

: Sustainability in the Curriculum

INTRODUCTION

The increasing integration of environmental, social and ethical issues into the business school curriculum is a trend that The Aspen Institute Center for Business Education seeks both to document and to support. Through our Corporate Governance and Accountability (CGA) project, which was supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, and which aimed to expand business schools' focus beyond the "shareholder primacy" model, Aspen CBE has worked to create new sustainability-focused teaching materials for use in the business school classroom, and to gather best practices from faculty and schools that are working to foreground these issues in the curriculum.

As the Corporate Governance and Accountability project draws to a close, we seek to distill some of the broader lessons of curriculum change that we have gathered through our many conversations with business faculty. A previous [Closer Look](#) examined two faculty's thought processes in developing stakeholder-focused teaching materials through the CGA project and their experiences putting the materials to use in the classroom. This paper highlights curriculum change efforts at three different universities—Bentley University, the University of Guelph, and the University of Maryland—that are designed both to prepare students for a changed marketplace where sustainability know-how is essential, and to help students use sustainability as an entrée into new questions and forms of analysis that enhance their total learning experience. These efforts situate the business school curriculum in the broader contexts of the university as a whole, the academy, and society at large.

THE BOTTOM LINE

- More and more business schools are heeding the call to prepare their students to be environmental and social stewards and ethical actors in the workplace.
- Faculty are drawing on interdisciplinary resources to teach sustainability subject matter and instill habits of mind that will serve students well in their careers.

ETHICS AND THE LIBERAL ARTS AT BENTLEY UNIVERSITY

Anthony F. Buono is Professor of Management and Sociology and Coordinator of the Alliance for Ethics and Social Responsibility at **Bentley University** in Waltham, Massachusetts. He has been involved in three curriculum change efforts at Bentley. Two of these efforts aim to enhance the undergraduate learning experience, and one is a faculty development effort that is open to business academia at large.

Bentley's Liberal Studies Major, now five years old, gives undergraduate business students the option of creating a second, liberal-arts-based major to complement their business major. Students can choose from seven different options, two of which—"Ethics and Social Responsibility" and "Earth, Environment and Global Sustainability"—are explicitly sustainability-focused. Bentley has also recently launched a new program for its business undergraduates, entitled "Complex Problems/Creative Solutions," which has just begun its pilot phase. Students opt in to the program, which is based around a sustainability-related theme. This year's theme focuses on the unintended negative consequences of consumer choices, and the problem of techno-trash—the disposal of cell phones, iPods, computers and other electronic gadgetry. During their freshman and sophomore years, the students take three related courses as a cohort each semester, and at the conclusion of the program, they will propose a set of solutions to the problem they have been considering for two years.

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Professor Buono works with students in the two sustainability-related Liberal Studies Majors, advising 10 out of the roughly 90 students in those two majors. He also served on the two University-wide task forces that helped to create the two programs. Of the program design process he says, “We asked ourselves how we could best use our capacity in the arts and sciences to enhance the business curriculum for students. The faculty on the task forces worked closely to integrate the issues into their courses in an effective fashion. We wanted to stress the importance of multidisciplinary thinking, which leads to greater creativity.”

A third effort at Bentley, which trains faculty, but which, according to Professor Buono, positively affects the student experience as well, is Bentley’s Global Business Ethics Symposium and Faculty Development Teaching Workshop. The program, which grew out of a longstanding internal workshop on ethics for Bentley faculty, is now in its sixth year, and is sponsored by the State Street Foundation. The symposium and workshop are designed to help faculty from all business disciplines incorporate an ethics-based perspective into their teaching. The symposium is open to the public and the follow-on four-day workshop hosts 20 faculty per year, half from Bentley and half from other universities around the world. The workshop places a focus on peer coaching, and the number of attendees is kept small to ensure that all participants will have the opportunity to be actively involved.

According to Professor Buono, the Symposium and Workshop reflect a longstanding focus on ethics at Bentley, which is felt in many disciplines. He says, “The ethics focus spills over into the rest of the curriculum. I’m convinced that we wouldn’t see this level of attention to ethical issues and integration across the curriculum if it weren’t for this program.”

CURRICULUM CHANGE AT THE UNIVERSITY OF GUELPH

Elizabeth Kurucz is Assistant Professor of Organizational Behavior and Sustainable Commerce at the College of Management and Economics at the **University of Guelph** in Guelph, Ontario. She has refashioned undergraduate and MBA-level introductory Organizational Behavior courses to incorporate greater sustainability content, and is in the process of doing the same for other courses. Her efforts are part of a larger initiative at the College to incorporate these issues into the core curriculum, as well as to develop new electives on social and environmental topics.

A major goal of the College’s curriculum redesign is to place sustainability front and center, weaving it into courses in an array of disciplines, and exposing all undergraduate and MBA students to its guiding ideas. For example, Professor Kurucz created a new MBA course on “Sustainable Value Creation,” which is now a required first semester course for all MBA students. According to Professor Kurucz, introducing these concepts earlier in the program helps students to see sustainability as “a frame through which they view the content they learn in the rest of their courses.” She says, “I make sustainability the context as opposed to the content, and I make sure that sustainability ideas are tied to OB concepts. I tell students that the goal of Organizational Behavior as stated in our text book is to make organizations more effective. In the traditional model effectiveness might not include a simultaneous focus on social, economic and environmental factors, but in a sustainable approach it means creating more value for an array of stakeholders, including shareholders.”

Professor Kurucz has also designed the class to help students develop critical thinking skills. From the outset of the course student learning is focused on how to unearth underlying assumptions and values. “If we make different assumptions, we can wind up with different outcomes—and some of those outcomes may be more sustainable than others,” she says. Professor Kurucz believes that incorporating sustainability into the course helps students learn to think critically by giving them a range of questions and problems to consider at the same time as the traditional problems and questions of the business curriculum. “What businesses want in an employee is a well-rounded person who can think independently and originally. One of the aims of the course is to help students build their capacity to navigate complexity. When you can think along multiple dimensions, you can create more value and make more impact.”

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A UNIVERSITY-WIDE PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND

Rachelle Sampson is Assistant Professor of Logistics, Business and Public Policy at the Smith School of Business at the **University of Maryland** in College Park, Maryland, and **Mark Stewart** is the University's Campus Sustainability Coordinator. Mr. Stewart runs the Chesapeake Project, a University-wide initiative, now in its pilot year, which provides support to faculty from an array of disciplines as they incorporate sustainability-related content into their courses. Professor Sampson is among the faculty who have participated in the program.

According to Mark Stewart, the Chesapeake Project follows a model that has existed for nearly 20 years and has been used at a number of other universities. He says "Each school that uses the program gives it its own spin. We called our version the Chesapeake Project to give a nod to this longstanding trend and to suggest that as much as possible we want to teach sustainability using local examples."

Faculty apply to participate in the program, through which they redesign an existing course and receive a small stipend. Forty-two faculty applied to the first round of the program and twenty-three were accepted. The faculty who were selected to participate came together for a two-day seminar where they were introduced to the core concepts of sustainability, and interacted with faculty experts in sustainability as well as other faculty mentors who have incorporated social and environmental topics into other disciplines. Following the two-day workshop, faculty submitted a revised syllabus; all will teach their refashioned course in the current academic year.

Because of her experience covering sustainability-related topics in her Economics classes, Professor Sampson was one of the peer mentors who led a workshop exercise designed to help faculty find natural overlaps between sustainability and their disciplines' core concepts. She says, "I discussed how these issues can play out in Economics. I talked about the idea of externalities, how to broaden what marginal costs include, and what would happen to production and costs if you incorporated externalities." Professor Sampson reports that she found the experience very valuable, and enjoyed interacting with a broad array of faculty from throughout the university. She says, "There were engineers and architects, people from the theater and dance departments, and from throughout the humanities—it was amazing to see them all come together and to see the different connections they were able to make to sustainability."

LESSONS FROM CURRICULUM CHANGE

The process of introducing sustainability-related content into the curriculum creates benefits for faculty and students within the classroom, and extends to the university at large. Below, interviewees discuss some of the positive outcomes that their efforts have generated.

Sustainability as a Teaching Tool

In discussing their teaching experiences, the three faculty consistently describe sustainability as a valuable teaching tool that helps students make connections between ideas and information, and as a frame that can provide useful context for teaching standard subject matter.

According to Rachelle Sampson, sustainability content can be a natural fit in Economics courses. She says, "Lots of people think that incorporating sustainability will mean that you have to remove essential content and substitute something else. But an effective approach that doesn't sacrifice core content is to use sustainability-based examples, through which students can think through the real-world applications of the Economics concepts they're learning."

In discussing her "Sustainable Value Creation" course, Elizabeth Kurucz describes sustainability as helping students to draw connections between topics that if presented in a more traditional manner might seem unconnected. "In a standard version of an introductory OB course, one week you might talk about structure, then design, leadership, teamwork and so forth, and you'd study each of these as one-offs. But

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you can use sustainability as an overarching frame that ties these topics together and shows how they all interact.”

Sustainability can also serve as a means of engaging students on a personal level. Professor Kurucz says “Sustainability gets a lot of students feeling connected to the subject matter from the very start. For some, it’s because they already care deeply about social and environmental issues, and the course shows them a connection between their studies and these issues they’re committed to. For others, it’s a matter of framing sustainability knowledge as an advantage in their careers. Businesses are looking for people with these kinds of skills, and I let my students know that this knowledge can be very valuable to them!”

She also believes that adding sustainability can help to push students to think more innovatively: “In business schools we talk a lot about innovation, but so much of what we teach is really about keeping everything the same, and reducing complexity. Until we take things apart critically and realign how we think, we’ll always come up with the same result. Sustainability helps students to rethink their assumptions, and helps them learn to embrace complexity—all of which will help them to become innovators.”

Benefits to Students

The faculty interviewed also observe the benefits of a sustainability focus in student learning and in students’ subsequent professional careers.

According to Anthony Buono, students who participate in the sustainability-based Liberal Studies Majors are often better able to draw connections between the different aspects of their education. In particular, students see the benefits of strong expository writing skills (on which the program places particular emphasis) and can broadly apply ideas and knowledge from different subjects. He says, “One of the things I particularly enjoy about working with the students in the Liberal Studies Major is their ability to draw on integrative perspectives. Students will tell me about how they’re taking an Accounting course or a Marketing course, and how the sustainability or liberal arts ideas they’ve gotten from their other major help them to think of new kinds of questions and ideas to apply in their business coursework.” He expects that by asking students to consider a consistent set of problems through different disciplines, the Complex Problems/Creative Solutions program will have a similar effect.

Elizabeth Kurucz finds that because her courses focus on building skills in critical thinking in order to navigate the complex problems of sustainability, there can be a time lag between when students are exposed to these concepts and when they start to build the capabilities they need to be able to rethink traditional approaches to business. “Students can be confused at first by an approach that doesn’t just get them to directly apply decision-making models but that requires them to challenge the fundamental underlying assumptions of existing models. I’ve had experiences in which students are confused for the four weeks of a class, and then all at once they get it. I’ve also had students email me a year after they took my class and are in the workplace to say ‘I didn’t know what you were talking about at the time, but now I understand it!’”

Community and Collaboration

According to all interviewees, efforts to integrate environmental, social and ethical components in the curriculum can contribute to the creation of productive and supportive on-campus communities focused around these issues. Elizabeth Kurucz says, “We’re starting to really build a culture at our school that values sustainability. A group of students has recently started a Net Impact chapter, and faculty who are interested in sustainability are starting to come together to support each other’s work. It’s encouraging to see these issues taking hold beyond the classroom.”

Anthony Buono reports synergies on Bentley’s campus among groups that are working toward similar goals. He says, “We have a very well-developed service learning program, which draws students from across campus including many of those who participate in the Liberal Studies and Complex

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Problems/Creative Solutions programs. These experiences really complement each other, and help students understand how they can use their business skills to reach out to the community.”

Professor Buono also stresses that the collaborative, interdisciplinary nature of all three of Bentley’s curriculum change programs has helped to create connections among faculty on campus. He says, “We started small, drew in like-minded people, and over time the programs evolved. Because the effort really came from the faculty and it was faculty-led, these efforts have become a central part of the institution.”

Rachelle Sampson and Mark Stewart report that Chesapeake Project is a valuable component of a growing focus on sustainability at the University of Maryland and in particular at the Smith School, and that it has also helped to reinforce and expand that trend. Says Professor Sampson, “We have a new dean at the business school, and a new center on social ventures. The dean really encouraged people to apply for the program.” Mr. Stewart concurs. “The business school was the largest financial supporter of the project, and of the twenty-three faculty who participated, five were from the business school. Support of the different schools within the University was critical to the success of the program. Deans of the schools who participated gave financial support as well as intellectual buy-in, which gave the program legitimacy among faculty.”

Both believe that because the Chesapeake Project is a University-wide initiative it is particularly rewarding for faculty participants, and particularly effective for students. Mark Stewart underscores the importance of university-wide sustainability efforts and sums up the potential power of cross-disciplinary efforts: “Many students are already knowledgeable about these issues and they understand that the issues will affect everyone and likely define their own careers. Solutions will have to come at a societal level, which means that the level of change we need depends on collaboration across disciplines.”

ONGOING QUESTIONS

- How can business faculty use content and concepts from the liberal arts to enhance student learning?
- How can faculty development efforts bolster faculty’s comfort teaching on social, environmental and ethical topics, and spark positive change in the curriculum?
- How can change in the curriculum contribute to broader conversations about sustainability at the business school or university level?

RESOURCES:

BeyondGreyPinstripes.org – World’s biggest MBA database, including detailed records on thousands of courses and information on extracurriculars, university centers, and more, for 128 schools on six continents.

CasePlace.org – A free and practical on-line resource for up-to-date case studies, syllabi, and innovative teaching materials on business and sustainability. Created for the educators who will shape our next generation of business leaders!

A Closer Look is a regular series of briefing papers on topical issues in MBA education, based on the research and programs of the Aspen Institute. The Aspen Institute’s [Center for Business Education](http://CenterforBusinessEducation.org) encourages future business leaders to innovate at the intersection of corporate profits and social impacts.

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