



Sustainability Is a Growing Theme

For years, companies have suggested changes to bread-and-butter business school courses. But recently, firms have begun to try to make their mark on another subject: social responsibility and sustainability.

» **By: Alina Dizik » The Wall Street Journal**

» **Published: March 4, 2010**

Some companies are taking a hands-on approach to help train potential employees, using real projects in an effort to help students move beyond case studies that are quickly becoming outdated.

Students "really need to go and dig into the behind-the-scenes operations. If we don't give [them] that opportunity, they come out handicapped," says Dave Stangis, vice president of corporate social responsibility and sustainability at Campbell Soup Co.

This new push is part of a larger effort among corporations to integrate social concerns beyond donations and once-a-year volunteering. The effort is being met with both gratitude and skepticism from business schools, which say that despite the emphasis on integrating these hot-button topics into the curriculum, it's business as usual at recruiting time. Few hiring managers, they say, ask students about corporate-responsibility training or indicate it's a priority.

Still, for their part, companies say that working with business schools is important to ensure a new generation of workers sees corporate responsibility as a bottom-line booster, not just something to feel good about.

"My whole goal in this [role] is to mature the curricula," says Mr. Stangis, who finds that many M.B.A.s—even those studying the subject—need to better understand how to implement CSR-related initiatives so they can have a real impact and business tie-in. "I don't think we are turning out the kind of students that we need to in this field."

Mr. Stangis, who heads up efforts on Campbell's impact on childhood obesity and sets metrics around sustainable agriculture, spends a few days a week with professors and students at business schools like the University of Pennsylvania Wharton School, Columbia Business School, and Drexel University's LeBow College of Business. He's working with Wharton students to produce a study on sustainable agriculture, packaging, and employee engagement based on an internal Campbell report.

"What I want them to figure is what's really cutting edge," says Mr. Stangis. The job of the students is to figure out "what the best companies are doing in this space."

So far, the companies most involved in corporate social responsibility are the ones that have already seen their bottom line and brand awareness increase, says Liz Maw, executive director of Net Impact, a corporate social responsibility-related nonprofit with 157 M.B.A. chapters at schools around the world.

That group is growing. Companies work with the group as a way to fill their own needs, says Ms. Maw. This year, Net Impact has 40 corporate sponsors, compared to 19 in 2006—a shift in line with increased interest in the field, Ms. Maw says.

Corporate sponsors pay dues, which start at \$10,000 a year, and are provided a direct connection to business students who are interested in social-responsibility jobs and projects.

The shifting importance of corporate responsibility within business schools is felt in other ways, too.

After a decade-long relationship with the University of Michigan Ross School of Business, Neil Hawkins, Dow Chemical Co.'s vice president of sustainability and environment health and safety, was asked to guest lecture about climate change in a strategy course that is a requirement for all full-time students. In the past, his lectures and efforts were relegated to sustainability-related elective courses.

"These are M.B.A.s of all different stripes and colors and going to work in many different sectors," and have sincere interest in the field, says Mr. Hawkins, who is based in Midland, Mich.

Mr. Hawkins now spends more time on business-school campuses, including Michigan and University of California Berkeley Haas School of Business, he says. Mostly, he's sharing details about Dow's internal sustainability initiatives. Mr. Hawkins says he provides key metrics of Dow's approaches to sustainability and asks students for analysis on how to implement Dow's 2015 Sustainability goals, measures that the company hopes to roll out in five years.

For full-time business students, this kind of real-time information helps them to move past the theoretical concepts in what is still an emerging field. That's a plus, says Ms. Maw, because teaching corporate social responsibility is still relatively new and students benefit from companies that act as laboratories of sorts.

For some firms, speaking about internal initiatives doesn't translate into hiring socially responsible M.B.As. Intel Corp. director of corporate social responsibility strategy and communication, Suzanne Fallender, says she regularly speaks at business schools about many of the company's sustainability initiatives. But, she says that the skills aren't needed to be hired into a post-M.B.A. job.

"I think we are far off from seeing it [as part of] the job requirements," she says, even if it does give prospective hires an advantage.

That sentiment, say school professors and administrators, points to a disconnect on part of the companies: There's enthusiasm in the classroom for imparting corporate responsibility and

sustainability concepts, but hiring managers attending campus recruiting sessions says it's rarely something they quiz candidates about.

Interest among students at the University of Michigan Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise, which offers a specialized M.B.A./Master of Science program from the School of Natural Resources and Environment, and provides sustainability-related education initiatives, has grown in the last several years, says Rick Bunch, managing director.

But his team and the students have had to do most of the outreach to find full-time positions where graduates' skills are valued, he says.

"The majority of our students are not trying to go into sustainability staff positions, but are trying to go into business units" where they can impart these skills, says Mr. Bunch.

At Campbell, Mr. Stangis is working to integrate those skills into the competencies required for new hires, but says that it still isn't a requirement in recruiting.

Dow Chemical doesn't require the training for all M.B.A. recruits. But Mr. Hawkins points out that the company offers jobs for business-school graduates for which sustainability experience is a must.

Source: [The Wall Street Journal](#)