

Integrating Sustainability in the Harvard Business School Curriculum

Background

In 2014, three [Student Sustainability Associates](#) (SSAs) started a year-long project to investigate the prevalence of sustainability themes in the cases and class discussions in Harvard Business School's first year (RC) curriculum. The group looked at every course covered during their first year and identified the cases with a significant focus on sustainability. Each SSA took note of the classroom discussions during those cases to track whether or not any sustainability issues were raised in each of their three classrooms. In addition, the project highlighted a number of cases not currently covered in the RC curriculum that could encourage more pointed conversations around sustainability in the classroom. The overall purpose of this project was to "ensure that business leaders graduating from Harvard Business School know basic facts about our environment, appreciate its importance and relevance for their business lives, and are equipped in dealing with business decisions involving sustainability issues."

Continued Efforts

In an effort to continue this work and get closer to meeting this goal, a few SSAs this year worked on a number of different initiatives to collect more data on classroom discussions, learn more about the case selection process for RC courses, and get faculty members engaged and involved with the project (as supporters, case-writers, or both).

First, in order to collect even more data on classroom discussions, we created an online survey that we sent out to all 10 SSAs (one per RC classroom section) after each sustainability case was taught. Even for cases with fundamental environmental issues, we had heard that section discussions didn't always cover these issues or provide context, so we wanted to gather the data to support or refute our thesis. We started sending out the survey for all sustainability cases taught in the second semester, and we will continue to collect that data from subsequent SSA classes.

Next, we met with RC professors in a number of departments across HBS to talk to them about the project, learn more about how cases are selected within their teaching groups, and ideally, get them involved with the project. Some of these professors already had backgrounds in or were doing

research in sustainability-related fields, but many did not, so these meetings were helpful in increasing awareness across campus and making sure these topics were more top-of-mind for faculty members.

Finally, we worked closely with the HBS [Business and Environment Initiative](#) throughout the process. Not only did the faculty and staff provide us with insights and guidance on the direction of this project, but they also helped us think extensively about what will come next. The exciting thing about this project is that it doesn't end with this class of SSAs, but that means we still have a lot of work to do, and we've spent a lot of time this year thinking about how we want to carry on this project. Among the things we believe will make a difference in the future are continuing to circulate the SSA survey among the 10 RC SSAs next year and completing the Climate Change Course Note, which can be used to provide context for a variety of different cases.

Future Plans

We plan to continue thinking about what basic facts or fundamental sustainability education are important for HBS students to know upon graduation. And, in order to provide that information, we also plan to brainstorm core business problems for a few key RC courses (where sustainability issues are most relevant) that align with a core environmental problem so that when we meet with course heads when we return in the fall, we can present these ideas to them as potential new cases topics and ensure more sustainability cases are incorporated into the curriculum and have staying power.

Most importantly, we want to make sure this project gets carried on next year and into the future. We plan on staying involved and hopefully continuing to pass it down through SSAs as well as getting the BEI Advisory Board and Energy and Environment Club more involved from the beginning.