SOCIAL NORMS AT WORK:
PEER AND PERCEIVED MBA EXPERIENCES OF ENVIRONMENAL SUSTAINABILITY

Researchers have noted that business schools have traditionally lagged behind global business trends in areas concerning sustainability (Suzanne Benn and Dunphy 2009; "Corporate Sustainability Leadership at the Edge" 2011; Springett and Kearins 2001) and that MBA programs do little to prepare their graduates for the multidisciplinary challenges of introducing sustainability or CSR issues in their workplace (S. Benn and Dunphy 2008; Suzanne Benn and Bubna-Litic 2004; Tilbury, Crawley, and Berry 2004).

In this research, we use in-depth interviews of one cohort of MBA students to attempt to understand how and why there appears to be a lag in business student perceptions of social norms about sustainability and business, relative to reports of executive attitudes and opinions on this topic (Accenture 2013), as well as relative to actual business student norms on these issues.

Scholars have often depicted this gap as being caused by a number of institutional factors, including the lack of faculty and offerings on topics of environmental management and sustainable business (Benn and Dunphy 2008; Springett and Kearins 2001; Storksdieck 2014); the marginalization caused when environmental and social sustainability themes are institutionally relegated both literally and symbolically to elective, instead of core, classes (Arlow 1991; Benn and Dunphy 2008; Benn and Bubna-Litic 2004; Patenaude 2011; Springett and Kearins 2001); and the unwillingness of business school academics to risk mainstream orthodoxy for pedagogical and philosophical stances that would help business schools lead in the practice of addressing sustainability from a business perspective (Birnik and Billsberry 2007; Carrithers and Peterson 2006; Springett and Kearins 2001).

This paper seeks to add another dimension to these explanations – that interactions and experiences of social norms at the individual, peer-to-peer level reinforce certain beliefs that if unaddressed, pose significant barriers to changes in social norms. These barriers are potentially specific to social norms regarding environmental engagement in a business context, and stand independent of institutional factors, although institutional intervention can work to address them.

Social norms can be defined as the shared perceptions of appropriate behavior that can induce people to act publicly in ways that deviate from their private inclinations (Prentice and Miller 1996), and reflect both a descriptive belief of what people do, as well as a prescriptive belief of what people ought to do. These social norms can influence more than just people's behaviour, but can also lead people to believe that the strength of a norm is evidence for the strength of the motive of the norm (Miller 1999). Situations where this belief is erroneous, in that there is a gap between the perceived norms and actual norms of other people, are considered cases of pluralistic ignorance (Miller, Monin, and Prentice 2000).

By interviewing 52 second-year MBA students at a top-tier U.S. business school, we collected qualitative in-depth interview data that allowed us to examine how a cycle of pluralistic ignorance was created and perpetuated. Three conditions in this case fed into this cycle: (i) the lack of explicit and visible environmental engagement, (ii) the mis-attribution of motivations to environmental actions, and (iii) the individually-held belief that interest in environmental issues are derived from innate and fixed "passions", rather mutable and business-relevant motivations.

To orient this work, this working paper uses concepts from social norm theory as a starting point in developing a framework to explain the entrenchment we observed: the lack of uptake of a social norm where business students are engaged in issues of environmental

sustainability. We chose the campus of our study for two theoretical reasons: (i) its' elite status as a business school (rated one of the best U.S. business schools by U.S. News, 2015) with influence on graduates entering a multitude of industries post-graduation, and (ii) its' regular top ten ranking among MBA programs globally with regards to sustainability (Aspen Institute Center for Business Education 2010). This business school had also been applauded for providing a number of institutional resources and sustainability initiatives such as dual-degree opportunities and interdisciplinary centers (Storksdieck 2014).

This particular program should then, in theory, have been an exemplary model of integrating environmental sustainability into the MBA program, and cultivating a student body exhibiting basic consensus and knowledge around the integration of environmental best practices into business. Instead, preliminary interview results suggested a gap between actual student experience and institutional intent, and provided strong motivation to use a qualitative in-depth interview approach to allow for a detailed look at the student experience of sustainability within the MBA program, a perspective that survey or more traditional quantitative modeling approaches may not have been able to capture.

We interviewed 52 second year business students, or approximately 25% of the graduating cohort, in the last six weeks of their two-year MBA experience. This timing was chosen to maximize the duration of the MBA program experienced by the time of the interview, and also given that second year students have more opportunities to engage with sustainability issues given that these particular students had little choice in course selection in their first year.

Random sampling was chosen over other methods (e.g. snowball sampling), on the rationale that by randomly interviewing 25% of the cohort we should be able to identify any (prescriptive or descriptive) social norm if the norm is actually considered normative. Students were recruited via an e-mail introduction from another MBA cohort peer, who was instructed not to mention the interview's focus on environmental sustainability, in order to introduce respondent bias based on this frame. The total recruitment sample was 80 students; of which I obtained e-mail introductions to 73 students (91%). I finally interviewed 52 students (71%).

The semi-structured interview protocol consisted of ~30 questions spanning about 60 minutes, that guided participants to describe their (i) experience and perception of the business school culture, (ii) experience with and knowledge of environmental sustainability concepts both before and in business school, (iii) opinions and outlook for the future of the natural environment, generally and from a business perspective, and (iv) estimations on how they thought their own views on each of the previous topics matched those of their MBA cohort peers. The interview was paired with an online survey of 17 social norms questions which may be used as a part of the final analysis, and demographic questions. Interview transcripts are being coded with Dedoose through a two-stage process. A team of two researchers are currently engaged in the first stage of coding, to be followed by a second round of finer coding categories.

This is thus far an early-stage working paper with further analysis underway. Based on preliminary results however, we plan to elucidate how the three conditions outlined earlier serve as barriers that would be essential to overcome in order to drive a campus shift in social norms. Further, we will argue that specific actions by institutions, and the way they take these actions, can undo a lot of the barriers existing at the individual level. Our observations lead to the conclusion that norm change is difficult for a number of reasons that are independent of the traditional institutional explanations mentioned above, and that consideration of social norms-related processes may aid in the design of more effective institutional interventions to integrate environmental sustainability into business management education.