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## **My Turn: The greening of the MBA**

By Ellen McCulloch-Lovell

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"The triple bottom line" is a phrase, packed with meaning, which is entering the popular vocabulary. This powerful idea urges the business sector to measure success not just in dollars, but with an inter-related set of values: people, profit and planet. The phrase was coined by writer John Elkington in 1994, and later expanded in his 1997 book "Cannibals with Forks: the Triple Bottom Line of 21st Century Business."

However it started, it is an idea whose time has come, catching on around the globe among business, environmental and education leaders. Business is "going green" to meet global challenges and also to ensure that future profits grow.

Our era is struggling with climate change, a global economy, human migration, poverty, war and sharp cultural differences. We also are experiencing a resurgence of certain values: individual rights, the preservation of communities, stewardship for the Earth. Just as families try to recycle and reduce energy use, colleges in our region also are "going green." So too are business degrees -- pushed by necessity and by businesses themselves as they discover that sound environmental practices and attention to employees and their communities are both good practice and profitable. That is why Marlboro College Graduate Center started its MBA in managing for sustainability. And that is why Green Mountain College and Goddard College have related master's degrees in sustainable business practices and communities.

Even as higher education captures trends and trains future managers, businesses increasingly are taking steps to fold sustainability into their day-to-day decision-making. In New England, companies such as Green Mountain Coffee Roasters, Seventh Generation, NRG and Stoneyfield Farms and groSolar have created a new sustainability brand. Citigroup, one of the world's largest financial companies, is investing \$50 billion over 10 years to reduce global carbon emissions. Some Fortune 500 companies, including Alcoa, SunMicrosystems, BP America, and Pacific Gas & Electric not only improved their environmental performance but also are urging Congress to enact legislation to cap or reduce U.S. carbon emission. Investment and venture capital firms are leveraging the collective power of investors to advance "clean tech" and other environmentally innovative businesses.

The new MBA, infused with these values, has many real-world case studies to show that environmentally and socially responsible practices enhance the bottom line. The story of Ray Anderson and his company, Interface, is one example. In 1994, Anderson was running a typical carpet manufacturing business when his research division asked him for his environmental position. Anderson remembers, "I didn't have a vision, except 'comply, comply, comply.' I sweated for three weeks over what to say to that group" ([www.interfaceinc.com/getting\\_there](http://www.interfaceinc.com/getting_there)). Then someone sent him two books: Paul Hawken's "The Ecology

of Commerce" and Daniel Quinn's "Ismael." He was converted. In Anderson's view, "Business is the largest, wealthiest, most pervasive institution on the Earth, and responsible for most of the damage. It must take the lead in directing the Earth away from collapse, and toward sustainability and restoration."

He had his research group design a specific goal to convert the company's manufacturing processes into a restorative enterprise. More than a decade later, Interface is working toward its environmental vision and remaining the world's leading manufacturer of modular carpets, outperforming all competitors. The decision "to do the right thing" more often than not leads to innovation that then leads to profits, which in turn benefit employees and society.

The exciting challenge for educational institutions is to initiate learning that inculcates new ways of thinking and operating through systems thinking, corporate social responsibility, understanding the global supply chain and "triple bottom line" management. Today's MBA graduates must learn the values, knowledge and skills to seize this pivotal moment, creating the next wave of innovation after the industrial and high-tech revolutions, as they manage for people, the planet and for profits.

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