

INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY INTO A BUSINESS COURSE

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ABSTRACT

By means of a case study and the results of a large student survey, this paper will highlight the importance of sustainability and illustrate how sustainability was integrated into the introductory business law core course at the Seidman College of Business course. Hopefully the insights and experiences with sustainability implementation will be of value to other faculty members who are contemplating the incorporation of sustainability into their courses.

Keywords: business school, case study, model, sustainability

INTRODUCTION

The need for sustainability education in business courses is important. In a recent Sustainability Conference, sponsored by AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business), it was stated "The roots to a sustainable business world start in the classroom, where we shape the next generation of responsible leadership. In order to provide students with the necessary skills, programs must integrate corporate social responsibility, ethics and other special initiatives into their curricula. Sustainable business has become a strong standard across industries, not just in terms of being green, but also by being socially and ethically responsible (AACSB 2012). Also, in 1990 university presidents and administrators, concerned with the need for education in the area of sustainable development principles and

practices, made a commitment to environmental/sustainability education by signing the Talloires declaration (TD) (ULSF 2008).

Today, most businesses have a "green business strategy" as businesses promote their products as environmentally friendly. Various magazines rank businesses on various sustainability issues (Brown 2009) Businesses, who want to be seen as "green companies," advertise that their company has reduced its "environmental footprint" or achieved "zero landfill-status" as their products are sold. For example, Whole Foods, the natural and organic supermarket chain, will no longer carry fish caught from depleted waters and only sell more sustainable seafood selections (www.usa.com, 2012).

United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon is "leading a global initiative on Sustainable Energy for All to mobilize action from all sectors of society in support of three interlinked objectives to be achieved by 2030: providing universal access to modern energy services, doubling the global rate of improvement in energy efficiency, and doubling the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix. Also, the United Nations General Assembly declared 2012 the International Year of Sustainable Energy for All (<http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/about-us>, 7/23/2012)." In addition, Ban Ki-moon has called on business schools to support the Principles for Responsible Management Education and has urged business schools to educate students to help businesses solve the big problems like global warming, poverty, and the energy crisis. (<http://www.umprme.org/the-6-principles/index.php>.)

Every year or two, the United Nations sponsors some type of Earth Summit to discuss how to mitigate and reduce the problem of global climate change. In 1992 the first Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where 172 countries attended and the Kyoto Protocol was adopted. Since their first Earth Summit, countries continue to meet and explore ways for businesses to be given incentives to reduce global warming emissions. The latest conference, Rio+20, Rio de Janeiro, June 21, 2012, brought together over 2,700 business leaders, governmental officials, academics and activists who established the latest "Sustainable Development Goals." (<http://www.umprme.org/the-6-principles/index.php>.)

Attention to the topic of sustainability continues to grow. On April 22, 2012, the international community celebrated the 42nd anniversary of Earth Day. This day, in part, is a

celebration of the efforts of the international community to promote environmental awareness and urge political leaders to implement standards to ensure sustainable development.

It has even been suggested by military experts that climate change is seen as a threat to America's security. "The changing global climate will pose profound strategic challenges to the United States in coming decades, raising the prospect of military intervention to deal with the effects of violent storms, drought, mass migration and pandemics . . ."

<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/09/science/earth/09climate.html>

Finally, many universities and business schools are adopting majors and minors in sustainability as educators recognize the importance and the demand for sustainability education. At Grand Valley State University, "sustainability" was adopted as a "core value." The university president indicated that professors should educate students on environmental matters and equip them to go into the community and solve real problems to help the people of the world. In addition, the university sponsors a "Campus Sustainability Week" to draw attention to what students and the university are doing to promote sustainable practices (Akbulut-Bailey et al. 2011).

Though many business schools have embraced sustainability in their graduate and undergraduate programs in the past few years; no study to the best of our knowledge has looked at how to incorporate sustainability content into existing courses. To fill this void in the literature, this paper highlights the importance of sustainability and illustrates how sustainability can be integrated into any business course. Hopefully the insights and our experiences with sustainability implementation and the five step model will be of value to other faculty members who are contemplating on incorporating sustainability into their courses.

PRESCRIPTIVE LITERATURE

Society is asking businesses to justify their products when it comes to the impact on the environment and human health. As business develops a "green strategy" businesses will require employees to have a "new skill set focused on sustainability. One place that these employees can gain this new skill set is part of their . . . education (Greenspoon 2008)." In order for business students to gain the skill set needed for sustainability, educators are being asked to incorporate the following topics into their curricula: environmental awareness, business ethics, social awareness, and corporate social responsibility (Singh et al. 2011).

When it comes to the critical role of education for sustainability (ES), it has been suggested that there are "four main levels of learning depending on the age of people involved, objectives and subjects learned . . . These four levels of learning can be divided into basic education, university, organizations (private and public), and lifelong learning. At the university level, different approaches to sustainability must be considered due to the various courses offered (Martins et al. 2006) .For example, in teaching sustainability in a global MBA program involving a supply-chain management class, a professor may want to emphasize not only the principles of sustainability in business but also "the role and contribution of systems thinking to sustainability and its relationship to other information and processing and decision-styles (Roome 2005)."

The Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education (AASHE) has indicated that "integrating sustainability into the curriculum is approached at each school differently--some have specific sustainability degree offerings, some through integrating sustainability into every class, and others offering a required sustainability general education class (Kodama 2011). The existing literature can be classified into four research streams. The first stream are the overview articles that deal with diverse topics such as critical factors, measurements, benefits and roadblocks to implementing sustainability in the business schools. Research streams No. 2 include prescriptive articles that are written by practitioners and deal with why, what and how to implement sustainability in business schools. These articles are mainly conceptual in nature and are written by experts in the field based on their field experience. These articles lack the methodological rigor that you would typically find in articles written by academicians. Research stream No.3 is concerned with articles in which conceptual models and/or theoretical frameworks have been developed by research scholars. The main goal of this stream is theory building. At this current moment, only one article fitted under this stream. Lastly, Research Stream No. 4 deals with the current practices of sustainability in business schools. Several studies exist in the literature that focuses on how different business schools are integrating sustainability into their curriculum. To the best of our knowledge, all these studies look at integrating sustainability from a macro level (i.e. school or program level) rather than micro level (i.e. individual course level). Our paper is the first paper that focuses on how to integrate sustainability at a course-specific level. Most of the research under this stream is

done through field studies, questionnaire surveys or case studies. Table1 summarizes the existing literature among the four streams of research.

Table 1: Prescriptive Literature on Sustainability in Business Schools

Author (s) and year	Research Methodology	Major Findings
Kearins and Springett (2003)	Literature Review	Uses the critical theory approach for identifying sustainability skills and for developing an elective course.
Pesonen (2003)	Case Study	Explains the challenges of incorporating environmental sustainability in a Finland business school.
Roome (2005)	Case Study	Discusses the key skills, pedagogy, and insights on how to teach sustainability in one global MBA program.
Springett (2005)	Prescriptive	Discusses different ways of incorporating sustainability in the business curriculum.
Thomas (2005)	Theoretical Framework	Develops a framework for operationalizing environmental sustainability.
Murray (2006)	Prescriptive	Discusses the factors that are making business schools take sustainability seriously.
Greenspoon (2008)	Literature Review	Analyzes the existing literature on sustainability and curriculum, specifically, pertaining to business schools.
Onuki and Mino (2009)	Case Study	Discusses how the new master's program in at the University of Tokyo incorporates all the elements of sustainability.
Roffe (2010)	Case Studies	Suggests different approaches to curriculum

		development for enterprise education,
Benn and Rusinko (2011)	Empirical Study	Discusses the roles and challenges for Australian business schools to incorporate sustainability in their curriculum.
Fisher and Bonn (2011)	Literature Survey	Conclude that more than half of the Australian business schools do not explicitly identify sustainability as part of their business curriculum.
McKenna and Biloslavo (2011)	Case Study	Demonstrates how the business school collaborated with the small business development center to offer a value-added course in sustainability.
Redding and Cato (2011)	Prescriptive	Discusses how humans can flourish on account of sustainability education provided in business schools.
Singh et al. (2011)	Case Study	Provides a pragmatic approach to redesign undergraduate curriculum to incorporate sustainability.
Von der Heide and Lamberton (2011)	On-line survey	Analyzes how top Indian business schools are addressing sustainability issues in their curriculum
Wiek et al. (2011)	Case Study	Provides a detailed evaluation of the sustainability curriculum at an Australian regional university.
Hogevold and Svensson (2012)	Literature Review	Identify the key competencies and critical gaps in sustainability.
Malik and Neal (2012)	Case Study	Discusses how the whole organization and the supply chain can be impacted by sustainability focus.

Segal (2012)	Empirical Study	Corporate governance, sustainability and ethics were frequently taught in Asian Pacific business schools.
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IMPLEMENTING AND INTEGRATING SUSTAINABILITY INTO THE CLASSROOM: A CASE STUDY

Figure 1 depicts a five step process of how we went about integrating sustainability in the core Legal Environment for Business course. Step 1 involved determining the need for integrating sustainability in a course. During the 2011 fall semester and the 2012 winter semester, 730 students were surveyed after listening to a 60 minute presentation on sustainability in their Legal Environment of Business course. Ninety-three percent of the students indicated they were very familiar or somewhat familiar with the concept of "sustainability" prior to the one hour lecture. Most students (63%) indicated that one class period was sufficient time to introduce the subject of sustainability, while several students (31%) indicated that two classes would be even better. It was interesting to discover that 78% of the students were not familiar with the concept of the "Triple Bottom Line" (TBL) as business attempts to expand traditional business reporting to include performance in the area of Planet (environmental sustainability), People (social sustainability), and Profits (economic sustainability). As a result of the one hour lecture 84% of the students found the class to be helpful in their understanding of sustainability when it came to the concepts involving the planet, people, and profits. Also, 83% of the students indicated that, after the presentation of the sustainability material, they felt more equipped to actively participate in building a socially diverse, just, and sustainable society. The survey results clearly concluded the necessity for including sustainability We then proceed to the next two steps of determining the content and extent of coverage (Step 2) and preparing the necessary handouts and teaching materials (Step 3). While each faculty member should develop their own classroom strategy as to what sustainable topics to introduce and how many weeks of coverage they would like. We, as a faculty, did some brainstorming and identified what we felt were possible topics that our readers could include assuming that we would devote 2 classes (2.5 hours on sustainability). We decided to incorporate all these topics. The six major topics are mentioned below.

Topic #1 - What is sustainability and why is this important to every student. During this discussion, the faculty member should emphasize that the ultimate goal of sustainability is to leave the world (the people and the planet) in a better position for the next generation. Many students have been exposed to sustainability material and their insights are very helpful in presenting this topic. We decided to prepare a power point slide presentation for Topic 1. In this handout, we also included several web links for students to further engage in this topic.

Topic #2 - What is the history of the sustainability movement since the first Earth Summit in 1992, and why was the Kyoto Protocol adopted. Also, what are some of the highlights of the sustainability movement? For example, Al Gore, former vice-president of the United States of America and environmental activist, brought much attention to the topic of global warming in his book, An Inconvenient Truth. The world recognized his message by awarding him with the 2007 Nobel Peace Prize (joint award with the intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), he was selected as Time Magazine's Person of the Year (2007), and he won an Academy Award for his documentary on global warming. Also, President Obama, who attended the 2009 Copenhagen Talks, called on the United States to make "clean, renewable energy the profitable kind of energy." For this topic, we also decided to prepare power point presentation and provide links to websites that discussed the above topics.

Topic #3 - Examples of businesses who have a "green strategy" of promoting their products need to be discussed. In addition, sustainability rankings of various businesses by various magazines can be discussed as well as what businesses do to reduce their environmental footprint. Examples of how local businesses recycle product waste and reduce the amount can be used. For this topic, we identified a short case study that addresses this topic in details.

Topic #4 - The Triple Bottom Line (TBL) needs to be discussed so that students are aware that companies today have expanded their traditional reporting framework to take into account, not only financial performance (profits), but also performance in the area of the environment (planet) and the social environment (people). The concept of the TBL demands that the company be responsible to "stakeholders" and not just shareholders. Stakeholders are those who are directly or indirectly influenced by the actions of the firm. The TBL is a way of reporting so that profit maximizing is integrated along with goals for protecting the planet and protecting the people. Being profitable and being sustainable go together. As part of this topic, specific examples can be used as to what companies are doing to help the environment and to help people while at the

same time being profitable. For example, Apple Computers monitors how their suppliers treat employees who supply Apple components so that Apple is not profiting from exploiting labor in other countries. This particular topic is very important because traditional microeconomic theory emphasized that businesses should strive for profit-maximization in decision making since this was the best way of allocating resources. Today's enlightened businesses realize that for a sustainable world, business needs to consider more than profit maximization. "Measuring the Triple Bottom Line through the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is a first step toward sustainability since it has been shown that being environmentally and social responsible is long run cost effective to the financial bottom line of enterprises. "Again, for this topic, we identified a short articles and case examples that discuss TBL.

Topic #5 - Latest developments need to be discussed on the regulatory, legal environment, and what countries around the world are doing to require businesses to reduce green-house gases. For example, California passed a law that effectively puts California in line with the Kyoto limitations by the year 2020 (a 25% reduction in green-house gases). Other countries have adopted a "cap-and-trade" policy to encourage green-house gas reduction. For this topic, we decided we would assign students a short assignment to address the latest trends.

Topic #6 - Finally, what the university, the local city, and what local businesses are doing to promote sustainable practices. For example, at our university, every student is given access to a "Student Sustainability Guide" to help educate and guide students on ways of being "green" around the campus. The city is building a new Urban Market and how this promotes sustainability is discussed. Also, many local businesses will build a LEED certified building or use alternative energy to power their business. Many students will have stories regarding their observation of sustainable practices from working in local businesses. Students seem to appreciate most stories of local and regional businesses that have developed sustainability strategies as the business promotes their local "green" product. For this topic, we decided to host an event for our students in which we would invite local executives to speak.

Once we have the sustainability materials ready, it is crucial to assess the student's learning pertaining to the above topics (Step 4). Exams, quizzes and term projects are the modes we plan to use for our assessment in the coming semesters. We will leave it to our faculty members to determine the weights they would like to assign to the different assessments. After one is done with a round of assessments, it is critical to look back and modify any of the above

steps deemed necessary (Step 5). This continuous improvement step is crucial as it will help us keep the material accurate, relevant, and meaningful.

CONCLUSION

In the past few years, several business schools have successfully incorporated sustainability into their undergraduate and graduate programs. The existing literature depicts several case studies that explain the roadmap these business schools have undertaken. To the best of our knowledge, there has been no published study that focused on incorporating sustainability in a specific course. Sustainability education can be introduced into every course and is critical to preparing students to meet the challenges of the world. A one-to three hours presentation on this topic that is related to the subject material that is normally covered will be appreciated by students, especially once the concept of sustainability is understood.

In order to fill the void in the literature, this paper suggests a five step approach along with specific topics for discussion. Even though, every professor may modify these topics depending on their course material and what students find to be most helpful and interesting; we believe that our recommended approach would be beneficial to all faculty members who are struggling with this issue. We strongly believe that the increased awareness of sustainability education and how it relates to the course material will help students appreciate the importance of sustainability.

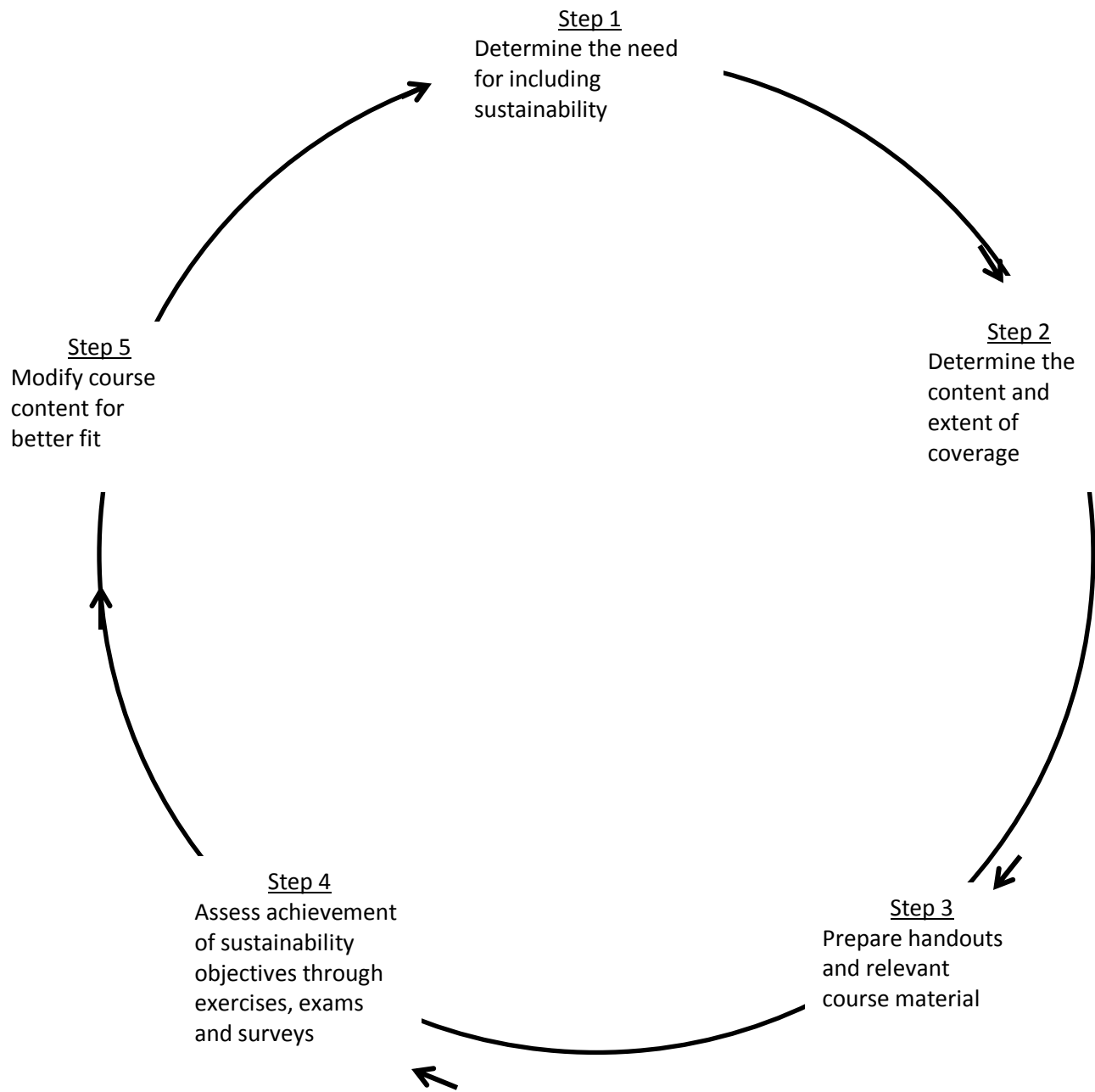


Figure 1: Five Step Process for Incorporating Sustainability in a Business Course

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