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Finding Business Models in Movie Monsters

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. — *Monsters, Inc.*, the animated film about an energy company that generates power from the screams of children, has become required viewing in two business courses at Illinois Wesleyan University.

Sammie L. Robinson, assistant professor of business administration, believes that the interaction between such characters as Henry J. Waternoose, the CEO of Monsters, Inc., and James P. "Sulley" Sullivan, the company's top "scarer," lends itself to teaching a variety of topics in both human resources and organizational management.

Robinson has used film clips in previous classes — scenes from *12 Angry Men* to illustrate group dynamics and *Crimson Tide* to teach motivation and leadership. With *Monsters, Inc.*, however, her students are required to watch the entire film on their own and refer to it as a case study throughout the semester.

"I had been casting about for something I could use to provide our students, who are of the traditional college age and generally without previous business experience, some beginning points of reference," said Robinson. "A colleague had just taken her daughter to see *Monsters, Inc.*, and told me, 'I have the perfect film to teach human resource management.'"

Some of the issues that Robinson uses the film to illustrate are:

- Leadership styles: "Sulley, the top 'scarer,' and Henry J. Waternoose, the owner, have totally different styles that the students can recognize. Sulley is relationship-oriented while Waternoose is very task-oriented."

- Workplace romance: "Two of the monsters who work together — Mike Wazowski, a scare assistant, and Celia, the receptionist, are involved in a relationship. I use these characters to pose a series of scenarios about what might happen if the relationship goes sour, and Celia files a harassment complaint."

- Performance appraisals: "One assignment for the students is to do performance evaluations for the employees using one of several appraisal methods. One may evaluate Sully using behavioral observation; another may evaluate Randall Boggs, the No. 2 scarer, using the management by objective method."

- Ethical behavior: "The movie turns on issues of ethics, and this provides numerous points of discussion. The fact that one of the key employees, Randall Boggs, is willing to do anything to become the company's top performer and that the CEO, Waternoose, is complicit in Randall's plan is one of several points where business ethics can be raised with students."

Robinson believes an animated film is particularly effective since animators can take more liberties and can suspend reality just enough to make a point. Moreover, she says, her students have to look beyond the obvious.

"Most of the students already know the surface story because they've seen the movie," says Robinson. "I'm asking them to consider these animated characters and the corporation that is at the center of the movie in a very different way."