



**School of Business**

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# George Mason School of Business Faculty Organize Conference on Sustainable Operations

Written by Adrienne Benson on July 18th, 2019.

Sustainability is more than a buzzword these days. As concern for the earth's resources grows, the balancing act between meeting current needs without surrendering future ones is increasingly important. Sustainability practices have to be tailored and, in a business context, this means exploring ways to make everything from product manufacturing to global procurement as environmentally responsible as possible.

In the spirit of exchanging ideas on how to address these challenges, the College of Sustainable Operations—an entity within the Production and Operations Management Society—held a slate of mini-conferences on May 2, 2019, at the Washington Hilton in Washington, D.C. Operations managers ensure efficiency in multiple areas of a business and have to stay current on innovations in the field so they know they're using the best methods to keep their companies environmentally and economically accountable.

As the organizer of one of the mini-conferences, the George Mason University School of Business gathered researchers and operations management practitioners to look at challenges, approaches, and new initiatives in social and environmental responsibility. The combination of academics and practitioners—50 participants from 12 countries—made for a dynamic atmosphere. With speakers from the private and public sectors, along with nonprofit organizations, participants were given insights into the ways these organizations approach the notion of sustainability, and specific programs they have implemented to further sustainable practices. Speakers from the Department of Energy (DOE), the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Arizona State University's School of Sustainability, the Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council, Conservation X Labs, Chemonics, and Lend A Box, a local startup, made for lively conversation around sustainable purchasing and supply chains, health care waste management in developing economies, and crowdsourcing socially and environmentally sustainable innovations.

Shabnam Fardanesh, the Sustainable Acquisition Coordinator at the DOE's Office of Environment, Health, Safety & Security, kicked-off the presentations by pointing out that sustainability is dependent on an organization's ability to embrace a culture of change. "Innovation follows a predictable pattern," Fardanesh said, "One person has an idea and other people then spread that idea. Over time, more and more people adopt it until a critical mass is reached. That tipping point pushes the new practice into accepted culture." She pointed out that in an organizational context, the willingness to change is about good management.

Alison Kinn, Senior Advisor at EPA's Office of Environment, Health, Safety & Security, noted that businesses need clear information about sustainable products and that the EPA's Environmentally Preferable Purchasing (EPP) Program helps provide that. The EPP program evaluates and recommends marketplace standards and eco-labeling to reduce the cost to identify and purchase environmentally-friendly products. Both private sector firms

and federal agencies can use these recommendations, which encourages private sector innovation in sustainability because of the combined purchasing power focused on products and services certified or labeled with the recommendations.

The “how” of sustainability is critically important, and members of the College of Sustainable Operations conduct rigorous, problem-driven studies addressing that question from a variety of angles. For example, Nicole Darnall, Associate Dean and Professor at the Arizona State University School of Sustainability, presented work she and her team did on local government sustainable purchasing, both in the United States and globally. She pointed out the tremendous impact that shaping U.S. government purchasing behavior would have since it accounts for more than 15.8 percent of GDP and, “is the largest buyer of goods and services across the globe.”

Kris Spriano from the Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council shared her journey into environmentally-responsible supply chain management at Cisco Systems and then into the nonprofit world. At Cisco, Spriano led efforts to develop an early “Scope 3” greenhouse gas emissions reductions program. Scope 3 emissions are all the indirect emissions that occur in a company’s supply chain, both upstream and downstream, not including the indirect emissions from purchased energy, which are Scope 2. In order to further her impact, she joined the Sustainable Purchasing Leadership Council where she helps other companies develop a systematic, programmatic approach to sustainable operations, not just a series of independent projects, she says.

The conference also offered an opportunity to be reminded of the “why” of environmentally responsible business practices. Chad Gallinat, who manages Conservation X Lab’s Global Cooling Prize, brought the reason behind sustainable business practices home by saying, “Our goal is to stop human extinction.” It’s hard to get a “why” clearer than that. The good news, which the conference illustrated, is that businesses are embracing the opportunity to rise to the challenge of coming up with new, sustainable solutions to old problems. Scott Ackerson of Chemonics described the challenges behind health care waste management in developing economies, and its importance to human health and the environment. Ackerson challenged the audience to think holistically, “You have to look at environmental compliance ... in a way that we do no harm, no matter what it is.”

Ioannis (Yannis) Bellos and Cheryl Druehl, both operations management faculty members at George Mason’s School of Business, organized the mini-conference as a way for academics and practitioners to draw ideas and energy from one another in the sustainable business space. Druehl pointed out that “students desire to work for companies that are improving their sustainability and ask for courses at the intersection of sustainability and business.” As a researcher in this area, Bellos expressed excitement about “Mason’s focus on sustainability and its support for research in this area, in the business school and campus-wide.”

George Mason, with its university-wide emphasis on sustainability, lives in this space of environmental stewardship. The School is a member of PRME – Principles for Responsible Management Education – and encourages research efforts in sustainability across disciplines. To tackle issues such as climate change, waste, and conservation, the university recently launched the Institute for Sustainable Earth, a multidisciplinary research institute in which School of Business faculty play an active role. With the school’s location, it is well-positioned to meet and influence policymakers around sustainable operations and business. As an example of ongoing efforts, the Honey Bee Initiative is a joint venture between the School of Business and the College of Science that focuses on honey bee sustainability through research, experiential courses, collaborative partnerships, and social entrepreneurship. The School of Business is also developing a Center for People, Planet, Prosperity—an outgrowth of its Business for a Better World Initiative. Faculty developed the Business for a Better World Initiative to address the world’s challenges through innovative curricula, cutting-edge cross-disciplinary research, and robust private-public partnerships that empower leaders and future leaders to create a better world.

Mason's focus on sustainability was also illustrated clearly by the conference's last speaker, Stephanie Zimmerman, a Mason alumnus and co-founder, co-owner, and vice president of Lend A Box LLC. Her company boasts the motto "Simple. Smart. Environmentally Savvy." Like the conference itself, this seems a perfect example of what the George Mason University School of Business says in its vision for the school and encourages all faculty, staff, students, and alumni to do: do well by doing good and ensure that business is a positive force in the world.

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