The Sustainable Development Goals and Business Students' Preferences: An Exploratory Study

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Abstract. To effectively teach the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to enhance corporate social responsibility, we need to understand the predictors of business student predispositions towards the SDGs. We examine whether location, authoritarianism, religiosity, and individualism influence university business student SDG preferences. Results (n=262) indicate authoritarian and religious business students emphasize SDGs with an orientation towards the health and economic well-being of their local communities. The results also indicate the most significant factor in predicting SDG preference was university location. Southeastern U.S. students were more supportive of people/prosperity-oriented SDGs, indicating greater concern with the social safety net and basic human needs, whereas Hawaiian students were more supportive of planet-oriented SDGs indicating greater concern for environmental issues. Implications for teaching SDGs to university business students are discussed.

Keywords: SDGs, authoritarianism, religiosity, location, individualism, collectivism, attitudes.

1. Introduction

In September 2015, 193 world leaders adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an agenda calling for a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. The 2015 United Nations (U.N.) SDGs resolution specifically called for all countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, to implement this approach which is "…urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path…(to) stimulate action over the next 15 years in areas of critical importance for humanity and the planet" (United Nations 2015). The significance of the SDGs to the future of business and higher education is

profound. As noted by Jeffrey Sachs (2015), "Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will guide the world's economic diplomacy in the coming generation" (p. 1). The UN created the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) initiative in recognition of the need for more effective sustainable business education, and PRME's vision is to "realize the Sustainable Development Goals through responsible management education." (PRME 2020).

However, it remains an open question as to how individuals will respond to these sustainable development goals, and what factors may predispose them to support (or not support) the SDGs. As noted by PRME (2020), "…managers and leaders of the future need to be equipped to understand the complexities and the consequences of their actions and be able to handle (snip) conflicts of values" (p. 17). To achieve the goal of the full involvement of all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, to implement this plan, it would be beneficial to understand which SDGs resonate with different stakeholders and people, and why, so that educational interventions are focused in a way that will make these efforts more successful. Put another way, to effectively teach the U.N. SDGs to help imbue corporate social responsibility in our future business leaders, we need to understand our audience, and understand the predictors of student predispositions towards the SDGs.

This exploratory study investigates the relevance of endogenous and exogenous predictors of SDG preferences of business students. We examine the endogenous factors of individualism-collectivism, authoritarianism, and religiosity; and the exogenous factor of university location to determine the effects on SDG preferences, as they have been shown to be predictors of ethics outcomes of business students in prior research (Blosser 2019; Westerman, *et al.* 2012; Westerman, *et al.* 2014). The goal is to enhance our understanding of the factors that explain student SDG preferences to enhance sustainable business education in university classrooms.

2. Individualism/Collectivism and SDG Preferences

To explain individual ethics, values, and decision-making, prior studies have used Hofstede's (1980) culture dimensions (Cohen *et al.* 1992, 1993, and 1995; Douglas and Wier 2005; and Douglas *et al.* 2006). Comprehending differences in values is key to understanding differences in national and international management practices, and provides the foundation for building an effective approach to business education. Accordingly, Hofstede's typology of national culture is utilized in this study because it clearly draws the connection between values and economic activity (Husted 2000). Since culture represents man's accumulated shared learning in the face of problems of external adaptation and internal integration (Schein 1997), and since espoused values and assumptions form part of his/her cognitive and affective make-up (including that of university