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## INSTILLING SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY THROUGH MARKETING RESEARCH FIELD PROJECTS

C.B. Bhattacharya and Jagdish N. Sheth

*Social Responsibility is a topical issue in the business world these days. Organizations are going beyond donating money, and providing active guidance and expertise to help solve social problems. Although both educators and business leaders have stressed that business students need to be trained in social responsibility, until now, such training has mostly been restricted to courses in business ethics. In this paper we describe a more "hands-on" approach that synergistically combines aspects of classroom learning, real world experience and social responsibility. Currently, the effort is restricted to the traditional marketing research course that is taught in most business schools and it involves conducting semester long field projects to solve "real" management problems for nonprofit organizations that deal with social causes. We propose a conceptual framework to establish the need for such a pedagogic innovation then discuss the procedures followed with regard to the field projects and the types of organizations for whom we have conducted research. We finish with a discussion of the benefits and obstacles provided by such a course to various constituencies and also the obstacles that we, as faculty, face in implementing such courses.*

### Introduction

In recent years, corporations such as AT&T, IBM, Reebok and Levi Strauss are backing philanthropic initiatives with real corporate muscle. In addition to cash, they are supporting social causes with managerial advice, technological and communications support, and teams of employee volunteers (Smith 1994). Relatedly, an organization called *Business for Social Responsibility* was created in 1992 to help companies develop strategies that focus not only on the bottom line but also on the well being of the work force, the environment and our community (Makower 1994). A number of articles have recently appeared both in the business press and academic literature on the themes of socially responsible buying (e.g., Drumwright 1994). Part of this heightened social consciousness on the part of corporations is no doubt a response to a society that is becoming increasingly socially conscious (see, e.g., Klein 1990, Winski 1991). But whatever the underlying reasons for these corporate initiatives, they seem to be indicative of a business environment that is becoming increasingly socially responsible.

Our notion of corporate social responsibility follows that of Steiner (1972) and Robin and Reidenbach

(1987). According to Steiner (1972), corporate social responsibility relates to the social contract between a business and the society in which it operates. This social contract comprises the set of generally accepted relationships, obligations and duties that relate to the corporate impact on the welfare of society (Robin and Reidenbach 1987, p. 45). The authors expand on this notion and posit that the *social responsibility of business* is an integral part of this contract between business and society. To encourage organizations to practice social responsibility, Robin and Reidenbach (1987) maintain that organizations need to instill a set of core values among their employees that include caring for integral publics, being a good citizen in the community and caring for the physical environment. Viewed in this light, the aforementioned practices of socially responsible buying and providing managerial advice and employee volunteers to support social causes are all examples of corporate social responsibility.

In our view, business school education has an important role to play in strengthening and accelerating the current corporate trend. If the key to practicing social responsibility is to instill an appropriate set of values, in principle, at least, business school education affords such an opportunity. To elaborate, in advocating practices of social responsibility by organizations, Robin and Reidenbach (1987) draw parallels between basic social responsibility values of the family and the organization. For example, the family value of protecting and caring for the family's home and land, maps onto the organizational value of pro-

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C.B. BHATTACHARYA is Assistant Professor of Marketing at the Goizueta Business School, Emory University.

JAGDISH N. SHETH is the Charles H. Kellstadt Professor of Marketing at the Goizueta Business School, Emory University.

They thank the Editor and two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

*Marketing Education Review*, Volume 6, Number 2 (Summer 1996).

tecting and caring for the physical environment on which the organization has an impact.

We assert that the likelihood of maintaining this parallel between the family and the organization will be greatly heightened if business schools actively strive to keep these values salient in future managers' minds.

The gap between concept and application, however, continues: until now, the AACSB's (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business) plea that business school curricula provide an education that addresses the need for responsible citizenship in society (AACSB 1988) has mostly resulted in courses in business ethics (Schwartz, Kassem and Ludwig 1991) and the integration of ethics into almost all other courses. In fact, over 90% of the nation's business schools now provide some kind of training in the area of business ethics (Stark 1993). Although business ethics courses have an important role in the curriculum, they do not adequately address the need for responsible citizenship. As discussed by Robin and Reidenbach (1987), the two concepts, corporate social responsibility and business ethics have essentially different meanings. The combined forces of the growth of social problems, the heightened social consciousness among today's youth and consumers, and the changing philosophy of corporations, are indicative of a ground swell of societal change that business school educators need to tackle in more direct fashion.

In this article, we describe our initial efforts at Emory University's Coizueta Business School (hereafter GBS) to use the curriculum to instill a sense of social responsibility both among graduate and undergraduate students. Our effort is currently restricted to the traditional marketing research course that is taught in most business schools. It involves conducting semester long field projects to solve real management problems for nonprofit organizations. These organizations deal with a variety of social causes such as AIDS, homelessness, and literacy.

Educators in various academic institutions have typically used real world organizations (both for and nonprofit) for experiential learning purposes in their marketing research courses. Our emphasis goes beyond experiential learning. Our focus has been on investigating whether we can expand the scope of this course not only to impart experiential learning, but also, in the process, to instill a sense of social responsibility among our students. Relatedly, our emphasis has not been limited to the methodological aspects of marketing research, but to teaching students how marketing research contributes to strategy

formulation, thereby, enabling students to see how their efforts benefit the client organization. In concept, our effort parallels that of the residency or externships done by medical school students. Research has shown that serving underprivileged communities makes these students more socially responsible and also influences future career decisions (Taggart, Wartman and Wessen 1987, Taylor 1994).

The marketing research course is a natural testing ground for this initiative because of two reasons. First, the suggestion of learning by doing has long been espoused by marketing research educators such as Lehmann (1989). Second, such a hands-on approach has also been advocated by those who have talked about teaching social responsibility (e.g., Woods and Berger 1989). The intuitive appeal of instilling social responsibility through the well-respected vehicle of experiential learning prompted us to undertake this initiative. However, learning the principles of marketing research and applying them to a real context within the space of a semester also has potential disadvantages. Our objective in this paper is to describe the conceptualization, implementation, and experiences with this initiative, such that educators in other academic institutions can make more informed decisions about undertaking similar initiatives.

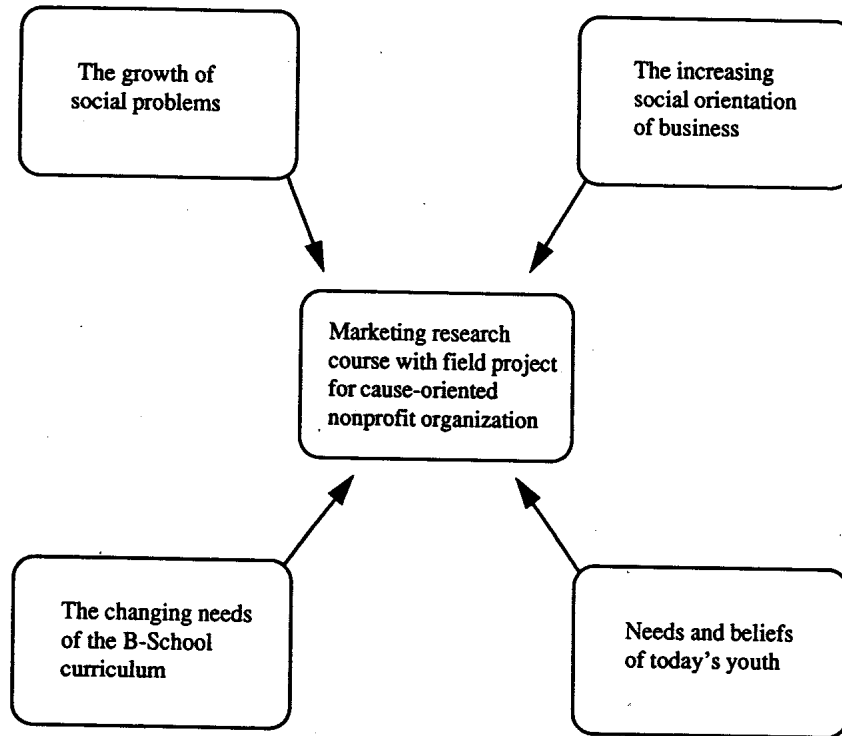
The rest of the article will be as follows. In section 2, we briefly describe the conceptual framework that establishes the need for such a pedagogic innovation. In Section 3, we discuss the procedures followed with regard to the field projects and the types of organizations for whom we have worked and the benefits and shortcomings of such a course. We finish with concluding remarks in Section 4.

### The Conceptual Framework

Our underlying objective in providing this experience is to impact the belief systems of business students. Through the experience they receive in the marketing research course we want students to realize that the skills that they are learning in the course are a potent way of solving social problems. Ideally, once they become corporate citizens, we want our students to act on their realization and continue practicing social responsibility.

The consumer behavior literature (see, e.g., Eagly and Chaiken 1993) has long stressed that the task of changing or strengthening beliefs and attitudes is made easier when the existing beliefs and attitudes of the target audience are in the proposed direction of the change. In other words, the proposed pedagogic

**Figure 1**  
**Forces that Validate the Implemented Pedagogic Innovation**



initiative is likely to work better if (a) the student population recognizes the magnitude of social problems and is predisposed to helping society, and (b) they believe that businesses (i.e., their future employers) value such practices of social responsibility. As we discuss below, a review of the literature validates the implementation of such a course on both these counts. In addition, we provide evidence from the marketing education literature that endorses the use of such a project based approach to achieve the desired goal of instilling social responsibility. Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic illustration of the conceptual framework.

***The Growth of Social Problems***

Instances of growing social problems abound—increased domestic violence, AIDS, crime, homelessness, drug abuse and the environment are a few examples. The responsibility of keeping the growth of these problems to a minimum clearly rests with the generation after the baby boomers, popularly referred to as Generation X (Dunn 1993). Needless to say, most of the business school students that we teach belong to this generation. Scholars in management (e.g., Drucker 1990) and, more specifically, in marketing (e.g., Kotler 1994) have long emphasized how the basic principles

of these fields can be effectively used to address community and social problems. As educators, therefore, we can help curb the growth in social problems if we are able to provide students with an experience that will demonstrate to them the applicability of their education to the social arena.

### *The Needs and Beliefs of Today's Youth*

There is a great deal of evidence about the heightened social consciousness and the solidity of values among the current college-going population (see, for example, Dunn 1993). When asked to identify the issues that were most important to them, the top four issues cited by college students in 1992 were AIDS, drugs, the environment and the quality of education. Interestingly, 50% of the students surveyed by Roper College Track maintain that they make brand decisions based on environmental claims on labels or in advertising (compared with 29% of adults) (Dunn 1993).

When it comes to job hunting, recent graduates are seeking out employers that share their beliefs in these areas, or, in some cases, starting their own companies that combine the objectives of profitability with social responsibility (Makower 1994). Similarly, in 1993, graduate students from a few schools across the country formed an association called Students for Responsible Business (SRB) whose mission is to contribute to the creation of a more human, just and sustainable world. Makower reports that in its first six months, with little or no recruitment effort, SRB attracted more than 500 students at 40 U.S. colleges and universities.

The conclusion one can draw from this discussion is that today's college-going youth (of which business school students are an important segment) is already favorably disposed towards using their education to help society. In the context of their education, the implication is that they are likely to be receptive to apply marketing principles to address social problems.

### *The Increasing Societal Orientation of Business*

The realization that businesses value social responsibility practices heightens the utility of this pedagogy to the students. During the past decade, much has been discussed and researched on the topic of the "social responsibilities of business" (see Makower 1994). Drumwright (1994) summarizes the current situation succinctly, "...Organizations are wrestling

with how to incorporate a new and different type of criterion into business decisions—social responsibility." In her article, Drumwright describes how organizations are incorporating non economic criteria like environmental concern into their buying decisions. In essence, organizations are scurrying to adapt to a multitude of powerful societal movements such as environmentalism (Kirkpatrick 1990, Klein 1990) in order to maintain their customer franchise.

The increased importance accorded by corporate America to issues of social responsibility has important implications for business school education. Active support for many of the recent initiatives has come from departments such as marketing and human resources (Smith 1994). Blending a relevant set of core values into the educational process will better prepare our students to implement such initiatives in the corporate world. Furthermore, exposing students to these recent initiatives in the corporate world will generate greater enthusiasm and seriousness about this course among our students.

### *The Changing Needs of the Curriculum*

The literature on business school education has eloquently discussed the gaps in our curriculum with regard to the issue of social responsibility. More specifically, the field of business, more than any other area of higher education, has been criticized for focusing too much on the financial point of view, and neglecting the development of the "whole life." As articulated by Behrman and Levin (1984), the products of such business school education are managers who are "inept and uncomfortable in environments where they must balance corporate and social goals." Similarly, Hotch (1992) notes that because of undue emphasis on competition and individualism, business schools are getting out of step with corporations.

Schwartz, Kassem and Ludwig (1991) classify the current situation as an incongruence in business school education between "doing what is right" and "doing what it takes to get ahead." In contrast to the other articles that have been written on the subject, they put forth the intuitively appealing notion that we must accept as given that business students "want to get ahead." To elaborate, the authors assert that "the key to structuring U.S. business schools for greater social responsibility is to take the desire to get ahead among business students as given, and to use that desire as a guiding force in the development of structural elements that elicit behaviors that are congruent with social responsibility." (p. 461).

As regards the (by now) well-founded notion that B-schools do indeed need to train their students to be more socially responsible, we believe that Schwartz et al. (1991) have proposed a direction that is germane to all of us responsible for such training. Basically, we can support coursework in which the theories and concepts taught in the classroom can be used to help organizations in the community that are otherwise unable to afford such help. This will work towards inculcating a better sense of social responsibility. Such congruence or synergy between experiential learning as a way of understanding the nuances of marketing research and the choice of the marketing problem that students attempt to solve is precisely what our course seeks to exploit.

To summarize the discussion in this section, we believe that a number of factors favor the proposed pedagogic innovation. Students are cognizant of social problems and they are positively predisposed towards solving these problems. The fact that corporations are trying to practice social responsibility heightens the relevance of such activities. Finally, choosing an important course like marketing research as the delivery system for social responsibility (as opposed to a course in community service offered by the business school) increases the likelihood of students approaching the task with greater conviction.

We choose to work with nonprofit organizations because these organizations typically deal with a multitude of societal issues. Hence, they provide a natural catchment area for the kind of marketing problems we are interested in solving. Furthermore, nonprofit organizations conduct less marketing research than they ought to (see Kotler and Andreasen 1996), part of which relates to a lack of funds. Conducting the projects free of charge takes care of the limited budget problem and boosts marketing research activity in these organizations.

### The Marketing Research Courses

Marketing research is offered as an elective both at the undergraduate (BBA) and graduate (MBA) level at GBS. Currently, both the undergraduate and graduate courses are taught by the first author. The course follows a fairly standard format in terms of modules of problem definition, research design, sampling, data collection, data analysis, etc. The implementation of the field project is similar to practices followed by other educators. Basically, the professor of the course lines up organizations that sponsor projects for the class. Overall, the organization acts as the "client"

and the students as the "marketing research agency." Each organization writes a letter to the professor, outlining their (often vague, ill defined, but very real) marketing problem. The letter is handed over to the student group responsible for the project. Then it is the students' responsibility to make contact with the organization and start working on the problem.

All projects involve primary data collection efforts and a strong emphasis is placed on problem definition, research design, sample selection, data analysis and report writing. The students make two to three interim presentations during the semester. Eventually, the students provide a final report to the organization after it is revised by the professor. At the end of the semester, members from the organizations come for a final presentation.

One of the key aspects of the course is the constant reference to issues pertaining to social responsibility in class discussions. Throughout the semester, students are exposed to a variety of examples that are reflective of the social responsibility trend in corporate America. Students are made aware (and then reminded) that through their work they are participating in this movement towards a better society. Practitioners from sponsoring organizations who attend the final presentation articulate similar messages and urge students to continue these endeavors in their future careers.

From the perspective of learning marketing research, a key aspect of the course is the inter relatedness between grasping theoretical concepts and applying these concepts to real world situations. In other words, students define the problem they are going to solve via their project in the week after the concept of problem definition is covered in class; write their research proposals after the research design module is covered in class; and so on. As other practicing educators are aware, this approach is very helpful in enabling the students to get a first-hand view of the real world applicability of their classroom learning.

### Examples of the Organizations and the Projects

In terms of Robin and Reidenbach's (1987) notion of what constitutes social responsibility, the class views itself as one organization trying to help a variety of other organizations who are unable to afford such help. In so doing, the basic organizational values we seek to build on include (but are not limited to) caring for integral publics (e.g., alumni of the business school), being a helpful and friendly corporate neighbor (e.g.,

a homeless shelter in the neighborhood, a day care center in the neighborhood), being a good citizen in the community, the nation, and the world (e.g., improving the fund raising capabilities of Georgia Special Olympics and AID Atlanta), and caring for the physical environment (e.g., assessing attitudes towards recycling). These are the same values we want the students to take with them to the organizations where they are going to be employed.

More specifically, the students have worked for organizations that are involved in a broad range of social causes including health care, animal extinction, rehabilitation programs, and so on. While some of the organizations are small and locally based (e.g., Nicholas House, a small transitional shelter for the homeless), others are large and national in scope (e.g., the American Cancer Society, American Red Cross, Habitat for Humanity, etc.). Some of the organizations are affiliates of the University (e.g., recycling, alumni association). Finally, the scope of the projects are challenging and varied. Georgia Justice, an organization that helps ex-convicts in their rehabilitation programs, is an excellent example. This project required the students to assess whether tourists and other pedestrians in the historic district in Atlanta would be interested in buying ice cream from a store operated by ex-convicts. In contrast, the project for Save the Children required the students to identify the attributes and benefits on which a child care referral service ought to be marketed to the corporate world.

### *Reactions to the Course*

The primary customers of this pedagogic approach are first, the students and second, the organizations for whom we have conducted research. If the students' feedback (both quantitative and qualitative) is any indication, the field projects proved to be a tremendous learning experience for them. Moreover, they also enjoyed this synergistic opportunity to address a social issue. Quantitatively, this course has consistently been rated as one of the best in the business school; however, we cannot definitively ascribe this to the field project experience.

Although anecdotal, what is more insightful for us is the qualitative feedback. The typical qualitative feedback was along these lines: "The opportunity to gain real world market research experience and help a social cause at the same time was invaluable." The feedback from a student who did a project for the Salvation Army suggests how these projects may have

affected students belief systems, "...the future success of the Salvation Army may in fact partly depend on the information that our group accumulated and analyzed. This fact and the responsibility to be as precise as possible taught me that the greatest motivation to do work doesn't lie in the grade received, but who was helped, who will benefit, and how it makes me feel to contribute to something as important as the Salvation Army."

In our observation, a number of factors embedded in this experience seem to help heighten the students' sense of social responsibility. First, direct exposure to the no frills environment in which many of our client organizations operate impacts the value systems of students. Students gain a better appreciation of the challenges and constraints facing these organizations. In turn, this creates an understanding of the scope that exists for strengthening the marketing strategies of these organizations and also makes them realize the intellectual value of the work they do for the organization. Most of the organizations do not have the capacity to conduct marketing research through professional agencies. In this sense, our pro bono work constitutes a true service to the organization. Two aspects of the nature of the interaction between the students and the client agencies further distinguishes this pedagogic initiative from a regular field project. First, because our clients don't always have the marketing training and orientation of their for-profit counterparts, students are constantly challenged to summarize their methodology, findings and recommendations in plain English. This exercise not only forces students to have a better understanding of the marketing research process, but also, when they are able to explain their findings with conviction to their clients, their sense of contribution to the organization is heightened.

Relatedly, often there are instances where the students, at the request of the organization, go back to it, make presentations to board members and other staff and help them figure out the implementation issues related to the market research findings. Going this extra step (which the students typically do of their own volition) strengthens the quality of the experience. To our mind, these experiences are important in crystallizing some key beliefs regarding the benefits of being socially responsible.

Finally, a key component for strengthening beliefs and attitudes is the feedback provided by the client organizations to the students. To date, the participating organizations have consistently been impressed by the course, the implementation of the project by

the students and the quality of information they receive. All the companies have expressed a desire to participate in future projects. Such high level of enthusiasm about a class project from an outside organization enhances the quality of the experience which, in turn, perhaps strengthens students attitudes towards social responsibility in the long run. When they become managers, this combination of favorable attitude and first hand knowledge of the applicability of business principles to societal problems will increase the likelihood of their practicing social responsibility.

### *The Downsides to the Process*

Although there are a number of benefits of providing this learning experience to students, the process is not without deterrents. First and foremost, there are time pressures that students have to operate under during a semester. Our school runs on roughly a thirteen week semester, within which we find little slack in the total process, even though all the projects are procured before the semester starts. Moreover, recall that a particular aspect of the field project (e.g., sampling) always follows the theoretical learning in that area, hence students do not always have a very good handle on the total scope of the project, which sometimes leads to further inefficiencies in time management. The aspect of the marketing research process that is most adversely affected is data analysis—often students do not have the time to apply the multivariate techniques that are taught in class. The problem of time pressure will no doubt be compounded for universities operating on the quarter system; we discuss some time management guidelines in the next section.

Second, certain nonprofit organizations also face severe budget constraints, and there have been instances where the organizations have not been able to cover the actual project expenses. We shall discuss ways to avoid such predicaments in the following section.

Third, beyond the qualitative and quantitative feedback collected at the end of the semester, as of now, we have no mechanism for monitoring the longer term benefits of this experience either for the students or for the participating organizations. The absence of such mechanisms makes it harder to gauge the impact of this effort on different constituencies.

Finally, the current reward structure for faculty in some institutions may prove to be a disincentive for undertaking such an exercise. Running this type of

course successfully requires significant commitment of time and energy on the part of the faculty member teaching the course. Also, such pedagogic innovations may not enjoy widespread adoption without greater external recognition of the intrinsic motivation of faculty members who implement such innovations.

### *Guidelines for Managing the Process*

As we have emphasized throughout the paper, a big determinant of the quality of such a course depends on the active management of the process. In the following paragraphs, we share a few guidelines that we have learned over the course of the last few semesters. Table 1 provides a summary of the guidelines.

First, procure projects from the organizations before the semester/quarter starts. This is very helpful in setting the tone in the first class, students get a better feel for what the course is all about, and group assignments are completed within the first few days. Rather than procuring ad-hoc projects every semester, the process can be made more efficient by setting up long run strategic partnerships with a few, select organizations.

With which types of organizations should we partner? Every community, whether rural or urban, has its share of social problems: drug abuse, teen pregnancies, domestic violence, etc. University professors can contact these organizations (oftentimes campuses also have organizations for addressing these issues) and offer to help them in their strategy formulation and assessment. Yet another way to find clients would be to align with the local chapter of a large, social organization such as the Red Cross or the United Way, who are networked into a number of local, social service agencies. Finally, alumni of the University are often a great source to tap—we have found our alumni to be extremely helpful in setting up initial contacts with relevant organizations. Many alumni volunteer for these organizations or serve on their boards and they are quick to see the value of this exercise.

Second, once the initial contact is made, sign a contract with the organizations outlining their obligations. Typically, we develop relationships with the person in charge of the marketing efforts of the organization. However, there will be instances when the organization is run by only one or two people. Specify in writing that the organization must bear any actual expenses involved and take an advance before the project starts. Sometimes the sponsoring organiza-

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Guidelines**

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Procure projects before semester starts</li> <li>• Write letter of contract to organizations</li> <li>• Manage expectations of client organizations</li> <li>• Involve client organization at all key stages</li> <li>• Adhere to deadlines</li> </ul>
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tions do not realize that there may be various costs involved in the data collection process such as paying for focus group facilities, mailing questionnaires, or making telephone calls. Setting the stage up front can avoid costly delays brought on by negotiations and explanations in the middle of the project. We also believe that charging a nominal amount for conducting the project may lead to a more professional client-agency type of relationship.

Third, manage expectations of the client organizations by emphasizing that the students take a full course load. Oftentimes clients unwittingly try to get the students to cover too much. This is where expectation management, again through the letter of contract, can be very helpful.

Fourth, involve the client organizations at all key stages of the process. This has a positive impact both on the students and on the organizations' personnel. For instance, before the student groups go out to collect data, the project proposal and in particular the questionnaire, must be approved by the client. Similarly, the client organizations should be invited to the final presentation, and copies of the final report should be sent to them as soon as possible.

Finally, it is critical to adhere to deadlines. Typically, the students do not have a clear idea of how much time it can take to collect data or to code and analyze 200 questionnaires. Table 2 provides the timeline we are using during the current semester. Note that based both on student feedback and our experience in previous semesters, we now allow between three and four weeks for data entry, data analysis and report writing. Schools that operate under the quarter system will of course have to amend the timeline to finish the project in ten weeks. The best way to implement this initiative in the quarter system would be to cut down on the scope of the project and the extent of data collection. This is where partnering

**Table 2**  
**Project Timetable Given to Students**

Week 1	First day of class: announcement of projects
Week 2	Formation of teams and assignment of projects
Week 4	Brief write up on project description and problem definition. Short oral presentation in class.
Week 6	Final draft of questionnaire due.
Week 7	Project proposals submitted. Proposals presented in class.
Week 10	One page write up of data collection efforts.
Week 11	One page write up of key findings from data analysis.
Week 13	Final reports submitted. Final presentations made in class.

with select organizations in the area can help: the professor can sit down with the client organization and carve out two or three smaller scale, specific projects that are manageable within a quarter, rather than trying to handle a bigger project all at once.

The above list of guidelines is not exhaustive in nature. We have highlighted the issues that we encountered in practice. Individual faculty members will discover their own methods for making the process efficient.

### Concluding Remarks

Given the rising incidence of a variety of social problems, the need for business schools to be socially responsible has never been greater. While practicing businesses have made a start by responding to the changing needs of society, business schools are yet to make a concerted effort in this direction. As Makower (1994) points out, business schools have not integrated socially responsible thinking into their curricula in any substantive way.

In this paper we have described our initial efforts at incorporating social responsibility into our curriculum in a more direct fashion compared to extant approaches described in the marketing education literature. Basically, we view the business school as a bridge between the family (where socially responsible think-



ing starts) and the organization (where students are actually going to practice social responsibility). Business schools can prove to be excellent forums for the enculturation process (cf. Robin and Reidenbach 1987) where we reinforce the core values integral to practicing social responsibility.

In contrast to more passive extant approaches, the learning experience we propose is live, emotionally driven, and most important, results in action. Theories of consumer behavior (see, e.g., Fazio and Zanna 1981) suggest that attitude-behavior correlations are typically larger for attitudes based on behavioral experience with the attitude object than for attitudes not based on such experience. Thus, the kind of direct experience we put the students through should have a stronger and more lasting impact on students' long run attitudes towards social responsibility. In their roles as managers, these attitudes ought to enable them to better balance corporate and social goals. Neither courses in ethics nor case discussions on social responsibility, which usually are limited to the classroom, can substitute for the value of this experience.

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