Business Education for Responsible Leadership: Preparing Students

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Over the last decade, an emerging trend in the business community has been a shift from "shareholder capitalism" to "stakeholder capitalism." During this period, this trend has moved from the leading edge to the mainstream of the nation's largest, most established businesses, as evidenced by the recent statement on the purpose of an organization by members of the Business Roundtable (2019). This shift is in response to the multiple and varied ways in which the world has changed. Led by consumers and the investment community, the bar for retaining trust, respect, and confidence in a firm has been raised beyond the price and quality of a product or service to include the social and environmental impacts that organizations produce. This chapter provides a case study in how one college of business has adapted to these important and substantial changes to business norms. We begin by sharing the drivers of this shift in curriculum and culture within the college. Next, we explore how we approached this strategic shift and share the programs and practices we adopted. We close by sharing the design strategies we employed, as well as the challenges we faced on this journey to prepare our students to serve as future leaders in this transformed business environment.

Drivers of the Shift Towards Sustainability

One of the hallmarks of American enterprise is the agility and innovation with which it adapts to marketplace dynamics. So, it should not come as a surprise that business strategies and models evolved in response to how major societal trends and

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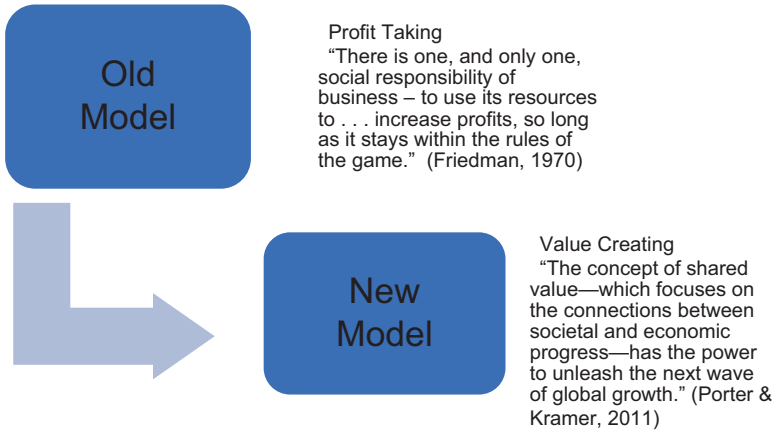Kent State University, Kent, OH, USA
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Fig. 1 The evolution of business models towards sustainability

environmental challenges impacted the economy, and the markets in which companies operate. We characterize this shift in the last decade towards embedding sustainability at the core of the business DNA as a fundamental change to business models. This change involves a move from a sole interest in "profit-taking" to a more comprehensive model of "value-creating." The essence of this shift is captured well by thought leaders from two different eras of business, as displayed in Fig. 1.

For our college of business, our journey was driven by three main factors, each a shift in a context that is highly relevant to our work of educating the management leaders of tomorrow. First, we were responding to the scientific and public media reports documenting the rising importance of environmental challenges and societal issues. Second, we were affected by the changes in strategies and models we observed in the business community. Third, we were influenced by our accrediting association and peer institutions who were also elevating and addressing these issues. Taken together, the impact of changes in these three key contexts shaped our path in how we adapted sustainability within the curriculum and the culture of the college.

As an institution dedicated to the creation and transmission of knowledge through research and teaching, the University plays a leading role in the dissemination and application of possible solutions and alternatives to the socio-environmental problems facing today's society. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) recognizes that education is a key element in the achievement of sustainable development. To advance towards this goal, in 2015 UNESCO defined 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that must be reached by 2030. A College of Business (CoB) for a state university has embedded the SDGs into the curriculum to prepare students for their careers. In 2017, the CoB launched the Responsible Leadership Initiative (RLI). The RLI promotes business as a force for good and demonstrates through practice and research how business can drive achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals established in 2016 by the

United Nations Global Compact. The Responsible Leadership Initiative is supported by the College's core values of respect, ethics, collaboration, and a sense of purpose in all we do.

The integration of Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) in higher education contributes to the development by university graduates of sustainability competencies, such as critical and creative thinking; problem solving; capacity for action, collaboration, and systemic thinking, thereby training potential agents of, capable of configuring more sustainable societies (Ceulemans et al., 2015). Many r international declarations committing them to the ko introduction of Sustainable Development in their educational policy, including the curriculum, research, and social projection. SDGs are envisaged to address the inequality and crippling conditions existing in the society that put certain social groups into disadvantage and margins. It is a commitment to create a just and egalitarian society. It puts the notion of sustainable development at the center where democracy and people's participation are the vehicles to ensure an all-inclusive society.

To create responsible leaders the Online MBA utilizes a variety of learning design elements to promote deep learning centered around the SDGs. The Master of Business Administration (MBA), which refers to an internationally recognized degree designed to prepare students and further develop their required skills for careers in business and management, has been recognized as one of the most popular professional degrees worldwide since the last few decades (Baruch & Leeming, 2001). Today's typical full-time MBA program is structured around three key areas: core courses, elective courses, and extracurricular activities including professional and social clubs as well as immersion and business consulting experiences. The MBA by nature is interdisciplinary as the core courses range from Accounting, Economics, Finance, Marketing, Management, and Information Systems with electives occurring within these core areas along with other colleges across the higher education institution. Overall, MBA students. Diverse learning opportunities. This chapter will explore how the SDGs are designed into the learning activities within the Online MBA to create responsible leaders.

The SDG Framework

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of 17 "Global Goals' for making the world a better place. They were developed by the 193 member nations of the United Nations. The SDGs were launched in 2016, with an agreement to achieve them by 2030. The agreement was forged at a conference in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in 2012 and is a non-binding agreement. The goals are also known as the "Global Goals," the 2030 Agenda, or simply, the "SDGs." As noted by the then Secretary General of the UN, Ban Ki-moon, "We have only one planet. There is no Plan B because there is no Planet B."

The SDGs address the full range of social, environmental, and economic activities of life (see Fig. 2). Each Goal has b parts (United Nations, 2020):

Fig. 2 The 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals. (Source: https://www.un.org/development/desa/disabilities/envision2030.html; used with permission)

1. Goal Statements include a description of the purpose of the goal.
2. Targets include a set of objectives that specifies what should be achieved.
3. Indicators include a list of potential metrics to assess our progress on each goal.

Additionally, most descriptions of the SDGS also provide additional information such as key facts and figures that help identify why this goal is important.

The SDGs matter because they represent a consensus among the representatives of 193 countries who worked together to create them, and then came together to commit to them, to share best practices, and to collaborate to achieve them over the next decade. Second, the SDGs provide a defined set of metrics for assessing where we are now in each of these areas of endeavors. Next, they represent a ready reference for making sense of our world. These goals emerged out of major trends that impact the world and offer specific targets for the activities and accomplishments that are needed. Because of its wide acceptance, many major corporations use this framework to report their sustainability activities and accomplishments. Finally, the goals and metrics help us identify important business opportunities, and useful opportunities to collaborate with nonprofit organizations and government agencies.

Integration of the SDGs into curriculum supports a "triple bottom line" approach to managing and evaluating business effectiveness. The triple bottom line of "People, Profit, Planet" suggests that, in addition to counting their financial profits, organizations must also assess their impacts on the full array of their stakeholders, such as their employees, suppliers, and communities, as well as their environmental impacts on the planet. This represents a transformative change in how executives

and organizations approach business. Organizations across the globe are now creating new ways for people to live and thrive in a manner that respects the planet's ecosystems and recognizes the significance of a healthy global social system.

For the last decade, this new, sustainable model of business represents a fast-growing trend as more businesses recognize what consumers, employees, and other stakeholders embrace a triple bottom line approach of business as a force for good. However, there are major differences in how deeply and how well companies are incorporating sustainability into their operations. Some do it in "bolt-on" fashion, where it is a symbolic or superficial gesture, designed to impress consumers. Sometimes, these efforts can be very misleading, and are then called "greenwashing." In contrast, some companies take sustainability very seriously, and reinvent their entire firm around sustainability. They change their mission and vision statements to fully incorporate sustainability into the DNA of the company and reinvent their operations and products to conform to sustainable practices.

The SDGs provide a framework and common language for educating students on how to create and lead responsible business initiatives that contribute value to workers, communities, and the environment in addition to generating profits.

Responsible Leadership Initiative

The College of Business is dedicated to creating a competitive Online MBA program that will prepare students to be responsible leaders who capably lead organizations by attending the contextual needs of society and the environment as they address business needs. Muff et al. (2020) define the responsible leader as one who "demonstrates a deep understanding of the interdependencies of the system and the own person, is distinguished by an ethical and values-based attitude, and able to build long-term relations with different stakeholders embracing their needs, while initiating change towards sustainable development" (p. 2257). Responsible leaders engage in reflexive practices and aspire to upholding a "responsible" mindset (Eriksen & Cooper, 2018). This mindset is based on the responsible leader possessing the ability to intentionally respond to others within the unfolding ethical and moral situations they find themselves in and make "moral and principled decisions by considering their impacts on others" (Pless & Maak, 2011, p. 8).

Maak and Pless (2006) define responsible leadership as the process that leads to building and sustaining positive relationships with all stakeholders. Rather than focus on attributes of the leader or the dyadic leader–follower relationships, Maak and Pless identify a set of roles for responsible leaders, providing a framework or mindset for dealing with seemingly competing demands from multiple stakeholders. These roles include steward, global citizen, change agent, architect, storyteller/meaning maker, visionary, coach, and servant.

Inspired by internationally accepted values in the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC), the six Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), broadly categorized as purpose, values, methods, research, partnership, and dialog,

are intended to guide the preparation of "a new generation of business leaders capable of managing the complex challenges faced by business and society in the twenty-first century" (PRME, 2017). The PRME initiative engages business schools and universities worldwide in improving their institutional strategies, curricula, research, teaching methodologies, and delivery models to promote an inclusive, sustainable global economy. Waddock et al. (2010) point out that commitment to PRME affects both implementation and assessment, including what is taught (content), how it is taught (process), the environment in which it is taught (context), and how learning outcomes are measured (assurance of learning). These are critical issues as economic crises and public awareness of sustainability alter expectations for business schools to prepare globally minded, ethical leaders who can responsibly address today's problems and tomorrow's challenges.

The College implemented their Responsible Leadership Initiative to highlight the range of activities within the college that addressed SDG-related research, as well as SDG-related curricular and extra-curricular activities in the college. Special attention was given to SDG curricular integration in the MBA program, for to manage organizations responsibly, MBA graduates must apply cross-functional knowledge and tools to understand stakeholder perspectives, recognize cause and effect (both intended and unintended), inspire commitment, lead change, and serve organizations and communities for short-and long-term vitality.

Program Design Based on Meaningful Learning

There are a variety of perspectives and strategies for designing learning environments around the SDGs and responsible leadership within higher education (Gadelshina et al., 2018; Dyllick, 2015; Muff et al., 2020). It has been argued that delivering education supporting the SDGs requires institutions to adopt pedagogical strategies that offer a variety of environmental and equity issues (Mulder et al., 2012). To create responsible leaders the Online MBA utilizes a variety of learning design elements to promote meaningful learning centered around the SDGs and responsible leadership by students actively exploring these topics throughout each course.

Meaningful learning construction is linked with strategies such as inquiry and problem solving, resulting in the ability to identify and analyze the underlying structure and connect existing with new concepts (Jonassen, 2003). For meaningful learning to occur, students need: (1) a reason for learning; (2) to engage in a set of learning activities that can help them to achieve their learning goals; and (3) proper scaffolding and other aids to help them derive targeted content and skills from their experiences. Savery and Duffy (1996) note that students' goals can act as a primary pivot point around which context, content, and learning activities can evolve. Csikszentmihalyi (1997) points out that when students are engrossed in achieving personally meaningful goals, they will achieve a state of "flow" that can only come about from active interaction between the learner and his/her learning environment.

These researchers tell us that once someone has a goal, the physical, social, and emotional environment they engage in will suggest and motivate the generation of new goals and sub-goals. As people generate, evaluate, and refine alternative solutions to challenges they aim to achieve, they identify the knowledge and skills they need to learn, setting up new goals for themselves. It thus makes sense to design learning activities centered on goals that students are likely to take on as their own.

To support meaningful learning the courses are designed with the following learning attributes: active, constructive, intentional, authentic, and cooperative (Howland et al., 2011; Mystakidis, 2019). Active learning is an instructional method that engages students in the learning process by requiring them to interact with content in the learning environment, engage with the subject matter to make a personal cognitive contribution (Bonwell & Eisen, 1991). Constructivism is "an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner" (Elliott et al., 2000, p. 256). In constructivist learning, students are expected to construct continuously their own meaning by interpreting and reflecting on observed phenomena, content, and the results of their actions. Intentional learning is generally defined as learning that is motivated by intentions and is goal directed where the learner invests effort in reflection and in controlling and maintaining learning strategies (Bereiter & Scardamalia, 1989). Authentic learning encourages students to explore, discuss, and meaningfully construct concepts and relationships in contexts that involve real-world problems and projects that are relevant to the learner (National Research Council, 1999). In addition to these independent learning attributes, the courses include cooperative learning by learners engaging in group collaboration to create a learning community (Johnson, 2003). These five learning attributes are integrated into the learning activities in the course courses that align to multiple outcomes (Silber, 2010).

Each course in the program integrates the SDGs and responsible leadership in a creative way to ensure program learning outcomes (PLOs) are being mastered.

- Economics courses: provide essential economic knowledge for responsible leadership decisions by studying several decision-making processes and discussing the relevance and trade-offs involved with each…ethics, equality, and efficiency. The SDG goals of no poverty and higher economic growth are more salient in these courses.
- Law and Ethics course: addresses the concept of Responsible Management/ Leadership with the use of the course theme of developing legally astute business managers who minimize legal risk while promoting business ethical concepts and cultures. The SDGs are addressed as part of developing the responsibly ethical business manager throughout the course.
- Global Technology Strategy course: focuses on SDG goals 1,3,6,7,8. Students learn about how technology is being used to change lives for the better as well as how digital transformation reduces carbon footprints. Responsible management is an underlying theme throughout the course.
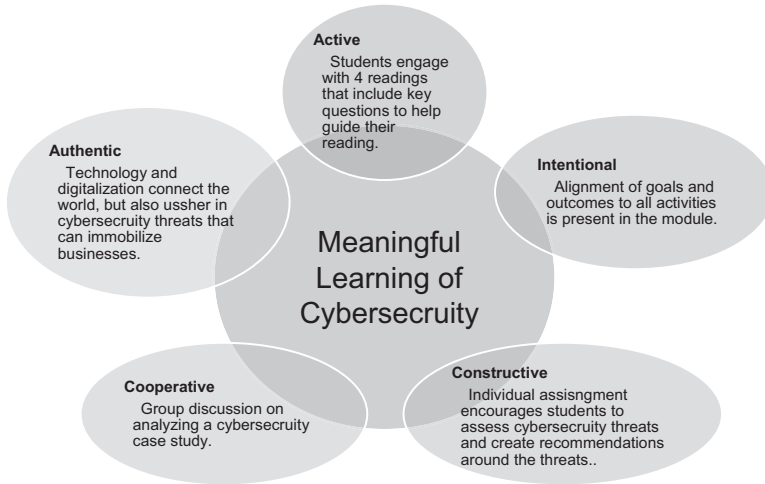
Fig. 3 Example of meaningful learning in Global Technology Strategy, SDG Goal 8—Decent Work and Economic Growth

- Leadership course: covers concepts that fit with good health and well-being, gender equality, the decent work part of decent work and economic development, reduced inequalities, and quality education.
- Capstone course: students discuss how and why there is an increased awareness for responsible management; what the students' companies are doing (with specific examples), and whether these initiatives are helping or hurting their relative performance in their markets. The case analysis and class discussions focus on the following SDGs: decent work and economic growth (#8), industry, innovation and infrastructure (#9), responsible consumption and production (#12), partnerships for goals (#17).

The above items are just a few examples of how this content is integrated into coursework. While faculty do not cover all SDGs in each course, they address those SDGs which are most relevant within a course's content structure. Fig. 3 illustrates the connection between the five attributes of meaningful learning and the SDGs in the Global Technology Strategy course. Unfortunately, space does not permit a full listing SDG-related of content in all courses.

Challenges Encountered

This endeavor was clearly a team effort on the part of administration, the instructional design expert, and numerous MBA faculty. The foundation for taking this direction was the college's Responsible Leadership Initiative, which provided a

platform and rationale for integrating the content into coursework. Industry experts from both local and global organizations were brought in to talk with faculty about the growing presence of sustainability and CSR in their organizations, and about how they summarize their relevant activities and initiatives in their sustainability reporting. As is typical in curricular change, some faculty eagerly shifted while others were reticent to take appropriate steps to learn how the SDGs related to their courses and/or to make room for this content coverage in their syllabi. Reinforcement came in 2019 from the Business Roundtable statement (referenced earlier). In 2020 the leading business accrediting body, AACSB, approved a new set of business accreditation standards. They used the term *societal impact* to address environmental and social sustainability and require that business schools/colleges report on how it is addressed in their mission, curriculum, and research; their new Standard 9 addresses how the business school/college provides societal impact in their community.

As such, what made this transition possible was the layered approach we took over several years: discussing, encouraging, and supporting this expansive change, but not demanding it. Essential to the process was the role of our senior instructional designer who utilized the Quality Matters (QM) Rubric for Higher Education™ (https://www.qualitymatters.org/) to implement and ensure online quality assurance within the program (Grincewicz et al., 2022). QM is an international, non-profit organization centered on improving the design of online and hybrid courses (Adair & Shattuck, 2015; Quality Matters, 2018). In addition to a rubric to ensure quality in courses, QM has also created a series of 4 individual online program certifications that online programs may seek: Online Program Design, Online Teaching Support, Online Learner Support, and Online Learner Success. The senior instructional designer worked with the faculty on the design of each course and led the way to obtaining QM Certification for all core MBA courses and QM Program Design certification (which led to her promotion to Director). She was always aware of where and how this content was being incorporated in courses and provided suggestions throughout course development. Further, to support obtaining QM Program Design certification, she regularly highlighted that faculty needed to identify one theme that could run throughout the program. When it was time to vote on this theme, no one offered a better idea than Responsible Management, and it became official. Following this vote, faculty knew the importance of reflecting this theme with a new program learning outcome:

Responsible Management Analyze the complex issues confronting organizations and craft solutions to business problems that create long term value and shared prosperity for the broad array of stakeholders.

Are we where we want to be? Decidedly not! We have many more layers to go. But the progress we have made is significant and meaningful. We have debated with others who are committed to sustainability whether an incremental progress approach like this can be sufficient, or whether taking a transformative redesign approach is required—one that tosses out traditional curriculum and builds it from

the ground up within a framework of social justice and sustainability. We advocate for both. While the transformative approach might be the ideal way to craft a system that dramatically shapes new thinking, few colleges have the luxury of taking the radical approach. Most of us must live within an existing system of administration, staff and faculty, one that creates boundary conditions to the extent that incrementalism is the only option. Without the capacity to hire several expert faculty who are grounded in social justice and sustainability, we work with what we have. We have seen the benefits of relentless incrementalism and are committed to it. Given time, even faculty who resist this content eventually begin to see the light. These faculty experience that students engage with the SDGs and encourage faculty to delve more deeply into this content. They encounter a growing number of articles both in research journals and in the professional press that pose a compelling drive toward sustainable and socially responsible approaches to business. We also understand that faculty have many competing demands for their time within the common domains of research, teaching and service. Mastering new knowledge, shifting the foundational models in their disciplines, and integrating new ideas into their courses takes time, patience, encouragement, and support. It also requires that administration presents a relentless drumbeat for why this is necessary. Eventually the magic happens.

Discussion

Our journey of integrating the SDGs and value creation into our MBA curriculum has been most rewarding. Our MBA focuses on creating an equitable education, offering a variety of life-long learning opportunities to our students to support the United Nation's 17 goals for sustainable development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015). As noted above, it has required a solid team effort, with meaningful contributions from each party. This curricular content effort dovetailed beautifully with improved instructional design required by QM Certification at both the course and program levels. Each course in the program is unique and includes innovative learning design frameworks that focus on the responsible management theme and integrating the SDGs. The courses align the program mission of preparing students for responsible leadership positions in private, nonprofit, and public organizations. Upon completion of the program, graduates will demonstrate a global mindset and competence in critical thinking, digital technology, communication, teamwork, and ethical management. Support from administration must provide a firm foundation upon which instructional designers and faculty can build. We strongly encourage other colleges to boldly go forth in this direction. Students will increasingly demand this substantive approach to purposeful business, which can address a range of substantive world needs.

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