

# The Socially Responsible Curriculum

by Tricia Bisoux

There was a time when many CEOs believed that socially responsible business practices were too expensive to implement, but today the opposite may be true. At a time when every action is subject to scrutiny, a company that ignores the social impact of its practices may pay dearly in terms of lost reputation, tarnished brand, higher employee turnover, and diminished consumer loyalty. As part of the new “green” deal, the importance of the “triple bottom line”—profits, planet, and people—has grown exponentially.

It is more important than ever for business schools to help students and organizations understand—and quantify—the business case for sustainability, says Nicola Acutt, director of curriculum development at the Presidio School of Management in San Francisco, California. Institutions ranging from Goldman Sachs to McKinsey & Company have issued reports on the strategic pragmatism of corporate social responsibility, she says. “Five years ago, we had to search for numbers that made the business case for sustainability. Now, the numbers are flying fast,” Acutt adds. “We don’t have to make the case anymore. It’s now accepted that it makes business sense.”

Many business schools have made it their mission to teach students the advantages of social responsibility and entrepreneurship via community service projects, corporate consulting, interdisciplinary teams, and full-scale student enterprises. In this way, they are working with business to provide graduates with the training, knowledge, talent, and drive to solve global problems in innovative ways.

Curricula that emphasize socially responsible business practices aim to make triple impact on the world’s triple bottom line.



## Making **TRANSFORMATIVE** Impact

*EGADE, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores  
Monterrey, Mexico*

Transforming failing businesses into profitable enterprises—or good businesses into great ones—relies firmly on the innovation, creativity, and cost effectiveness that sustainable business practices can inspire, says Elisa Cobas, a professor at EGADE. If students are to be agents of such transformations, they first must learn the true definition of

sustainability. “‘Sustainable’ does not necessarily refer to something environmental,” Cobas says. The term also describes a business model that sustains and protects the livelihoods of a company’s employees, its community, and its own long-term success.

In Cobas’ course, student teams develop a “sustainability portfolio” for one of 100 small- and medium-sized companies involved with EGADE’s business accelerator. Students analyze the life cycle of the company’s product or service and how it contributes to value for the company’s customers, employees, and community, as well as to its own success.

### More Ideas for the Classroom

**E**ducators emphasize that it takes time, commitment, and creativity to teach socially responsible business effectively. They suggest several ideas to enhance courses in sustainable business management:

#### ■ **Think globally, act locally.**

While projects involving the widespread operations of Fortune 500 companies are certainly educational, students often get closer to the effects of sustainable business practices when working on local concerns.

Daniel Malan, a professor at the University of Stellenbosch Business School in Bellville, South Africa, emphasizes that local examples also give students more opportunities to apply what they’ve learned. The best case studies, too, will be those generated by the local community. “Examples from the U.S. are not always effec-

tive within a South African environment,” he says.

#### ■ **“Accelerate” learning.**

Sustainable business accelerators, where companies invite students to solve their biggest sustainability challenges, have become the way many business schools present students with real-world, experiential learning opportunities. The accelerator at EGADE, for example, serves approximately 100 companies. At Duquesne University’s Donahue School, companies compete to have students work on their projects—this year, five student teams had their pick of projects submitted by ten local companies.

In May, the University of North Carolina’s Kenan-Flagler Business School in Chapel Hill launched its first Business Accelerator for Sustainable Entrepreneurship (BASE). The accelerator will focus on startups,

whose success often relies on minimizing costs and conserving resources, says Katie Kross, executive director of UNC’s Center for Sustainable Enterprise. “BASE will raise the visibility of sustainability issues and foster the growth of new businesses that have a positive impact on the environment and society,” says Kross. “UNC students will take part in interdisciplinary experiential learning that shows them how to integrate environmental and social considerations into all aspects of business.”

■ **Promote student ventures.** At many business schools, students independently launch their own social entrepreneurial businesses and learn firsthand just how much they can accomplish locally and globally.

In April, for example, 15 members of the chapter of Students in Free Enterprise

(SIFE) at Quinnipiac University in Hamden, Connecticut, launched a new coffee business, Café Cameroon. The business will purchase high-grade coffee beans from the 400 residents of Bawa, a village in the West Province of Cameroon, Africa. Students are working in teams to handle logistics, accounting, sales, and public relations for the cafe. They received their first shipment of coffee beans in February.

The goal is to generate enough profit for the village to build a much-needed health center, says Rich Hirsch, director of Quinnipiac’s Family Business Center and SIFE advisor. In addition, students want to help support a sustainable economy in Bawa that allows residents to support themselves.

■ **Develop living case studies.** Student teams in the Donahue School’s Sustain-

‘Sustainable’ does not necessarily refer to something environmental,” says Elisa Cobas. The term also describes a business model that sustains and protects the livelihoods of a company’s employees, its community, and its own long-term success.

Last year, one of Cobas’ students owned a company that made glass jars for candles. His company had lost market share to firms in the U.S. and China, and he faced going out of business. However, after he and his teammates conducted a sustainability analysis, they discovered that his company’s manufacturing process could also produce glass for wall-mounted light fixtures—and that he could keep its doors opened and its 30 workers employed.

Cobas’ students also worked with a water treatment company that had developed mobile water purification equipment that could be transported by pickup truck. In their

ability MBA program write five-page, single-spaced case studies of their sustainability projects. Faculty hope to use these case studies as pedagogical tools for future cohorts.

■ **Involve students in research.** The Donahue School also selects students to work five to ten hours a week with faculty members to develop new research and pedagogical tools involving sustainability. So far, these projects have led to four potential journal publication submissions and one case study to be used in its SMBA program.

■ **Make time for reflection.** A large part of developing students with skills and social awareness is to build into the curriculum time and opportunities for them to reflect on and refine what they have learned. At the University of Stellenbosch Business School, for example, MBA students

undergo what USB faculty call the “Sustainable Leadership Process,” explains Laetitia van Dyk, head of USB’s Center for Leadership Studies. This includes a 360-degree assessment, a meeting with a USB career officer, a personal development plan, and participation on student leadership councils. In addition, students can use Web-based Leadership Aspiration guides, online tools that help them determine their leadership

intentions. They also are required to keep personal journals throughout the MBA program, where they reflect on their leadership styles.

■ **Define and refine.** At the Presidio School of Management, students are asked to write down their definitions of sustainability at the beginning and the end of the two-year MBA program. At the beginning of her program, for example, one student defined sustainability simply

as “acting with regard for the environment in which you operate.”

By the end of the program, her definition had evolved. “Sustainability,” she wrote, “is the process of renegotiating our relationship with the resources we use to conduct our business, and the environment in which we operate. This renegotiation includes both physical and human capital. By operating in a sustainable fashion, we redesign our processes and operations in order to limit the damage we inflict and find new ways to create value for ourselves and the world.”

Such an exercise “speaks to the continuum of inquiry” that the program espouses, says Nicola Acutt, Presidio’s director of curriculum development. “It demonstrates the maturity, level of understanding, and competence that students develop.”



sustainability analysis, students realized that the technology could be of immediate help to people in remote villages without clean water or in areas hit by natural disasters. They also uncovered a larger business opportunity: car washes. “Students realized that this company could offer an effective way for car washes to save money and conserve water,” says Cobas.

Cobas believes students leave her class with the intention to transform the way companies do business. “I tell my students that they now have a great responsibility, because they know what they didn’t know before. They know about the scarcity of our planet’s resources and how much damage our bad behavior can do,” she says. “As leaders, they now have the responsibility to change that behavior and take action to transform how people think and act.”

## Making **SCALABLE** Impact

*Miami University, Farmer School of Business  
Oxford, Ohio*

In 2006, Brett Smith, a professor at Miami University’s Farmer School of Business, was searching for a way to provide a wide-scale social venture opportunity to his students. Smith knew that Bono, lead singer of the rock band U2, was a vocal proponent of social entrepreneurship, and he planned to invite Bono to campus to speak to students. As he explored that opportunity, he discovered Edun Apparel, a socially conscious apparel company started by Bono and his wife, Ali Hewson. Acting on the premise “trade, not aid,” the for-profit Edun Apparel aims to effect social change, not through charity, but through business. By sourcing apparel from cotton growers and clothing factories in India, Peru, and sub-Saharan African countries, Edun Apparel works to provide workers with livelihoods and build self-sustaining communities.

Coincidentally, Bono also was looking for a university partner. His idea: to purchase blank T-shirts from African companies, print them with custom designs, and sell them to college students. So when Smith contacted Edun Apparel with the idea for the Edun Live on Campus social entrepreneurship project, it was a perfect fit. Through Edun Live on Campus, business students work with students from across the MU campus; together, they learn about the global economy, participate in conference calls with company executives, create marketing plans for their product, and develop greater social awareness.

ELOC purchases each blank shirt directly from African



**ELOC participants iron out the details of selling the T-shirts sourced from African manufacturers.**

manufacturers, sending \$4 per shirt back into Africa’s local economies. Students then have the T-shirts custom-printed and sell them in the U.S.

Smith says that ELOC has created opportunities for his students that he had not envisioned. One student spent last summer working for Edun Live’s division in Ireland. Another was invited to sit on a panel about “students ending poverty” at Clinton Global Initiative University, where she met fellow panelist Premal Shah, president of the microfinancing site Kiva.org, as well as former U.S. president Bill Clinton. The Farmer School also will be taking a group of students to Africa to visit businesses that produce the shirts they sell.

With ELOC in full force at the Farmer School, Smith wants to introduce the program to other schools. So far, The Ohio State University and Gonzaga University have signed on. Smith’s goal is to roll the program out at 40 schools by 2012. As the program gains momentum, the true value of a socially conscious business curriculum will come to the fore, Smith emphasizes.

“Students are engaging in hands-on learning, but also in peer-to-peer learning and peer-to-peer teaching,” says Smith. “We’re scaling more than just the social impact of supporting African farmers and businesses; we’re scaling the experiential learning. The whole is becoming greater than its parts.”

“We’ve tried to break down barriers between courses, so that students don’t view each course as something they focus on for a short time and then forget,” says Virginia Gerde.

## Making **SUSTAINABLE** Impact

*Seattle University, Albers School of Business and Economics  
Seattle, Washington*

Many leadership courses require students to tackle real-world projects and problems. But in the Executive Leadership Program, a seven-month, 20-credit graduate program at Seattle University’s Albers School of Business and Economics, students also must ensure that the impact of their work lasts beyond their own participation. “It’s a large challenge,” says ELP’s director Marilyn Gist. “But it’s also a wonderful learning laboratory for developing leadership and teamwork skills.”

The ELP includes the seven-month course, “Leadership for a Just and Humane World.” The program, taught by six faculty members and 12 professional coaches, enrolls two sections of 25 students each. Student teams must identify an area of social justice they’d like to address in areas such as education, healthcare, homelessness, hunger, domestic violence, or elder care. Their assignment: to make a “significant and sustainable contribution” within that domain within six months.

Gist points to the impact students already have made in the area of domestic violence. One team discovered that domestic violence victims often must leave their possessions behind when they leave dangerous households. The team persuaded moving and storage companies to donate their services to victims identified by the police departments and a service agency. One team member went on to serve on that agency’s board, ultimately encouraging Albers alumni to get involved. Those alumni volunteers developed a curriculum for early intervention and prevention of domestic violence now taught to middle school children.

Another team developed a mentoring program for victims transitioning out of violence to help them learn to live independently for the first time. Delivered by mentors who have experienced domestic violence themselves, the curriculum emphasizes topics such as personal safety and financial management.

Such examples show students just how their business decisions can have lasting impact, says Gist. One graduate, whose firm works with rug suppliers in India, made sure



that his company was not buying from suppliers using child labor. Another graduate, whose company buys shrimp in global markets, uses his leadership position to promote sustainable practices in supplier countries.

“Although projects are initially focused on social justice in the local community, our curriculum also addresses the global community,” says Gist. The ultimate lesson for participants, she says, is that “they can learn to lead and partner with others to achieve significant goals.”

## Making **INTEGRATED** Impact

*Presidio School of Management  
San Francisco, California*

*Duquesne University, Donahue Graduate School of Business  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania*

Educators at a handful of business schools have chosen not only to integrate sustainability and social responsibility, but to create full-blown MBA programs in sustainability. The Presidio School of Management in San Francisco, California, for example, has based its entire graduate business curriculum on sustainable management since the school’s inception in 2003. And the Donahue Graduate School of Business at Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, launched its own Sustainability MBA (SMBA) last year.

The key element to programs at both Presidio and Donahue is *integration*. Faculty collaborate to integrate the content of their own courses with the content of others. “We’ve tried to break down barriers between courses, so that students don’t view each course as something they focus on for a short time and then forget,” says Virginia Gerde, associate professor in Donahue’s SMBA program.

At the Donahue School, courses worth 16 credits are delivered in 75-minute modules, some of which are co-taught by faculty from different disciplines. As part of the program, students work in teams on semesterlong consulting projects with local businesses. SMBA students also participate in two study-abroad experiences; this year, students traveled to Germany and Japan to visit businesses, nonprofits,



**Duquesne SMBA student Holly Gioia presents her team's solution during a workshop on the human dimension of climate change at the United Nations University in Bonn in March 2008.**

and universities so they could discuss the challenges of sustainable business practices overseas.

The integrated curriculum is flexible enough to allow students to learn core business skills and explore sustainable issues in depth, all while designing and implementing projects that have meaning and impact for themselves and the community, says Gerde. For example, one SMBA team worked with a local grocery chain to determine the business case for using plastic, paper, or reusable bags. Another worked with a company to draw up an analysis of how it should handle membership to the Chicago Climate Exchange, a system of "carbon trading" that allows organizations that produce fewer greenhouse gases to sell allowances to those that produce more. This summer, another team will develop a system to help a company chart its progress in achieving sustainable business practices across its operation.

Presidio's MBA program in sustainable management comprises 16 courses with no electives. Presidio faculty collaborate regularly to integrate core disciplines and sustainability issues vertically, across all courses, and horizontally, throughout the duration of the MBA program. Each summer, professors attend a two-day meeting to discuss opportunities to integrate and cross-reference content in all courses; throughout the academic year, faculty also produce online workshops to share what's happening in each professor's classroom. "We want to make sure we're all on the same page in terms of the flow of content," says Acutt.

At the end of the program, students take an integrative capstone course, where they connect what they've learned to a project that's meaningful to them. "Initially, our capstone

The planet needs help. Students trained in sustainable management are more conscious of social responsibility and the ways that business decisions can make a difference," says Marilyn Gist.

course was a simulation experience," says Acutt. "We eventually abandoned the simulation option in favor of a capstone course that asked each student, 'What's your big idea?' We wanted the course to place each student's idea in a global context in relation to sustainability and what they want to do with their lives."

While taking the course on the principles of sustainable management, for example, a group of Presidio students persuaded Presidio faculty and board members to join the Chicago Climate Exchange. During a course on marketing and operations the following semester, the team continued its project by launching Drive Neutral, an organization that allowed individuals to offset their own carbon emissions. One team member continued to lead Drive Neutral after he graduated and eventually expanded its environmental focus beyond carbon offsets to include eco-friendly lifestyle choices. The organization, now called Live Neutral, has partnered with Presidio and the Exchange to launch an executive training program focused on carbon markets and the new regulatory environment.

Other students have entered traditional corporate environments, ranging from Mattel to Wal-Mart, to help these companies develop more sustainable strategies. "Students who pursue MBAs in sustainable management can redefine traditional careers," says Acutt. "They also can create completely new careers in sectors that didn't exist 20 years ago."

### **From Thought to Action**

The difference between ethics and social responsibility is the difference between thought and action, say these educators. "The planet needs help; our social systems need help. Business leaders are being asked to leverage opportunities to be positive forces for change," says Gist of the Albers School. Students trained in sustainable management, she adds, "are more conscious of social responsibility and the ways that business decisions can make a difference."

These educators argue that their sustainability-savvy, socially responsible business students aren't just pushing for social change. These students are showing businesses how to become more efficient, more profitable, and more capable of meeting society's growing expectations that they leave the world better than they found it. 