

Sustainability principles need to be integrated into business education

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The principles of sustainability need not be at odds with a classic education in business, since environmental and poverty issues will likely be among the biggest challenges for tomorrow's leaders of industry, according to published research from Madhu Viswanathan, a professor of business administration at Illinois.

Credit: L. Brian Stauffer

The principles of sustainability need not be at odds with a classic education in business, since environmental and poverty issues likely will be among the biggest challenges for tomorrow's leaders of industry, according to published research from a University of Illinois expert in

poverty and subsistence marketplace behaviors.

The call for embedding sustainability practices in business education means marrying managerial, ecological and social values, something businesses already are realizing but business schools have yet to fully embrace, says Madhu Viswanathan, a professor of business administration at Illinois.

"I'm a big believer that in the areas of social and [environmental sustainability](#), we are not experts," he said. "If we were, we wouldn't have the problems we have right now."

In a paper published in the *Journal of Management Education*, Viswanathan outlines how he has designed a number of business courses built around sustainability: a first-year MBA course; a required module for all first semester business undergraduates on sustainable businesses for subsistence marketplaces; and a yearlong interdisciplinary graduate course on sustainable product and market development for subsistence marketplaces.

Using synergies among research, teaching and social initiatives, Viswanathan describes his approach in terms of its philosophical orientation – specifically, how to bring about a better world, and understand the associated challenges with realizing that vision.

"Underlying what I teach in subsistence marketplaces is the idea that it's not just that you can do good while doing well, but that it's essential to do good in order to do well," said Viswanathan, who directs the Marketplace Literacy Project, a nonprofit organization that helps to enable marketplace literacy among low-literate, low-income people.

"In other words, you have to be thinking about what's good for the organization as well as the individual and community."

According to Viswanathan, there are two models for teaching about sustainability, although he has followed one over the other.

"There is the classic, top-down model, beginning with what we already know, which works for well-established courses," he said. "But sustainability is different and we are only beginning to understand what it means for business. Therefore, the way we approach the topic is bottom-up, attempting to learn with students about an emerging area. By bottom-up, I mean, if you're teaching students about subsistence marketplaces, run a poverty simulation. If you're teaching sustainability, I tell students to keep a diary of their own unsustainable consumption. I then ask: 'These are things you're doing. What's the one thing you can do to make your consumption more sustainable?' They'll say, 'I'll recycle.' Then we challenge those assumptions – 'Is that going to have the most impact, or is it lowering the temperature of your thermostat?' "

Practicing sustainability in one's own life is important, but so is being able to apply those principles in the much broader context of the global economy, Viswanathan says.

"Why does Wal-Mart focus on logistics?" he said. "Why is Starbucks thinking about poor farmers? Are these the best first steps for them? In other words, if you want to steer a large enterprise away from business-as-usual to a more sustainable path, what are the most effective steps one, two and three?"

What the bottom-up perspective does is give students a "flavor of reality, one that they often have never considered," Viswanathan says.

"Businesses function in the real world," he said. "Managers get it because they are faced with these realities. What this means is we just need to bring sustainability principles into the classroom earlier. I think the ideal situation is one where some of this percolates into the standard

undergraduate courses, when students are just beginning to think about how to use resources efficiently."

With the bottom-up approach, Viswanathan says the exposure to different realities moves the dialogue away from thinking "it's only about shareholders and the next three months" to "if I don't understand what's good for the community and larger society, then how am I going to do well?"

According to Viswanathan, sustainability will likely be the big topic in business education in the coming years.

"The way I view this is, what brings these strands together are emerging markets, where the real growth is occurring" he said. "The biggest impetus for teaching something like this is that we face two huge challenges or perhaps collision courses. One is population, and the other is the environment. These are the issues we need to be addressing, and I feel like we are in a different place today than we were 10 or even five years ago. The consciousness about this has really been raised. I even see a different response about this today than from my students who have graduated five years ago. So the currency of these issues is certainly increasing.

"The anonymous quote I always come back to is, 'The challenge of education is to prepare students for their future – not our past.' We need to get students to understand how to do [sustainability](#). Moving these issues to the forefront of the business process is very important."

More information: The article, "Curricular Innovations on Sustainability and Subsistence Marketplaces: Philosophical, Substantive, and Methodological Orientations," is available online.

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