If New Jersey government and business leaders were playing television’s popular word game “Wheel of Fortune,” their word of choice for solving all the puzzles would be ‘innovation.’ They spell the word daily in their speeches that extol the virtues of innovation as being the key to New Jersey’s fame and fortune. Turning that key and unlocking the value of innovation may be a bit more complicated, however, than using it in a sentence.

Kevin Michels, a professor at the School of Business at The College of New Jersey, can help individuals and institutions discover the societal treasures that result from well-executed innovation. Professor Michels is a student of innovation, which he is working to elevate to an academic discipline.

The keynote speaker at a recent Princeton Regional Chamber of Commerce luncheon, Professor Michels was named one of the Top 40 Undergraduate Business Professors in the country in a 2017 survey by Poets and Quants Magazine. As a perpetual student, teacher, and advocate of innovation, he sees innovation as “a trinity of value, ethics and technology …. A deep reflection on value and ethics can help us uncover the innovation opportunities that technology can deliver …. Businesses, social enterprises, and technologists can learn how to work together to create and deliver valuable change,” said Professor Michels, who teaches courses and conducts research on law, ethics and innovation and is the founding director of the School of Business Center for Innovation and Ethics. He is working on a book tentatively titled: The Innovator's Discipline: Fusing Value, Ethics and Technology to Change the World.

The threshold question, said Professor Michels at his Princeton Chamber presentation, is: “what is innovation? Change? But there is good change, bad change, and trivial change …. Innovation is …. Substantial change that delivers important and ethical value in the world.”
Ten years ago, Professor Michels’ department chair, Dr. John McCarty, gave him the opportunity to be creative and innovative – to develop a brand-new course in anything he wanted. “I knew I wanted to explore the question of how do we teach people to drive innovation strategically, how to chart the course for innovation, to go beyond the platitudes and clichés associated with innovation. And I also was determined to help overcome the perception that innovation cannot be taught – that it’s more magic than method.”

“People of all backgrounds can innovate if they have the right academic and practical tools. Engineers can be great innovators, if they also are trained to think about values and ethics …. STEM education can be crucial to providing the technological tools for achieving innovation. But I believe that a liberal arts education is equally important in innovation – providing the capacity to think across disciplines, see connections, to deliver value by being forever curious and interested in solving the problems, uncovering where the gaps exist, and then figuring out how to navigate the gaps.”

As examples, Professor Michels mentioned three individuals whose names were only vaguely familiar to me. Tim Berners Lee was frustrated by the inability of teams at CERN to collaborate. (CERN, the international physics laboratory based in France, provides the particle accelerators and other infrastructure needed for high-energy physics research.) His solution was to create the World Wide Web.

Atul Gawande was troubled by surgical outcomes in developing countries. He introduced the checklist into the surgical theatre, substantially improving the success rate.

John Bogle was unhappy with the expense and results of investment funds. As a result, he revolutionized investment with the index fund.

“You can begin to see how innovators fuse ethical values and know-how to change the world,” said Mr. Michels.

Kevin Michels’ academic career in innovation was fueled by his prior non-academic career as a practicing lawyer. Before joining the faculty at TCNJ, Mr. Michels, with a BA in history and political science from Rutgers College and JD from Rutgers Law School – Newark, was a director of the law practice Michels & Hockenjos, L.L.C., representing startup companies helping entrepreneurs build their own companies, and serving as expert witness, consultant and counsel on matters involving attorney ethics and liability.

While in practice, he authored a treatise on legal ethics and served on the New Jersey Supreme Court Commission on the Rules of Professional Conduct, which advised the Court on the 2004 revision of the attorney ethics rules …. “After nearly 20 years of practicing law, I wanted an opportunity to think about and research these issues on a sustained basis …. so, I was honored and thrilled to join the TCNJ faculty in 2006.” His academic writing explored the intersection of law ethics and business. “After developing a body of research
in a discipline, I think it is important to look for larger, interdisciplinary connections. For me, that was to explore ways to integrate our deep ethical and value commitments into the innovation process."

“If students are going to be innovators, we must give them more than stories and anecdotes, need an operational account – blue print for innovation, how to do it, how to do it procedurally.”

His reputation for inspiring innovation among students has gone far beyond the business curriculum at TCNJ. He was voted to be the commencement speaker at the 2016 TCNJ graduation ceremony. Even though he never shows favorites in the classroom, he couldn’t help thinking about one particular graduate that year – his own daughter, Tori Michels, who, no matter what she does, is destined to do it with passion, creativity, ethics and innovation.