

“Corporate Social Responsibility and Strategic Partnerships: Academia and Business Can Be A Powerful Team To Advance the Agenda

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There is no lack of evidence suggesting that the social and environmental problems that our world faces are intractable, complex, and multi-faceted. Nor is there a dearth of evidence claiming that business has been a contributor to these problems. Most of the evidence purports that business stands poised to be one of the more powerful and effective agents in the solutions to these dire problems. A clear ‘best practice’ for corporations hoping to engage in strategic corporate responsibility is to engage with multiple stakeholders and to strategically partner across sectors. It stands to logical reason that one effective partnership to highlight is between business and academia: a not so typical for-profit and not-for-profit partnership. Little focus and attention has been given to the opportunity and potential of academic partnerships with business to advance the CSR agenda.

In this editorial, I will define practical methods and recommendations for a mutually beneficial partnership between academia and business in corporate social responsibility. I will use as an example the work in which the Center for Responsible Business at the Haas School of Business at the University of California, Berkeley is engaged.

If we are to truly change the global management paradigm to one of sustainability and integrated strategic CSR, one critical and rudimentary step in this process is to build this management mentality into our core management training: we must educate future management leaders in the critical theory, frameworks, and practice of integrated strategic CSR, just as we educate them in traditional areas of finance, marketing, and accounting. At Haas, we view CSR to be a part of our core management training for all of our students- not more or less important than other core subjects. Our goal is to expose all Haas stakeholders to the complex subject of strategic CSR as a core management subject.

Further, if corporate responsibility is truly emerging as a core facet of management education—and it is truly emergent—then the only way academia will succeed in integrating CSR into long-standing management education models is with the collaboration and support of business. There is not a wealth of academic tradition, data, writing, or research in the field of CSR from which to draw, for either academia or for business. The window of opportunity and need is now as open as it has ever been.

Programs, courses, research, CSR centers (such as Haas's Center for Responsible Business) and institutes, and professorships are cropping up by the droves as a reaction to the abysmal state of global corporate behavior.

Research Programs

Empirically solid and valid research in the arena of CSR is lacking, particularly in the areas of standardization, benchmarking, reporting, metrics and measurement, and the business value and opportunities of CSR. A collection of the best problem solving, research design, and data analysis minds reside within academia. A collection of the most strategic, innovative, cutting-edge strategies of CSR are happening within corporations. Partnering for action-oriented research initiatives—in real-time—can help to move the field of CSR best practices, strategies, metrics, returns, and value forward at a quick and practically applicable pace. Certainly there are risks associated. Worst practices, risks-taken with no rewards, and even failures might be uncovered. Alas, this is how we all best learn: not only from strategies that worked well, but also from those that did not work. Companies internally struggle with proving the business case for CSR, developing effective strategies, benchmarking best practices across industries, and measuring their CSR strategies. Often, CSR departments for even the largest of multinationals, like Ford Motor Company, which boasts 360,000 employees, are only two and three persons large. These departments do not have the capacity to take on all of the internal or external CSR needs or issues. By effectively partnering, they can outsource this work in a cost-effective way that, as will be later discussed, not only returns valuable data, but advances the higher learning agendas of management education and maximizes learning outcomes. The first best practice in developing partnerships between academia and business is to develop strategic research partnerships.

Student Experiential Learning Projects

John Dewey, in the early 20th century, was dubbed the grandfather of a then-radical concept called 'experiential learning' that has slowly taken root in most professional training institutions of higher learning. His theory was simple: students learn most effectively when in-the-classroom-theory is closely coupled with real-world practice. Theory that appears neat, simple, and tidy in texts and lectures is most often quite complex and messy in implementation. Management education has been one of the last great professional arenas to fully grasp this concept (law and medicine fully integrating it within their models). Later pedagogical theorists have asserted that upwards of seventy percent of knowledge is gained through out-of-the-classroom-experiences: only thirty percent of knowledge is transferred in the classroom (Kolb, Argyris, Schon, Korn, Astin, and others). If any theory, in practice, is far messier and far more complex than it might at first appear, it is indeed CSR. So, engaging students who are studying CSR, sustainability, and corporate citizenship within their management education classrooms in real-world, current, live corporate projects is invaluable. Students have the opportunity to immediately put into practice their newly learned theories of stakeholder engagement, social return on investment metrics, strategic, integrated CSR, and developing the business case. Students are more motivated to learn and to do well if they are involved with solving real, current business problems and in applying this newly-learned and less-empirically-studied theory. Ultimately, they learn the theories of CSR more effectively

and are better able to transport and implement this in their respective careers. They also see living proof that companies are committed to and engaged in strategic CSR. Companies gain unbridled, objective, valuable, analytic, strategic, innovative, and inexpensive consulting work. And business schools successfully embrace the model of developing business leaders for tomorrow's sustainable world. It is a complete win-win situation. By sponsoring these learning projects for students, companies also enhance their brand image and get a first cut and the top talent coming out of business schools. At Haas, we offer Strategic CSR courses to students at all levels, which have as a complement to the in-the-classroom study of theory, frameworks, and learnings a hands-on company project. Students work with companies like McDonalds, HP, Chiquita, Wells Fargo, and Kontiki (a high tech start-up in Silicon Valley). We are quite proud of these partnerships.

Center & Institute Support

Over the last several months, Centers for ethics, CSR, governance, environmental management, etc. have been popping up in every business school that wants to stay competitive, and show that they are doing 'the right thing.' Corporate partners can have a profound effect on shaping these critical late-coming entities to the world of management education. Not only can they provide critical funding to run the research, teaching, and outreach programs of these centers, but corporate leaders can serve on Advisory Boards and shape strategy, policy, and direction of the Center. Corporate leaders can work with management schools as guest speakers, seminar lecturers, student mentors, project and research advisors, and Executives-in-Residence. Unless the chasm between academia and business- 'the real world' for which we are training our future business leaders- is bridged, sustainability will never become achievable with corporate strategy, practice, and operations.

Corporate Recruiting & Hiring

I have long had a day dream of a typical Wall Street or finance-related MBA job interview in which the corporate recruiter asks the cocky young finance-focused student how the firm ought to be quantifying social and environmental ROI, along with the traditional calculations of ROI. In this day dream, the young, astute finance student suddenly resembles a frightened deer, and ultimately does not get the job offer based on this lack of knowledge. Individual faculty champions, a subset of committed students, and specific CSR Centers have tried to engage the mainstream masses of management education students in CSR as a core component of management education. Sadly, the corporation, in that thirty-minute interview, by asking that one simple question, could do more to engage the mainstream masses than even the largest and most-well-funded centers. Right or wrong, students want to develop and acquire a hireable set of knowledge and skills. Thus far, the corporate world has not sent the clear and unified message that in-depth CSR knowledge and practice skills are sought after or valued in the marketplace as well as traditional business acumen. Until corporations begin to outwardly place value on and hire, not only within their individual CSR units, but more importantly within their core business functions, job candidates who have a solid and proven grasp of CSR theory, concepts, and skills, management education will not succeed in teaching CSR in a mainstream, integrated, and holistic way. And until future generations of business

managers and leaders are trained with this embedded knowledge, corporate behavior and strategic operations in CSR will not contribute to wide-scale positive social and environmental impact.

Professorships & Doctoral Fellowships

An old euphemism states that “it is difficult to move elephants uphill,”—this may well have been developed with faculty in mind. Faculty, of all lots, can be deeply embedded in traditional fields of inquiry and disparate subjects in knowledge. Again, corporations, in partnering with academia, can move this herd of elephants. An early, lower-cost, and more sustainable strategy for moving this herd is to support doctoral candidates who wish to pursue this field of inquiry within their respective disciplines. Doctoral candidates are far less risk-averse and far more innovative in their approach to knowledge acquisition and problem solving. And if we can support and train the future faculty to investigate and develop theories and models in CSR during their doctoral training, then they will clearly bring this into their new posts as professors in our world’s business schools of these new business leaders. Companies can sponsor doctoral fellowships within academia for a very low fee, and receive in return specific, targeted, innovative, fresh research ideas and results. Of course, in order to fully institutionalize CSR within academia, the older elephants must to be prodded as well. The most clear, straightforward method for doing so is for corporations to sponsor targeted professorships, as they have long existed in Finance, Accounting, Statistics, and Operations. Again, the company gains clear brand recognition, and has a bloodline into cutting-edge, focused research streams.

The Center for Responsible Business at Haas values its corporate partnerships as a key factor to its success, as well as to the ultimate success of business is playing a key role in solving critical world issues. We simply could not do this critical work without one another.