



Advancing Sustainability Education through a Cross-Disciplinary Online Course:

Sustainability and Human Rights in the Business World

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In recent years, much discussion has taken place in the business arena regarding sustainability, social roles and responsibilities of business, and consumers' roles in business reform. Simultaneously, the human rights community has begun to explore new models and strategies by which it might interact with the private sector. In both of these contexts, the role of universities is crucial as it helps shape students' attitudes and provides them with the necessary knowledge and critical thinking and analytical skills to make decisions as consumers, future professionals, and human rights activists (Setó-Pamies & Papaoikonomou, 2016). Thus, the formal educational system is an appropriate arena to promote sustainability, social responsibility, and human rights-informed business practices because it may influence students' worldviews and capabilities for being change agents in the future (Dobson, 2007).

To respond to this growing need, academic programs have increasingly begun incorporating sustainability and social responsibility units into courses. However, few programs offer a full-semester course on these topics. As Setó-Pamies and Papaoikonomou (2016) argued, universities are multi-level learning environments, so there is a need to look beyond discipline-focused curricular content and educate students as socially-responsible citizens and future leaders. Thus, the researchers proposed an integrative and holistic approach to guide the integration of ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability into education that aims to improve students' knowledge and attitudes.

To achieve these aims, the authors developed a new asynchronous online course at a large university in the U.S.: "Sustainability and Human Rights in the Business World." The course is offered in a variety of ways: first, at the undergraduate level without prerequisites to university seniors in all majors, as a required course for Product Development majors, and as an elective for other majors within the college. It is also offered at the graduate level to all majors. The course is team-taught by the authors--one, a professor in entrepreneurship and the other, the director of a university-based human rights center and attorney. Our idea to teach collaboratively resulted from the first author's procurement of sustainability research grants from the center. The course provides an overview of social responsibility, human rights, and sustainability; identifies strategies and frameworks to apply to socially-responsible and sustainable businesses; and explores the role of the consumer, corporation, and government and non-governmental organizations. The uniqueness of the course is that it covers sustainability topics in environmental science (e.g., air, climate and water issues; forests, wildlife, and biodiversity; agriculture and food; and alternative clean energy and fuels) before starting on those in the business field, which we find lays a good foundation for student learning on sustainability and business and expands their

views on the topics. Additionally, the course provides practical perspectives using numerous industry practices as well as a conceptual perspective.

Eight of the fourteen course learning objectives are listed here: 1) Examine the factors at the individual (e.g., ethical consumers) and organizational level (e.g., corporate social responsibility) that contribute to socially-responsible business, 2) Apply sustainability strategies and frameworks for socially-responsible businesses, 3) Examine the role of the consumer, corporation, and government and non-governmental organizations for sustainable businesses, 4) Recognize current trends in human trafficking and child labor and how they impact the business operations of the private sector, 5) Evaluate evolving strategies by NGOs and corporations to promote human rights compliance in the private sector, 6) Develop skills for sustainable supply chain management including sustainable materials, design, production, and retailing, 7) Develop strategies for a sustainable future using creative and critical thinking, 8) Explain the role of social entrepreneurship and how social enterprises can address social problems around the world.

To complete the course, two paper projects are required for the undergraduates and three for graduate students, in addition to weekly quizzes, discussion posts, and journals. The purpose of the first project “Human Rights in the Business World” is to conceptually design a non-governmental organization (NGO) that addresses a particular human rights issue in the business field. Students must first identify a human rights issue (e.g., labor trafficking) then draw on the human rights framework introduced in the course and the examples of how NGOs function in the larger human rights field. Next, they provide an overview of the relationship of the issue to global markets and identify their NGO’s strategic objectives. They then identify key tactics that the group will utilize, describing how such tactics correspond to their larger strategic objectives. Finally, they explain the criteria for success. The purpose of the second project “Sustainable Products/Practices in the Global Market” is to identify a successful socially-responsible business that focuses on sustainable practices and analyze the sustainable practices involved in various aspects of its products in the global market. Students must first select a for-profit business or a non-profit organization and describe its target market, successful sustainable products, and strategic elements of materials, design, product development, production, retailing, and post-use. They must also examine the role of technology and sustainability practices employed during the entire product cycle. The purpose of the third project “Social Enterprise and Sustainability Practices,” which is only for graduate students, is to explore the role of social entrepreneurship and to examine the sustainability practices of a chosen social entrepreneur in the global world.

Students include the completed papers in their interview portfolios prepared for internship or job opportunities and have received extremely positive responses from recruiters. Both informal mid-term and formal end-of-semester course evaluations are regularly administered. An additional evaluation from the university Office of Distance Learning using 42 specific review standards of Quality Matters (QR) Higher Education Rubric is scheduled for later this semester. Students frequently self-report their interest in the course content and their enjoyment learning about sustainability and examples of sustainable companies/products. They also have reported that the video lectures are thorough and engaging and greatly help with the assignments. Many students have particularly liked the weekly discussion/journal assignments commenting, “... These always efficiently review the material assigned to us during the week in a more condensed, relatable format and allow me to truly showcase my digestion of course material. It also ensures that I keep up with the class and its materials. I like the

fact that the class is fairly interactive even though it's an online class..." "I enjoy getting to see all of the different perspectives through the discussion boards and gaining knowledge from my peers." In order to best meet the students' learning outcomes, we have revised the course projects based on the students' comments from evaluations. Next year, a problem-based service-learning project with a social enterprise will be incorporated along with required student reflections.

In this paper, we summarize the creation of a course that meets the need to develop a more holistic and integrative model to guide the incorporation of ethics, corporate social responsibility, and sustainability into higher education, specifically in business education, in order to contribute to a more profound and lasting change in students' attitudes, knowledge, and behavior. Universities have an important role in educating a new generation of leaders who are aware of the complex challenges faced by business and society (Hesselbarth & Schaltegger, 2014).

References

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