

## **A holistic approach to the scholarship of sustainable business**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Reductions in state funding of higher education have propelled public universities and colleges to turn to private funding to sustain academic programs. However, private funds often come with strings attached; they may be earmarked for projects that reflect donors' interests. As a result, administrators and faculty are challenged with designing and implementing special-topic initiatives that may transcend disciplinary boundaries. This paper aims to offer educators a blueprint for such donor-funded signature projects by describing one such project on the business of sustainability.

Keywords: sustainability, donor-funded initiatives, higher education funding, interdisciplinary scholarship, university philanthropy.

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## INTRODUCTION

A declining trend in state funding of higher education (Slotnik, 2012) has forced public colleges and universities to explore uncharted territories in pursuit of financial support to sustain academic programs. Unlike private universities, public colleges are new to fundraising. As public universities increasingly turn to alumni and private donors for financial support, they are taken by surprise to find out that more than ninety percent of private donations come ‘earmarked for special projects’ from wealthy donors, who are more interested in making a difference than simply paying for overhead (Foderaro, 2011).

These earmark projects may sometimes reflect the philanthropic interests of donors or emerging issues of public interest and consequently may not immediately fall in the traditional research and teaching domains of universities. As funding arrangements shift away from state to private sources, attracting donor money for signature projects that would bring publicity to campus may increasingly become the norm for public universities. As a result, universities may increasingly be called upon to embark on projects that transcend their disciplinary boundaries. This presents a significant challenge to faculty and administrators, particularly in small and medium-scale universities with limited academic programs. Adding to this challenge is the lack of proven models in the literature as to how universities can systematically deliver special-topic educational initiatives to satisfactorily meet donor interests.

This paper is intended to offer educators a blueprint for building academic and public awareness on a topic by approaching the issues from a multiple disciplinary perspective. More specifically, this paper reports the experience of faculty in a medium-scale, public university delivering a donor-funded initiative focused on the topic of business of sustainability. The interrelated elements of the initiative are described with the goal of benefiting faculty in other institutions who are engaged in delivering special-topic educational initiatives.

The project encompassed research, teaching, and service activities. Thus, the rest of this paper is organized in five sections. The first section provides background on how this special-topic initiative evolved. The second section offers a discussion of theoretical and applied research funded by the project. The third section overviews the structure and activities of an inter-disciplinary course on the business of sustainability. The last two sections describe three public lectures and student-led activities.

## BACKGROUND

The project described in this paper came about through a donation to the College of Business (COB) at a Midwestern university. The Elliott Initiative\* funded by the donation was designed to engage the campus and community through a portfolio of teaching, research, and outreach activities focused on a specific topic each year for a decade. The topic selected by the faculty and the Dean in consultation with the donor in the first year was ‘business of sustainability.’ For this project, sustainable business was described, borrowing from World Commission on Environment and Development’s definition of sustainable development, as business practices “that meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The topic of sustainability was recognized by the donor and the COB faculty as one of the

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most critical and timely issues facing businesses. Businesses realize that tougher regulations, increasing operational costs, and higher customer expectations are driving them to adopt sustainable business practices. As such, the aim of the Business of Sustainability initiative was to foster an in-depth exploration of sustainable business practices by engaging industry leaders, students, academia, governmental and non-governmental organizations, and the public on a campus-wide critical examination of sustainability topics.

With this goal in mind, the initiative offered incentives to promote academic and applied research on sustainability, sought to enhance the curriculum of the COB by supporting the development of a special-topic seminar course, and sponsored lecture series as well as student-led activities to foster sharing of knowledge on sustainability issues among business practitioners, faculty, students, and leading organizations.

Initially, four faculty from the College of Business, due to personal interest in the subject matter, were recruited to design the initiative. Faculty from marketing, supply chain management, finance, and management information systems formed the core team from within the COB. During the first meeting of the team, the group discussed the desirability of adding additional colleagues from outside the COB. Faculty from biology, engineering, social entrepreneurship, and the campus coordinator of sustainability were recruited because of their expertise on the topic to join the team. One of the COB faculty was selected as the Project Coordinator for the initiative. The eight faculty met over fifteen months to plan and deliver the initiative.

With such a diverse array of faculty, disciplinary perspectives on what constituted sustainability and sustainable business practices varied greatly. The committee members worked together and educated each other on different dimensions of sustainability while trying to find consensus on matters such as identification of relevant topics and guest speakers for the public lecture series, refinement of the seminar content, and appraisal of the intellectual merit of research proposals. Some of the decisions regarding each of the three components of the initiative are described in further detail below.

## **RESEARCH ACTIVITIES**

One objective of the Elliott Initiative was to support theoretical and applied research through the awarding of grants funding research addressing business issues of sustainability. As a first step, the committee formulated a plan for allocating the research funds.

### **Academic research**

For theoretical research projects, the committee decided to solicit proposals from both within and outside the campus. The goal of soliciting external proposals was to engage sustainability researchers in a nationwide dialogue while enhancing the visibility and reputation of the college. The committee also wanted to support emerging scholars in sustainability; as such, the call for proposals (CFP) invited doctoral work in addition to faculty research projects. An award of \$15,000 was allocated for the faculty research grant, and \$5,000 was allocated for the Doctoral Dissertation Support Award.

The committee began by articulating a set of research questions to guide the proposals. These questions centered on issues that a business willing to adopt sustainability as a strategy might face. Specifically:

1. Is sustainability a business imperative?
2. Does adapting sustainability make business sense as a long-term strategy?
3. How does sustainability impact profitability?
4. Does sustainability offer a competitive advantage to produce and market sustainable products?
5. How do consumers respond to sustainable business enterprises?
6. How does a business measure sustainability and its impact on the organization?

The CFPs for these awards were widely disseminated through mass electronic mailing via various national and international professional academic societies' listserves. Potential researchers were also informed via targeted mailings to business school deans of various Ph.D. granting institutions. Overall, the faculty and dissertation grants received seven and three proposals, respectively, from academic institutions in the U.S.A. and abroad.

The committee developed and used a standard template to assess and rate proposals based on their intellectual merit and their broader impact on research on the topic of sustainability. The proposals were rated individually and collectively and a unanimous decision was made to award the grants.

The faculty research grant was awarded to an advertising faculty at the University of Texas. The project, entitled "Keeping the Faith: Consumer Trust, Green Marketing Claims and Sustainable Consumer Behavior," sought to understand the effect of consumer trust on attitudes about eco-labels through experimental methods. As the primary goal of the Elliott Initiative was to contribute to the nationwide dialogue on sustainability by adding new insights, the recipient of this award was invited to campus to give a lecture to faculty and invited guests. A link to the presentation is provided on the Elliott Initiative website at <http://cob.umd.umich.edu/691028/>.

The dissertation grant was awarded to a Ph.D. student in supply chain management at Syracuse University. The project, entitled "Recovering Sustainable Products: Efficient Trade-in and Buy-Back Acquisition Incentive Strategies," focused on trade-in and buy-back incentive strategies. The study investigates issues associated with designing products to improve the reusability of products and factors that affect purchase of remanufactured goods. The recipient of this grant also presented the results of this study to faculty and invited guests on campus. A link to the presentation is provided on the Elliott Initiative website at <http://cob.umd.umich.edu/691029/>.

In addition to the grant-funded research supported by the initiative, some members of the faculty team were inspired by their involvement in the initiative to embark on two research projects related to sustainability following the completion of the project. One such project addresses theoretical and applied issues in greening of the supply chain. The objective of the study is to improve decision makers' abilities to design, model, and implement green supply chains through improved information sharing. The first phase of this project involves theoretical and computational work focused on the development of a framework for understanding green supply chains with a focus on information sharing and decision making. The second phase applies the theoretical framework and computational tools developed in the prior phase of the project to a supply chain problem at a local hospital.

A second project stemming from the initiative addresses questions related to socially responsible investments (SRI). The study examines whether socially responsible investments outperform their non-socially responsible alternatives by using a novel approach that focuses on the incremental effect of SRI recognition (Chong et al., 2006; Collison et al., 2008; Dereall et al.,

2005; Law and Yau, 2008; Renneboog et al., 2008; Statman, 2000). This research analyzes stock returns and the operating performance of companies that have been added to or dropped from SRI indices.

### **Applied Research**

Some members of the committee were inspired by their involvement in the initiative to partner with the Center for Innovation Research in the College of Business to conduct applied research on sustainability. This applied research project involves semi-structured interviews with executives from leading organizations in the area about sustainability policies and practices. The objectives of the project are to generate insights useful to practitioners and to develop a theoretical framework for research on sustainability initiatives in organizations.

### **TEACHING ACTIVITIES**

As part of the initiative, a course on the business of sustainability was offered to undergraduate business students. Since no single member of the faculty had a comprehensive background in sustainability, a team-taught course was designed and delivered. The course offered students a multidisciplinary approach which integrated perspectives across a variety of business and foundational disciplines to address sustainability issues in a comprehensive fashion. A systems approach was brought to bear, and a model integrating socio-environmental-technological-business-economic perspectives was used to develop and teach the course.

In order to bring a variety of student perspectives to the course, students from majors across the College of Business were encouraged to enroll in the course. The College faculty agreed to count the course toward most of the majors in the college to encourage students to enroll. Nineteen students, all of whom had senior status, participated in the course. Students with majors in finance, marketing, information technology management, and supply chain management were represented in the course.

Eight learning modules were designed to deliver the course content. The modules included lectures, guest speakers, class activities, and assigned readings. Each module took either one or two three-hour class sessions. The topics of the eight modules were environmental economic systems, socio economic systems, socio-business perspectives, marketing perspectives, supply chain management systems, technology and energy systems, management information systems, and financial perspectives.

Students were engaged in team projects which investigated an organization's sustainability practices in order to evaluate and benchmark the organization's sustainability performance with respect to industry standards. Recommendations for improvements in the organizations' sustainability practices were also developed by the student teams. The organizations that participated in the project teams included Comerica Bank, Dow Chemical Company, Ford Motor Company, Nichols, Inc., and Smith Group. Nichols, Inc. is a distributor of consumer goods, and Smith Group is an architectural firm which focuses on sustainability design.

The student teams conducted interviews with company executives, reviewed the companies' sustainability reports, and conducted a review of relevant literature. Teams wrote a paper on their findings and presented these findings during an event attended by industry partners, the Dean, and members of the faculty. A celebratory atmosphere was created for this



event with a dinner served before student teams presented their findings. Feedback from industry partners after the event was quite positive.

Grades in the course were based on the project work as well as on two exams. The faculty member responsible for each module graded the relevant part of the exams and a meeting was held of all eight faculty participating in the course to discuss exam and final course grades.

## **PUBLIC LECTURE SERIES**

A public lecture series consisting of three panel discussions was held throughout the year in order to foster the exchange of ideas between the university and the community. Experts from the public and private sectors were invited to discuss and debate sustainability trends impacting the future of business and society. The university collaborated with a local media outlet to organize and advertise the public lecture series.

These panel discussions were attended by over 600 guests including industry leaders and professionals, non-government organization representatives, faculty, staff and students. These panels provided opportunities for open dialogue among panelists and the audience. Additionally, these events offered excellent networking opportunities for attendees. The panel discussions were preceded by a networking breakfast at which tableware provided by an organization focused on sustainability was featured. A synopsis of the three panel discussions follows.

In the first forum titled “Sustainability in Manufacturing” panelists explored how manufacturing companies are incorporating sustainability in their product-life-cycles and supply chains in order to remain competitive and maintain operational excellence. The forum focused on best practices, standards, and initiatives focused on sustainability. Pitfalls and practical difficulties in the implementation of sustainability initiatives were also discussed.

The second forum focused on “Sustainability in Healthcare Management.” In this forum panelists explored how healthcare providers are addressing sustainability in the design and delivery of their services. The implications of the recently adopted health care reform bill by the U.S. Congress on sustainability related issues were also analyzed by the panel.

The final panel was titled “Keeping Detroit Sustainable.” During this forum the panelists explored how government, non-government, community, industry and academic leaders are incorporating sustainable practices as they plan and implement the revitalization of the city. Panelists discussed the economic and environmental impact of federal, state and local policies and programs.

A link to the video proceedings of three discussions is provided on the Elliott Initiative website to promote awareness of sustainability issues on campus.

## **STUDENT-LED ACTIVITIES**

In an effort to engage students and generate interest in the seminar, the committee decided to work with a group of student leaders in the COB to develop a Campus Sustainability Week. The faculty group sought to have the planning and execution of this week be an exclusively student-driven effort. Students decided to focus on activities that were intended to celebrate and promote environmental sustainability throughout the campus. Activities included presentations and exhibitions on green energy, methods to reduce the carbon footprint, urban farming, sustainable procurement of campus food, clean water, and strategies for reusing consumer goods. Visitors tasted free organic foods and participated in lectures on environmental

issues. Professors encouraged students in their classes to attend events throughout the week and a “passport” was used to incentivize participation. The passport was used to document student attendance at events. In at least one case, a professor granted course credit to students who wrote a reflection paper about their experience during the sustainability week. The highlight of the event was a presentation by author and journalist John Gallagher from his book “Reimagining Detroit: Opportunities for Redefining an American City.”

## CONCLUSION

The initiative successfully generated public awareness and academic dialogue; and as a consequence, several collaborative projects have been initiated since the initiative concluded. More specifically, these collaborative efforts yielded a student internship program, an additional research grant on campus, and a conference presentation. One member of the faculty team responsible for the initiative has initiated an Environmental Interpretive Center Sustainability Internship Program for undergraduate students interested in exploring sustainability issues from an inter-disciplinary perspective. The Elliott initiative also inspired the Environmental Interpretive Center at the university to offer a research grant of \$12,000 to a member of the faculty for research and scholarship related to sustainability, conservation, or environmental education and research. Another member of the team was invited to serve as a panelist on the topic of “Competitively Greening the IT/IS Function – Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice” at an academic conference.

The initiative received wide-spread support from faculty, staff, students, industry partners and subject experts. The faculty committee members gained valuable insights into the topic and hope to continue research and pedagogy in the future.

The blueprint offered in this paper provides an example of how an interdisciplinary team of faculty can collaborate in order to design and deliver a special-topic educational initiative reflecting the philanthropic interests of a donor. As public universities increasingly rely on private funds, faculty are likely to be challenged to deliver signature projects that transcend their disciplinary boundaries. While local conditions and donor preferences will affect the structure and content of these signature projects, the experiences described here are offered as one example that may help faculty in pursuing their own forays into special-topic educational initiatives.

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