

# The Green TEAM

What's small and committed and green all over?

Three niche MBAs that focus their whole programs on sustainable business.

While mainstream business schools are beginning to bring more issues of corporate social responsibility (CSR) into the classroom, some educators think their efforts are insufficient. What's needed, they believe, are business curricula that are built entirely around the concept of sustainable development—that still teach the basic disciplines, but color them all with a shade of green.

Three small, niche schools have done just that, developing MBA programs built entirely around sustainability. All three are on the West Coast of the U.S., a region often at the forefront of liberal and environmental movements. All three are run by organizers who passionately believe that the traditional methods of teaching business are simply not good enough.

“With all the scandals in big business—with the environmental problems surrounding fresh water supplies, forest cover, and global warming—and with social issues such as the widening spread between rich and poor, it's pretty clear that we need a new model for business,” says Susan Briski, operations coordinator for the Green MBA at the New College of California in Santa Rosa, California. “Students are still learning the same skills we've been teaching since the Industrial Revolution, which caused some of these social inequities and polluted our environment in the first place.”

Briski and her colleagues believe it's time for a fundamental change.

## Class Concept

Like the Green MBA, the MBA programs at Bainbridge Graduate Institute on Bainbridge Island, Washington, and Presidio World College in San Francisco integrate issues of sustainability into every single course—and they draw par-

ticipants who share that vision of developing socially responsible businesses. According to Allison Weeks, dean of students at Presidio, faculty and students “look at business from an integrated bottom line that includes a return to the community, a return to the environment, and a return to investors.”

This means even traditional MBA material is viewed through a green-tinged lens. Says Briski, “In financial accounting, students learn how to read financial reports *and* how to understand what companies are doing socially and environmentally. So we study the Global Reporting Initiative, which is an international effort to get organizations to report on their financial, environmental, and social performance.”

Other classes focus solely on sustainability. “In our class on ecological commerce, we study the latest business models coming out of sustainability think tanks,” says Briski. “We study natural capitalism, the environmental and social solutions that exist if we had the political will to use them. We study the CERES Principles from the Coalition for Environmentally Responsible Economies. This is another international effort to take companies in the direction of social and environmental responsibility. In addition, students go out and audit a business, then give the owners advice on how they can be more environmentally friendly.”

At Bainbridge Graduate Institute, executive director Rick Bunch believes that “many social and environmental issues simply provide an engaging way to teach what MBA students should learn anyway. For instance, you can teach all kinds of accounting with social and environmental issues, along with net present value and debits and credits. You have to find the right material and the right professors.”

by Sharon Shinn

illustration by Chris McAllister



## Taut Teaching

In fact, those two tasks—finding the right material and the right faculty—are among the most challenging faced by these program directors. Says Weeks, “We need faculty who really know the core courses of a business curriculum, such as accounting faculty who can teach accounting but also understand social audits and environmental accounting. We’re an accredited school, so we need to find people who have Ph.D.s in the disciplines who also, either through their own research interests or life experiences, understand issues of sustainability.”

At New College, the emphasis is less on the doctorate and more on real-world experience, combined with some previous teaching experience. “Our green and social marketing instructors run a firm that’s been successful in marketing green companies,” says Briski. “Our economics professor taught at another university and worked in the forestry service for a while.”

Bainbridge Graduate Institute combines a small group of core faculty with a wide variety of outside experts who come in to teach for a semester or even a session. The school’s once-a-month format allows working professors from other schools—the University of Washington, Stanford University, the University of Michigan, MIT, and others—to present a module for BGI while retaining their full-time positions.

“It’s like a little curriculum incubator,” says Bunch. “They get to try out teaching ideas with a great deal of freedom and a supportive, engaged student body, while working with our core faculty who really understand how to integrate sustainability issues into the class. We’ve found faculty who have pushed the boundaries at their home schools, brought them here, and challenged them to go farther. We also bring in guest speakers with particular expertise in some subset of the course’s content, and they come in for a day or two. We have a lot of people cycling through.”

Even when schools find enthusiastic, qualified faculty, they’re facing something of a dearth in textbooks and teaching materials. Weeks notes that relevant material can be found at World Resources Institute and CasePlace.org, and she expects more schools to develop them in the future.

Currently, however, the paucity of material in sustainability leads program managers to creative solutions, many of them experiential. Students are frequently sent out in the community to work with existing businesses or encouraged to design business plans along environmentally responsible lines.

In fact, course assignments at BGI are often ad hoc, Bunch



says. “It’s a rule at the school that students can always propose an alternative assignment to an abstract on the syllabus, something that applies to their work or personal life,” he says. “The more we can tie school and work together, the easier students’ lives will be and the more we’ll retain them in the program.”

Because BGI’s curriculum is oriented both toward entrepreneurship and intrapreneurship, students graduate having learned how to be effective change agents. Says Bunch, “Not only do we emphasize sustainability throughout the curriculum, but we teach students how to get an organization mobilized around these ideas. Knowing what sustainability is but not knowing how to use it would be really frustrating.”

## Atypical Applicants

For all three of these niche schools, programs are small but remarkably diverse. Classes are either evenly split between genders or weighted toward women. Applicants tend to be drawn from, and interested in working at, smaller companies as opposed to big corporations; many want to be entrepreneurs. The age range is broader than that for the typical MBA—anywhere from 22 to 55, though the average age at Presidio is 35.

The fact that most of her students are older and have significant work experience is very telling to Weeks. “There’s an element of maturity,” she says. “They’re old enough to realize they want to work in a world that understands their values. By the time they’re 35, they’re finding it hard to work in an area where they’re not deeply committed to the business.”

Bunch agrees. “What holds them together is the idea that they want to bring their values to work rather than leave them on the parking lot. For so many of them, finding a program like this is an epiphany.”

All three of the programs rely heavily on their Web sites as marketing tools, since many students interested in sustainable business conduct Internet searches to see what might be available. These program directors also find students by showing up at venues where likely candidates are plentiful: the U.S. Green Building Council’s conference; conferences on solar energy and green business; events held by Bioneers, an international organization dedicated to conservation, the environment, and sustainability; and the Green Festival, a party-cum-sustainability expo held annually in San Francisco and Washington, D.C.

Students who enroll might share social and ethical values,

# Mark Your Calendar

F O R A A C S B S E M I N A R O F F E R I N G S



## 2005

July 28–29	Maintenance of Accreditation Seminar	Tampa, FL
August 2–3	Business Accreditation Seminar*	Tampa, FL
September 22–23	Advisory Council Seminar	Chicago, IL
September 22–23	Maintenance of Accreditation Seminar	Chicago, IL
October 17–19	Assessment Seminar	Seattle, WA
October 17–18	Business Accreditation Seminar*	Seattle, WA
October 30–Nov. 2	New Deans Seminar	San Antonio, TX
November 14–15	Maintenance of Accreditation Seminar	Tampa, FL
November 16–18	Assessment Seminar	Tampa, FL
December 3–4	Lessons for Aspiring Deans Seminar	Atlanta, GA

## 2006

January 16–18	Assessment Seminar	Tampa, FL
January 23–25	Strategic Management Seminar	Tampa, FL
Dates TBD	Business Accreditation Seminar	Sao Paulo, Brazil
February 4–5	Maintenance of Accreditation Seminar	San Diego, CA
February 10–11	Accounting Accreditation Seminar	San Antonio, TX
February 23–24	Advisory Council Seminar	Tampa, FL
March 1–3	Assessment Seminar	New Orleans, LA
March 13–14	Business Accreditation Seminar*	Tampa, FL
April 3–5	Department Chairs Seminar	Tampa, FL
April 10–11	Maintenance of Accreditation Seminar	Tampa, FL
May 1–3	Assessment Seminar	Tampa, FL
May 17–19	Assessment Seminar	Singapore
June 3–4	Lessons for Aspiring Deans Seminar	Tampa, FL
June 25–28	New Deans Seminar	Tampa, FL

## New Offerings

Dates TBD	Applied Assessment	Tampa, FL
Dates TBD	Applied Assessment	Denver, CO
Dates TBD	Faculty Resource Management Seminar	Atlanta, GA
Dates TBD	Faculty Resource Management Seminar	Denver, CO
Dates TBD	Teaching Seminar	Tampa, FL

\*Optional Accreditation Reviewer Training half-day session to follow each Business Accreditation Seminar.

**Some locations and dates are subject to change.** Look for full schedule and details about each of these programs, as well as registration information, on our Web site at [www.aacsb.edu](http://www.aacsb.edu).

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—Allison Weeks, Presidio World College, San Francisco

but their reasons for pursuing a green-themed MBA show some variation. A poll of BGI’s entering students reveals that one-third have business backgrounds but want to learn more about social and environmental topics. One-third already have a background in corporate social responsibility and want to become more sophisticated about business. Another one-third have a background that combines environmental awareness with technical expertise or NGO experience, and they too want to learn how to marry that with business knowledge.

### Schedules and Venues

Because so many students in the three programs are working adults, the formats tend to mimic EMBA schedules, offering great flexibility in hours or residencies. For instance, BGI students meet for a long weekend once a month, staying in touch via distance learning and conference calls. At New College, students attend school two weekends and one Wednesday a month. While courses follow a natural sequence, each one is taught every semester, so students find it easy to switch between part-time and full-time enrollment.

Most of New College’s students are from the San Francisco Bay area and drive some distance to make it to the facilities in Santa Rosa. While the school doesn’t own a residence hall, it has rented a house where students can spend the night during weekend sessions. Students who elect to stay overnight can also order dinner from an organic local food delivery service.

Such amenities help the students and the school build a small community of like-minded people. “So many students who come here say, ‘Before I found this program, I thought I was the only one in the world who cared,’” says Briski.

These schools also underscore their message by operating in venues compatible with the program principles. The offices of Presidio World College are located on a 1,480-acre national park, but classes are held in outlying locations, such as the Institute for Noetic Sciences Retreat center. The 200-acre setting offers woodlands, vistas, and hiking trails through northern California countryside.

Similarly, BGI’s campuses are idylls in the woods, designed to appeal to individuals passionate about environmentalism. One, a rustic, solar-powered eco retreat, is on Cortes Island off the Pacific Coast, and students gather there each year for a weeklong residency. Another, a ferry ride across the Puget Sound from Seattle, is nestled in a 255-acre forest and features the highest LEED environmental building rating handed out by Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design.

“It’s a mix of environmentalism and high-tech, and it really crystallizes for students the values of the program,” says Bunch. “It shows you can make a comfortable, highly functional environment that respects environmental values.”

### The Job’s the Thing

No matter how beautiful the campus or how intriguing the coursework, no niche program will continue to attract students unless it can point to a reliable record of finding jobs for its graduates. These three schools have only had a few graduating classes between them and are still tracking their success at placement.

“Most of our students keep the jobs they’re in, and they do feel they’re able to apply much of what they’re learning on the job right away,” says Bunch. “Others feel their old company is a lost cause, and they want to move on. The most important thing we do is bring in all kinds of participants and advisors who have made careers in this area. We arrange for high-profile public speakers each month, from alternate energy guru Amory Lovins to Christine Ervin of the U.S. Green Building Council. They help students figure out where they want to go.”

New College also uses a stream of guest lecturers as a way to help students design post-graduation career paths. Guests include founders of green businesses and nonprofits who present lectures, attend student dinners, build relationships, and often offer opportunities for internships, school projects, and permanent work positions.

The school also improves students’ networking chances by sending them to the Bioneers conference, which features about 100 presenters who run green and social businesses. Field trips to environmentally responsible companies like Clif Bar and Traditional Medicinals also help students form contacts that will help them when they begin looking for jobs.

Weeks admits that it’s too early to assess how well Presidio will be able to place graduates; but, based on some remarkable internships students have enjoyed, she thinks the situation is promising. One student spent his summer helping a major corporation develop its first CSR report on its environmental impact; another interned at HP, working with a team that developed a suppliers’ code of ethics.

“We think most jobs will be driven by student interest,” Weeks says. “Many of our students are deeply committed to their current enterprises and don’t really plan to get a corporate job. They’re already running a going concern; they just wanted to know how to grow their own businesses.”



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Briski agrees that most of New College's graduates will be steering clear of big corporations, but she's already seen a handful of them succeed in their own small- or medium-sized companies. One student is running a Web site hosting business that harnesses wind power. Another is designing a first-aid kit made with environmentally friendly products. Another student has started a firm that prepares recycling guides that are distributed by government agencies. Briski herself—a graduate of New College—is a part-time business consultant who helps companies implement sustainable management systems.

#### Face Toward the Future

For now, these niche program directors feel they're leading the way in sustainability-related business education; but they don't know how long they'll have the advantage. "My gut says that this is territory that the big business schools will increasingly invade," says Bunch.

Bunch also expects the landscape to change as traditional business schools receive multimillion dollar endowments for chairs or centers that focus on corporate social responsibility, social justice, and sustainable business. "I think BGI is on the leading edge now, but we can't sit still. The big business schools are coming," he says.

To keep the specialty school ahead of the mainstream, he says, BGI must implement new courses like its class on radical sustainability. Its message? "Everything students are learning today will not bring nearly enough improvement for the

world to be sustainable," he says. "We need a quantum shift in our thinking."

Briski believes that traditional business schools will be forced to focus more on environmentally responsible business partly because corporations are starting to demand more students who understand those issues. As major corporations like Home Depot and Nike get attacked for practices that harm the environment or workers in developing countries, says Briski, all businesses will start to reconsider their CSR imperatives. "Some mainstream schools are really lagging behind the trends happening in business right now. If nothing else, businesses is going to drag them along and say, 'We need graduates who understand sustainability. This is important to our business.'"

Like Bunch, Weeks believes traditional business schools will slowly begin moving onto the green turf, but she thinks the transition will take some time. "Higher education, like the church, changes very slowly," she says. "Will all business in the future be sustainable business? Well, that's the hope. Somebody said to me, 'What will happen to you if all the other business schools get on board with sustainability?' I said, 'Great! We'll figure something out.'"

There are indications that at least some major, mainstream business schools are bringing a sustainability focus to their MBA curricula, but it could be years before the concepts become accepted throughout the management education community. Until then, niche schools like these three will be leading the green revolution. 