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## **Critical Thinking and Critical Theory: Interdisciplinary Strategies for Social Responsibility in Business Education**

Joshua Ravenscroft

Corporate scandals, economic recessions and unsustainable business practices have created demand for prosocial business strategies. In response, business education has increasingly included corporate social responsibility curriculum. Nonetheless, ongoing controversies raise the question of what should be done to preserve and advance social responsibility in business education. While research has explored corporate social responsibility, interdisciplinary trends in business education and the application of critical theory to business, it appears that the literature has not yet combined those three ideas into a specific approach. To begin envisioning a business studies curriculum reorganized around these principles, this paper uses interdisciplinary theory and critical management studies to explore the culture of business education and interrogate traditional methods. Even as critical curricula become taboo or restricted, interdisciplinary studies and critical management studies provide a framework for prosocial and sustainable business models. By contrasting traditional business education with divergent methods, this paper collects relevant insights from across disciplines and discusses how to reorganize ethics and corporate social responsibility curriculum to better support students, businesses, and a sustainable future.

*Keywords:* interdisciplinary, business schools, business education, business curriculum, critical theory, critical management studies, corporate social responsibility, immersive teaching approaches, interdisciplinary studies, interdisciplinary theory, business school, ethics, DEI, justice, critical management studies, sustainability

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## Traditional Models of Business Education

### Controversy, Ethics and Corporate Social Responsibility

In the aftermath of massive corporate scandals in the 1990s and early 2000s, business schools scrambled to incorporate ethics programming into their already dense MBA curriculum, despite student resistance and disinterest (Alsop, 2006). In 2005, the consensus among employers, students and media outlets was that business schools were so myopically focused on technical skills that their students were not ready to be ethical businesspeople, let alone well-rounded enough for the complex realities of the workforce (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005). After the 2008 financial crisis, mass criticism targeted business schools and MBA graduates working in corporations and banks, blaming them for pursuing profit at the expense of family homes and the national economy (Podolny, 2009). In reaction to ongoing corruption, climate, and financial crises following the 2008 financial crash, the United Nations organized the Principles for Responsible Management Education programs to invite business and management schools to prioritize corporate social responsibility (CSR) and sustainability (Godemann et al., 2014).

Corporate social responsibility encompasses models and strategies where businesses go beyond regulated minimums to do social good by balancing the interests of all their stakeholders: not just shareholders, but customers, employees, suppliers, and related communities (Zhao et al., 2023). CSR can be a tool for both practical and altruistic goals; different models may prioritize sustainable revenues, competitive advantage, or the benefit of individuals, society, or the environment (Zhao et al., 2023). Although business schools have faced repeated criticism for their role in economic and social crises, business scholars have made continuous progress in developing a pedagogy of ethics (Raman et al., 2019). Corporate social responsibility has been a topic of attention in business publications for decades and continues to be an area of thriving research and exploration (Zhao et al., 2023). At the same time, due to the tendency for business faculty to be specialists in subfields of business, CSR and ethics material are usually separate courses from the rest of business curriculum, which limits the scope of debate and analysis in the classroom (Schlegelmilch, 2020).

Corporate social responsibility is a broad term that includes a variety of business models, and not all CSR models are equally sustainable or prosocial. As Dyllick and Muff (2016) explain, sustainable business models fit into three categories, distinguished by their increasingly positive impact on society and the environment. First are business models that adopt CSR for sustained shareholder value; in this framework, while sustainability concerns are a challenge to business operations, they are an opportunity for innovation and revenue. This view of CSR, while pragmatic, is narrowly profit-driven and may face accusations of corporate greenwashing. Second is the triple bottom line (TBL), a business model that expands beyond profit to include social and environmental concerns as strategic priorities. Third, and most effective at contributing to global sustainability, is what Dyllick and Muff (2016) call true sustainability: a fundamentally different strategy where rather than aiming to minimize harm, the business focuses on creating new strategies and business models that solve sustainability challenges and maximize positive impact. True sustainability faces many obstacles as a business model, particularly for commercial business obligated to generate value for shareholders while navigating the short-term financial expectations of the market (Dyllick & Muff, 2016). However, true

sustainability moves beyond the triple bottom line by centering on the common good and avoiding unsustainable revenue streams.

### **Behind the Times: Business Culture and Curriculum**

Schlegelmilch (2020) describes a contemporary crossroads between traditional business education and competing models across the globe. Traditional business education often takes place within a larger university and is based on the model of business schools in the United States (US), featuring in-person lectures focused on certification and longstanding accreditation requirements (Schlegelmilch, 2020). Competing models leverage technology for remote learning, offer micro-credentials, and may be specialized to their own national certifications and market contexts. As technology enables international differentiation, business schools in the United States are losing their dominance in the global education market, while fluctuating geopolitical realities have incentivized business educators in Europe and Asia to focus on their own cultural, political, and economic systems (Schlegelmilch, 2020).

The diversity of the market exists in contrast to the uniformity of curriculum, culture, and ideology that defines traditional business education. While the prevailing logic of business strategy supports cultural diversity for competitiveness in the global market and to promote creative thought and innovation (Brosi et al., 2017), most graduate-level business case studies focus on white male leaders and perpetuate harmful stereotypes when they focus on women or leaders of color (Smith et al., 2021). Many efforts to create access for racially marginalized students in business schools are undermined by a culture that preserves dominant group identities, provides discriminatory evaluation and participates in knowledge and resource hoarding, thereby limiting access and decreasing retention for underrepresented students (Minefee et al., 2018). Even schools of thought intended to be critical of business studies still reflect the dominantly white and male populations of business scholars (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). These are not isolated examples: Bell et al. (2020) summarizes a bevy of studies which demonstrate patterns of anti-blackness in business schools and the harm caused by business culture. Furthermore, Bell et al. (2020) note that anti-blackness is pervasive in North American universities regardless of whether the institution tends to be politically liberal (Bell et al., 2020). The traditional curriculum and hierarchies preserved by business culture are failures of social responsibility that directly impact business students and have downstream effects into the workplace (Smith et al., 2021).

The disconnect between student populations and traditional business culture is further highlighted by the shifting values of business students. There is a growing demand for sustainability (Schlegelmilch, 2020), yet core curriculum generally does not include it. One study of Canada's business schools showed a persistent lack of ethics education in business studies, finding that less than a third of schools required ethics or corporate social responsibility coursework (Wymer & Rundle-Thiele, 2017). There was also a distinct lack of prosocial global studies, sustainability, or other topics relevant to CSR. Slow adoption of CSR curriculum is a risk in a market where enrollment is influenced by student values (Schlegelmilch, 2020). Amid the changing landscape of business education, traditional business education faces questions of relevance, but also an opportunity to innovate and adapt.

## Neoliberalism and Unspoken Questions

Leaders in business education calling for corporate social responsibility and environmentally conscious business practices may be evidence of a shift away from traditional perspectives (Forbes & Jermier, 2010). Yet, corporate environmentalism still prioritizes corporate freedom over societal and environmental longevity. So-called *Green Capitalism* is scrutinized as a tactic for corporations to publicly endorse change while passively continuing destructive practices (Forbes & Jermier, 2010). Traditional business curriculum focuses on profit structures, and most case discussions and lectures do not question profit as the priority of corporate value creation (Schlegelmilch, 2020). Others call for more radical analysis, arguing that because corporate capital structures drive towards profit and extraction, they are ultimately incompatible with long term sustainability and the dramatic reforms needed to prevent climate catastrophe (Ergene et al., 2020). Despite these critiques and apparent contradictions, corporate sustainability serves as a popular alternative to widespread structural change towards environmental sustainability. If true sustainability requires prioritizing the common good at the expense of unsustainable profit as Dyllick and Muff (2016) propose, perhaps sustainability requires an evaluation of the politics of profit. To do so, it is necessary to scrutinize the neoliberal foundation of traditional business education.

Neoliberalism is a political framework defined by a commitment to free market economics and has largely been adopted by both political conservatives and political liberals, as seen in United States and the United Kingdom (UK) over recent decades (Winlow et al., 2016). Neoliberal policies have reduced corporate regulation and dramatically changed the global economy, almost entirely replacing any other forms of socioeconomic organization in politics, corporations, and communities (Winlow et al., 2016). Neoliberalism has become entrenched as the status quo in business curriculum, prioritizing shareholders, profits, and market managerialism (Parker, 2014). Furthermore, neoliberalism positions the student in a market framework wherein the education and social relations of students serve production and profitability (Adler et al., 2007). This instrumentalism in business education means students are educated for the sake of employer profit rather than what may be personally fulfilling or socially responsible.

Students and outside critics increasingly demand sustainable and ethical business, giving educators an opportunity to engage assumptions about profit motive and corporate structures (Schlegelmilch, 2020). However, the neoliberal culture of business education constrains the values and practices of educators. Even within progressive business schools, a lack of administrative buy-in and barriers to interdepartmental collaboration can mean the homogenization of business curriculum, faculty, and culture (Parker, 2020). As Contu (2019) explains, “business school academics are not expected to engage in radical work (i.e. to ask awkward questions about the current system, to forge progressive alliances and to build theories and practices that have a deep and intimate critical concern with social, economic and epistemic justice)” (p. 744). Scholars and leaders in business schools usually do not raise their voices in times of crisis (such as the coronavirus pandemic and concurrent social justice movements) due to the ideological and political context where they work (Peredo et al., 2022). For those professors who seek to question the status quo of their workplace and community, the pressures of the business school silence these critiques (Contu, 2019).

The influence of neoliberalism in the academy is not limited to curriculum, as faculty and professors across the board face increasingly commanding leadership and more demanding workloads for less consistent pay or job security (McCann et al., 2020). A familiar story has played out in the UK; state funding for colleges and universities has diminished, and administrations have compensated by relying on and maximizing the profit from their business schools, creating scenarios where the education itself is transparently a marketed product (Parker, 2020). When faculty attempt to challenge the increasingly marketized institutional structure, they are disregarded or sanctioned (Parker, 2014). In this way, the material effects of neoliberalism extend towards faculty regardless of their political affiliation and beliefs. The limits of traditional business education makes it necessary to explore how other models of business education can address these concerns while providing relevant skills to business school graduates.

### **Divergent Models of Business Education**

#### **A Critical Approach from Within**

*“We have participated in this attempt to make management education and research more critical, in the sense of designing a curriculum that encourages students to explore power, control and inequalities” (Ford et al., 2010, p. 72).*

Critical Management Studies (CMS) is a field of critical theory and research that analyzes business education and develops theories of management (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). Topics of study range from workers’ rights, radical politics, and rethinking organizational frameworks to challenge the neoliberal status quo of corporations and business schools. The critical approach of CMS goes beyond skepticism, strategy or critical thinking (Adler et al., 2007). Rather, CMS is intended to promote business practices which counteract organizational inequality, exploitation and authoritarianism while encouraging social change more broadly (Grey et al., 2016). CMS is an especially useful framework to critique and understand traditional business education, as it investigates from within. When compared to other business theories, CMS has the benefit of relevance and plausibility due to its awareness of often overlooked business dynamics such as the conflicts of interest and power struggles central to neoliberalism (Adler et al., 2007).

#### **Outside Perspectives: The Value of Interdisciplinarity**

Interdisciplinary studies is a theoretical framework used to analyze and promote collaboration between academic disciplines in higher education (Bobek et al., 2023). According to Bobek et al., business education paradigms are becoming increasingly interdisciplinary. Business education is often multidisciplinary, in the sense that it brings together accounting, management, finance and so on, but by introducing students to outside disciplines and unfamiliar kinds of information, an interdisciplinary approach expands business education and helps sharpen problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and creativity (Bobek et al., 2023). Because the field of interdisciplinary studies was created to strengthen research projects that combined multiple disciplines, interdisciplinary education prepares business students for navigating multidisciplinary collaborations (Bobek et al., 2023). Interdisciplinarity provides concrete value to employers as well: one study of over 150 European

companies demonstrated increased revenue and innovation when company management had diversity of national origin, gender, and industry backgrounds (Brosi et al., 2017). These results highlight that diverse perspectives, interdisciplinarity skills and disciplinary diversity are of practical value in business.

Interdisciplinarity may also enable business education to deepen their views of CSR and the environmental impacts of business as usual. Interdisciplinary views of sustainability closely mirror truly sustainable models such as those outlined by Dyllick and Muff (2016). However, interdisciplinary perspectives on social responsibility may pose a challenge for business education, as neoliberal managerial methods face criticism for incorporating the environment into the calculus of the corporate status quo and pursuing profit over ecological and social sustainability:

While seeking ways to ‘green’ or make organizations ‘sustainable,’ the field has failed to pay attention to the root issues that produce our present crises. The existing literature has focused predominately on incremental change without problematizing its political-economic premises, yet the problems of the Anthropocene require transformational change at the systemic level that reconsiders how humans relate to the natural world and how wealth is distributed among diverse populations (Ergene et al., 2020, p. 1320)

Ergene et al. (2020) suggest that scholars who desire society to remedy the effects of climate change must shift from managerial to critical epistemologies, participate in interdisciplinary collaborations with natural scientists, and pursue scholarship that is morally relevant to their communities. Scholars must intentionally “redirect one’s field of inquiry towards addressing the systemic causes of our environmental problems even if that means moving in a direction that is contrary to the political, economic, and academic institutions in which we reside” (Ergene et al., 2020, p. 1320). In this way, adopting an interdisciplinary approach could bring business education in line with contemporary sustainability sciences.

### **Going Outside: Immersive Curriculum**

Immersive business curricula combine job placement, internships or community partnerships with regular classwork to give students the opportunities to take business from theory to practice. Classes which partner with real business projects give students the chance to network and put their skills to the test in real workplaces (Albert, 2019). Experiential learning curriculum gives instructors an opportunity to reinforce critical thinking among their students, but to be successful students need resources, mentors, collaborative teams, and a focus on the foundational skills and resources that apply to their projects (Albert, 2019). Instead of downplaying challenging topics, instructors can help students develop their understanding of complex issues through critical reflection upon the stressors they experience and problems they observe (Vaara & Fay, 2012).

One graduate-level immersion curriculum prepared students by encouraging them to debate relevant CSR scenarios beforehand, so that while on field immersion students were ready to analyze corporate impacts on local human rights (Baumann-Pauly, 2018). Another project brought MBA students together to partner with local microentrepreneurs and nonprofits: these collaborations invited students to apply their business acumen to their local community and deepen their understanding of social responsibility (Guerrieri et al. 2023). As these partnerships were with microentrepreneurs from low-income, underrepresented communities, students were encouraged to adopt a social justice lens to

understand their partner’s business problems and available resources. Through a combination of classroom learning, immersion, and intentional debriefing, these programs gave students the opportunity to complicate their ethical analysis and learn from local entrepreneurs. In addition to meeting learning goals, the immersive curriculum gave students a chance to have a prosocial impact by utilizing their skills to help solve local, real-world problems.

### **Reorganizing CSR Curriculum with Critical and Interdisciplinary Theories**

Most business education exists to provide students with marketable certifications and degrees within the parameters set by accreditation agencies, leaving little room for CSR, let alone a dramatically restructured curriculum (Schlegelmilch, 2020). Facing the limited capacity of programs packed with necessary technical training, business educators may feel there is little room for change, or that they must choose between supplemental CSR, CMS, interdisciplinarity or immersive curriculum. However, to meaningfully increase social responsibility and reduce harm, business education must combine the strengths of critical management studies, interdisciplinary studies and immersive curriculum.

Akin to Dyllick and Muff (2016)’s three models of sustainability, I conceptualize business CSR education in three forms: *traditional* curriculum, *revised* curriculum, and *reorganized* curriculum. As explained above, traditional business education may incorporate CSR, ethics courses and TBL models, but it ultimately maintains the primacy of profit. A revised approach adds supplemental CSR coursework, introduces truly sustainable business models, and prioritizes the belonging of all students. While this may include interdisciplinary concepts, social justice, or immersive curriculum, the revised approach does not fundamentally differ from traditional curriculum in its acceptance of neoliberalism and marketization. Reorganized curriculum is designed around critical management studies and interdisciplinary theory. All other curriculum is built atop this foundation; educators reorganizing around divergent approaches would weave critical and interdisciplinary CSR into the technical training required for accreditation.

Three paths for organizing CSR curriculum are outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1**

Curriculum	Theoretical Basis	Basic Learning Goals	Further Reading
Traditional CSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sustained shareholder value</li> <li>- Triple bottom line</li> <li>- Ethics pedagogy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Industry standard CSR, e.g. Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) reporting</li> <li>- Theoretical and real-world understanding of business ethics</li> <li>- Critical thinking</li> <li>- Basic CSR pitfalls, e.g. greenwashing or environmental racism</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Dyllick &amp; Muff, 2016</li> <li>- Raman et al., 2019</li> </ul>
Revised CSR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- True sustainability business models</li> <li>- Immersive pedagogy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Case studies of truly sustainable business models, e.g. circular economies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Albert, 2019</li> <li>- Baumann-Pauly, 2018</li> </ul>

	- Interdisciplinary theory	- Cultural intelligence and cultural competency - Problem-solving skills, critical thinking, and creativity - First-person, theoretical and real-world understanding of CSR	- Bobek et al., 2023 - Dyllick & Muff, 2016 - Eisenberg et al., 2013 - Guerrieri et al. 2023
Reorganized CSR	- Engaged scholarship - Critical Management Studies - Immersive pedagogy - Interdisciplinary theory interdisciplinary studies Engaged Scholarship	- Interdisciplinary collaboration - Understanding workers’ rights, exploitation, neoliberalism, and alternative organizational frameworks, e.g. workers cooperatives & community ownership - Identify systemic causes of environmental & social inequality - Apply first-person experience and social justice to business problems and solutions	- Ergene et al., 2020 - Grey et al., 2016 - Guerrieri et al. 2023 - Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011

**Barriers to Critical and Interdisciplinary Business Education**

*“Of course, in a marketised context, all courses become ‘products’ because jobs are on the line, but the management and business school is probably the most intense example of this activity, performing the knowledge that it also teaches” (Parker, 2020, p. 1113).*

The feasibility of implementing critical and interdisciplinary studies is determined in part by the incentives of the school itself. CMS faces a serious barrier between theory and implementation in a neoliberal higher education marketplace where critical structures and profit motives may be incompatible. Parker (2020) provides a case study of UK business schools organized to teach and embody CMS principles; nonetheless, the school failed to resist the pressures of neoliberal market forces. Changing institutional leadership posed a risk to the CMS school and prioritized profit over academic diversity while disregarding their predecessor’s commitment to critical approaches (Parker, 2020). Even when faculty protested and dissented, the mandates from leadership were unchanged and the business school was restructured with a more marketable and less critical curriculum (Parker, 2020). CMS academics face having their impact undermined even in their own communities and institutions: even when a business school is founded upon CMS scholarship and established among faculty, institutional leadership can and will operate in a profit seeking manner that can undermine or destroy what was built (Parker, 2020).

Adopting a critical lens towards business studies may provoke scrutiny among students, faculty, local communities, or even governmental departments. While curriculum using words like diversity or critical race theory have been targets of bans and censorship (Watrobski, 2024; McGowan

et al., 2025), the same is not true of interdisciplinary studies or CMS at time of writing. Despite widespread stereotypes about disproportionate numbers of liberal and leftist professors, the data shows that faculty in the United States are in fact broadly politically moderate (Tyson & Oreskes, 2022). Even the progressives of critical business scholarship are flexible enough to navigate a middle ground to promote collaboration with managers and maintain accessibility to those outside of the critical field (Parker & Parker, 2017). However, the leaders of United States business schools may be reticent to allow critical theory to take a central role in curriculum, as they historically prioritize the interests of the large firms that recruit their graduates (Adler et al., 2007). In traditional business schools, critical professors may not be able to teach CMS and sociology related materials in their business classes, as supervisors may prefer more standard material (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). In these cases, faculty ought to strive for academic autonomy, so they can preserve ideas which go against the norm and help students explore them (Vaara & Fajä, 2012). CMS is much rarer in the United States than internationally, especially compared to the UK and Europe, due to factors spanning from cultural values, reticence to cause trouble, research methodologies, and the social science origins of many UK business schools (Grey et al., 2016). A lack of familiarity or resonance with CMS may pose a barrier to its use in North American business education.

It is worth noting that CMS faces some criticism from within, which may lead some to question its legitimacy as a critical theory. Rowlinson & Hassard (2011) discusses the history of CMS, placing particular emphasis on the field's origin as a space predominantly composed of white men, as well as how the professional nature of the group led to a disconnect with other critical theories and working-class leftism. While many of these scholars would identify with a working-class background, some are concerned that CMS has become too much of an institution. When critically oriented UK business schools embody the same structural characteristics of traditional business schools, CMS scholars and organizations may appear hypocritical or self-contradictory (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). Perhaps teaching of CMS in a business school is paradoxical, as CMS distributes a critical lens that will likely be dismissed or commodified to support profit and extraction (Hietanen & Mohammed, 2023). In other cases, a faux-revolutionary culture exists within CMS contexts, and CMS scholars may appear to endorse critical theory simply to signify issues with the business school rather than to create institutional change (Rowlinson & Hassard, 2011). This apparent contradiction is tempered by the context that CMS scholars are often union members and politically involved, or serving as consultants and advocates in business, non-profits or government projects (Adler et al., 2007).

## **Conclusion**

### **Implementing Critical and Interdisciplinary Approaches**

Depending on their context, business educators may wish to approach reorganized CSR curriculum in an incremental manner: first recognizing elements of traditional business education, then shifting towards a revised model of business education while preparing to reorganize around interdisciplinarity and critical theories. In other situations, business educators may have the freedom, expertise and opportunity to move directly from their current educational model towards a

reorganized curriculum. Some business schools may wish to use reorganized curriculum to achieve market differentiation and competition among traditional education models. While business schools founded upon CMS still exist, and can be used as models for reorganized curriculum, they are at increasing risk of being subsumed by neoliberal market forces (Parker, 2014; Parker, 2021). To avoid the same outcome, a reorganized business education framework likely means thinking beyond a marketized model of higher education. Future research may explore the economic, political and policy developments needed to enable such a change in the landscape of higher education.

To achieve structural and cultural change, business faculty, students and institutional leaders will need to be prepared to engage with new ideas and strategies. In the classroom, professors can encourage students to investigate their own beliefs and expose ideas usually taken for granted to deeper analysis and discussion (Vaara & Fay, 2012). CMS scholars and others who call for change in business schools have an opportunity to create new communities as their minority opinion gains recognition and the uniform culture of business education evolves. As business schools seek to develop innovative and ethical approaches to curriculum and administration, they can take a cue from interdisciplinary studies to bring many competing views together. One tool is the engineering-design metaphor of knowledge-generation, which is a theoretical tool for facilitating interdisciplinary science teams (Boon & Van Baalen, 2019). This tool can work in other contexts too, like business, where there may be multiple departments and viewpoints. As in all collaborative efforts between different disciplines, the rubber meets the road when teammates come to the idea of truth very differently; the engineering-design metaphor encourages teams to design and shape a new shared epistemology. However, this is not to suggest that interdisciplinary collaboration will be easy, rather, that by facing the challenges of interdisciplinarity head on, stakeholders can define and engage with problems as a team and develop solutions informed by multiple viewpoints (Brewer, 1999).

The present work does not purport to design curriculum or prescribe specific educational policies, but the following hypothetical scenario may serve to envision a case study discussion in a reorganized curriculum. To explore how CMS differs from traditional business analysis, educators might consider the 2008 financial crash through both perspectives. Traditional frameworks accused corporations of pursuing profit without regard for families or the economy, and blamed business schools for not preparing MBA graduates to identify unethical revenue streams and financial incentives (Podolny, 2009). A CMS approach would build upon the critique of individuals and organizations to primarily investigate the systemic factors. For example, educators could scrutinize the value of the profit motive and observe that neoliberal deregulation had contributed to the propagation of financial policy and MBA curriculum focused on profit rather than the common good. This may raise the question for students of whether traditional corporate social responsibility is sufficient to prevent the harm ensuing from neoliberal structures.

### **Critical Theory and Community Support**

When participating in immersive curriculum, business students and educators must approach community partners as equal collaborators and subject matter experts. Before embarking on field experience, it is necessary for students to engage with critical frameworks, so they are prepared to analyze and interpret immersive experiences without stereotyping or adopting a savior complex

(Guerrieri et al. 2023). While courses on cross cultural management can have a strong effect on cultural intelligence and are better than working in a multicultural space without such training (Eisenberg et al., 2013), critical education takes this progress further. Critical theory challenges traditional expectations of assimilation, or the assumption that the presence of diversity will naturally resolve issues of discrimination, racism and misogyny – instead, it invites a deeper understanding of identity and power in the context of organizations and societal structures (Zanoni et al., 2010). As business schools continue to explore ways to introduce ethical and immersive learning to their students, educators must be equipped to help students debrief their field experiences to develop a nuanced understanding of corporate social responsibility.

Even as diversity and social justice faces a dramatic backlash, having been removed from some university curricula and fallen out of fashion in many corporations (Watrobski, 2024; McGowan et al., 2025), the need for sustainability and corporate social responsibility is as persistent as ever. Those who prioritize diversity, interdisciplinarity and justice when teaching CSR may benefit from communities of practice with likeminded colleagues, such as those formed by educators facing attacks and government censorship of their diversity, equity and inclusion curriculum (Bhatnagar et al., 2024). School administrators hoping to preserve CSR and social justice education might consider learning from the anti-racist policy design of educators who resisted bans over the past few years (Welton et al., 2023).

### **Envisioning Change**

As Vaara and Faÿ (2012) explain, “it is not easy either to position a university or business school in a way that differs from the prevailing expectation, or to sell new kinds of programmes to students.” To successfully introduce new interdisciplinary approaches, the curriculum must offer valuable capital to students and enable them to understand and solve relevant problems (Vaara & Faÿ, 2012). In this case, a business school who positions their interdisciplinary or critical studies appropriately can gain the prestige of cutting-edge education, especially among students and accreditation agencies attentive to ethical and critical concerns. At the same time, the need to achieve accreditation must be balanced with a commitment to change and improvement. The hierarchy and exclusion present in traditional business education is causing immediate and downstream harm; these realities require investigation and introspection on the part of business school leaders so that structural changes can be adopted to reverse these trends.

Ergene et al. (2020) invite those in business schools to adopt their framework of *engaged scholarship* – rather than being independent observers, engaged scholars are proactive citizens of the world who resist the presumption that the free hand of the market will create a sustainable planet. Engaged scholarship is a call to be radical enough to confront the foundational assumptions and epistemologies of the discipline; it requires that scholars and students be able to understand the ideological underpinnings of business education and make conscious choices to innovate and act. As an example, business schools can challenge conformity and systematize sustainability by joining interdisciplinary collaborations with natural sciences (Ergene et al., 2020). Schlegelmilch (2020) even suggests that the business classes of the future could be jointly instructed by business specialists and philosophers to integrate sustainability and ethics into all functions of business education.

Interdisciplinarity can help unify business education with the sciences to work collaboratively towards sustainability and social responsibility.

Rather than accepting traditional business education or using sparse elective credits for supplemental CSR, business curriculum reorganized around critical interdisciplinarity could develop advanced CSR curriculum while preparing students to be critical of existing frameworks. If business educators were willing to make the shift towards natural sciences and engaged scholarship (Ergene et al., 2020), they could equip students to work collaboratively towards true sustainability models and innovations. For the sake of students, stakeholders, and the planet, business educators must reevaluate questions of social responsibility and sustainability by organizing a more critical and interdisciplinary approach.

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