-edited a book on irony and organizations. She can be reached at [woodillaj@sacredheart.edu](mailto:woodillaj@sacredheart.edu)

Chris York is the Acting Director of the MBA Program and Clinical Assistant Professor, Welch College of Business, Sacred Heart University. With over 40 years of management experience, he has served as Secretary of Citibank's Board of Directors; Associate General Counsel of Citicorp; Vice President of Planning & Marketing of AmBase Corporation, and EVP-Management of Project HOPE, the international medical education NGO. He holds an AB degree from Colgate University, an MA degree from the East-West Center at the University of Hawaii, and a JD degree from Emory University Law School. His current research interest is ethical business practices. He can be reached at [yorkc@sacredheart.edu](mailto:yorkc@sacredheart.edu)