**Introduction**

The movie “21” is vaguely based upon a true story that took place in the 1980s’. It is about an MIT professor and five students who practice card counting tricks to win at casinos in blackjack tables. One of the students, Ben, has been asked to join the team his professor and does so on a condition that he is doing it to earn $300,000 for medical school and would quit as soon as he had earned enough. Once the money starts to flow his demeanor changes and wants to continue gambling. The professor treats this as a business, and provides funds to the students to use for gambling. He takes a large share of the earnings and the remaining is divided among the five students. During one of the trips to Vegas, Ben makes a mistake and lose $200,000, but the professor demands that he be reimbursed for the entire sum. The professor fails him in his class and influences other professors to fail him as well, all intended to threaten Ben into paying back the $200,000.

**Questions & Answers:**

*Q1: How was “the business world” portrayed... in a positive light, negative light, neutral, etc.?*

*A1: In this movie the professor’s “business” was portrayed in a positive light, initially; but that changed as the plot progressed and the professor’s demeanor changed. In the beginning the students were shown as having a good time learning to play blackjack and the professor showing the students having a good time and essentially helping them earn money. One of the students had a goal of saving money for medical school. Their trips to Vegas were shown in a glamorous light where as their absences from school*
were “taken care of” by the professor. The main plot of the movie showed the main student character, Ben, making a mistake at a blackjack table and losing $200,000. Since this money belonged to the professor, he demanded the money be returned to him by the student. When Ben refuses to do so, the professor turns against him by failing him in his and other classes while also stealing all the money Ben had earned thus far. At this point, the movie portrays the professor and his business in a negative light.

**Q2: What business ethics issues were portrayed?**

**A2:** Following are a few business ethics issues portrayed in the movie:

- The professor was openly recruiting smart students for his own personal gain and taking advantage of poor students by luring them into working for him with promises of glamour and huge sums of money.

- The professor also uses university resources and services to further his personal business goals.

- The professor took advantage of the fact he had power over the students by using that as a stick to make them do his bidding. When one of the students refused to do so, he retaliated by failing the student in his and in other classes.

These were some of the ethical issues that the movie presented its audiences, which I believe could be used to form parallels with any company where a higher-up would take advantage of company resources, employees and services to further his or her other interests. The use of power is portrayed especially well in the movie against a university backdrop where student’s futures are created. The ambitious students portrayed in the movie had worked all their lives to be admitted into MIT and were willing to give up
anything in order to preserve their academic standing, even if that meant appeasing a professor.

**Q3: Choose 3 specific business ethical dilemmas. For each issue do the following:**

a. *Briefly describe how the issue was portrayed.*

b. *How was the issue resolved, if at all?*

c. *How should the issue have been resolved?*

**A3:**

- The Professor was openly recruiting smart students for his own personal gain:
  
  a) The issue was portrayed in a positive manner in the beginning of the movie, but quickly turned negative as the plot progressed and it became clear that the professor was did not have the well being of his students in mind but only cared about his own personal gain.

  b) The students realized that the professor had his own agenda and did not care for the students. The issue was resolved by the students, who banded against the professor and decided to take revenge.

  c) Ideally the professor should never have started this scheme, but while he continued pursuing his business he should have realized that there are risks involved. When the incident occurred where a student lost $200,000 the professor should have taken his losses and walked away. Retaliating against the students caused the students to band together and took revenge.

- The professor used university resources and services:
a) I believe this issue was portrayed in a neutral manner as no emphasis was put on the fact that the professor was indeed using university resources to recruit and train the students in the guise of forming a study group.

b) This particular issue was not resolved by the university as the plot of the movie ended up putting the professor behind bars, but was not in anyway related to him misusing university resources and services.

c) Since the professor insisted on pursuing his business interests, he should have taken his teaching sessions off campus. He also should have talked to his students off campus about any non-university sanctioned business dealings.

- The professor took advantage of his power of students:

  a) This issue was portrayed in a negative light as the professor was shown as a dominating figure where as the students were portrayed as helpless and poor. When things didn’t turn out as the professor had planned, he turned against his students but failing them in his class and also in other classes by influencing other professors. Since graduating from a prestigious institution such as MIT was the dream of the students, they were willing to do as the professor asked.

  b) As part of the plot, the students banded against the professor and lured him into playing blackjack. The professor had been banned from casinos on the charge of counting cards and defrauding the casinos a long time ago. Once
the casino security personnel got wind of his presence on the casino floor
they immediately arrested him and put him jail.

(c) The students should have reported the professor to the university and come
    clean about the whole incident. This way they would have come out of it all
    looking better in front of the university.

Q4: Overall what did you learn from this exercise?

A4: I learnt to analyze and critique ethical issues portrayed in a cinematic setting and
draw parallels with other real-world settings. After analyzing the movie, it made me
realize how important power is and how it can be used to coerce people to do
something that they are not willing to do otherwise. Also, it is always best to come out
clean when one is stuck in an ethically questionable situation, rather than be sucked
deeper into a quagmire.