

A Bottom Line with Soul:
A New MBA in Organizational and Environmental Sustainability At Antioch
University New England
By Christine Holderness

“Education is about more than knowledge. It is about connecting the dots and becoming aware of the interdependence of everything. Knowledge is just one component of the creative process.”

Steven Guerriero, PhD
Vice President for Academic Affairs
Antioch University New England

An hour or so into the hike, on a hot July afternoon, a shift occurs. Trees, plants, water, and earth cease to be separate entities and become a complex and highly effective system that work productively together to sustain a living, pulsating, functioning environment.

The nineteen students enrolled in the newly launched MBA in Organizational and Environmental Sustainability (Green MBA) program at Antioch University New England (ANE) found that to hike with Tom Wessels, professor in the Department of Environmental Studies at ANE and a teacher in the Green MBA program, is to feel layer upon layer of history breathe.

During a recent hike at Pisgah State Park, an undeveloped 14,000-acre parcel in southern New Hampshire, clues were deciphered that reveal an ecosystem that works. Stopping at a tree with bark removed at the bottom, Wessels was able to determine that a beaver had chewed this tree nine years ago; the way a rotted tree was balanced on another indicated it was blown down during the devastating hurricane of 1938; and, a gigantic hemlock was estimated to be over three-hundred years old by examining the bark.

But as intriguing as these observations are, what creates intellectual bridges and generates innovative ways to consider day-to-day life are the myriad ways in which ecological principles that govern sustainability in ecosystems can also be applied to human systems to make them more sustainable.

Professor Wessels’s hikes are legendary. On these walks he “reads” the landscape on literal, metaphoric, psychological, historical, and political levels. His 1997 book, *Reading the Forested Landscape*, beautifully explores the natural history of New England in ways that reveal connections between the land and eons of history. In his recently published book, *The Myth of Progress*, Wessels demonstrates how our current path of continual economic expansion and

indiscriminate use of resources runs counter to the laws of sustainability in nature.

“If everything that we observe in the world around us honors limits to growth as a means to sustain itself, why is the underlying foundation for our current paradigm of progress ever-increasing growth? The answer lies in a body of economic theory that not only has no grounding in, but is actually divorced from, the scientific laws that govern the Universe. In a very real sense our reigning neoclassical economic orthodoxy has been developed in a artificial world where resources are infinite, and waste, including garbage, pollution, toxins, and environmental degradation, don’t exist, and where our socioeconomic system functions in a void rather than being nested within the biosphere.” from *Myth of Progress*, (University of Vermont Press, 2006), pg. 32.

“We just can’t continue to conduct business as usual,” emphasized ANE’s vice president of academic affairs, Steven Guerriero, the driving force behind this new Green MBA program. “The future of our planet depends on teaching a whole new generation a different way to think about business.”

And a first step in imagining a different way to think about business is to break down the boundaries that separate the natural world from the manmade world. At its core, ANE’s Green MBA believes that profit is only one measure of a company’s success. As crucial are quality of work life, ethical practices, social responsibility, and sustainable and ecologically conscious development.

Fittingly, it was in many aspects an organic and generative process that led to this innovative approach to business education. The genesis of the program began in the mid-1990s when Dr. Maich Gardner, then co-chair of ANE’s Department of Environmental Studies, developed a course, “Building Sustainable Organizations.” Together Gardner and Guerriero laid out both the need for Green MBA programs and identified some of the key aspects of such a program. From there support grew with input from faculty, outside experts, and the generous support of the Pierson-Lovelace Foundation.

This new Green MBA program combines resources from the Departments of Organization & Management and Environmental Studies, forming a synergy among students and faculty that, ideally, motivates all to want to make a difference in both businesses and the environment.

“The first night I met the students, I told them that the Sustainability Field was evolving so fast we would need to travel this road together...this group is committed to conversation and reflection, we are honored to have them as our students,” muses Polly Chandler, core faculty and director of Antioch’s Tomey Center.

To further facilitate this goal, students are part of a cohort, a group that is intimately connected throughout the two-year program. The cohort approach is representative of the collaborative business environment of progressive cultures, balancing the competitive character with the team player.

“I am really amazed at the diversity in age, background, and interests of the cohort. The instant acceptance of nineteen people who had never met before and the openness and grace with which we all took the time to get to know one another makes you think there is hope for us all after all,” student Susanne Patroliia enthusiastically exclaims.

Patroliia is a 42-year-old mother of two teenagers who currently works for a fabric company in eastern Massachusetts. The tragic death, in a climbing accident, of her sister-in-law led her to a major crossroad in her own life, and a path that eventually led to Keene, New Hampshire for an intensive ten-day session that heralds the inauguration of two years of study. The students will meet monthly in Keene as they continue to work and live in far-flung communities.

“I have a great need to have my work life, where most of my energy is spent, mean something,” is a sentiment repeated by Patroliia and other students in this first cohort at ANE. The students range from their mid-20s to mid-50s and are drawn from a wide and diverse range of backgrounds.

There are organic farmers from Vermont, a former professor from the University of New Hampshire, a USA Toyota employee, and a person beginning a sustainable energy business. All share a common desire to move beyond the status quo with sensitivity and compassion.

“What is important to me, now and likely forever going forward, is to be part of the solution (If indeed there really is one...) to global warming. I’ve had this same discussion with many others in my cohort and most of us agree that it is questionable as to whether we, as a global community, will be able to effect the necessary changes...in the right volume, to prevent us from reaching a rather bleak future. Yet, when we then ponder whether it’s even worth making ANY effort at all we realize that we are compelled to act, even if these actions go absolutely nowhere. As living beings in touch with our consciousness, we have no other moral choice. Anyway, living in a world where hope is gone is considerably more terrifying than facing the problems that lie ahead,” passionately states student Preston Alexander whose long-range goal is to start a sustainable energy business.

Why is change important, how does one recognize the need for change, and how does one successfully navigate through change? Through a combination of

study, experiential learning, reflective practices, group projects, and online discussion, these students will hold these questions up and dissect them from numerous perspectives.

“There is a tendency to get siloed in one’s thinking. It is impossible for any organization, company, or business to operate effectively in a vacuum,” Guerriero states emphatically. Clearly, a traditional MBA’s focus on finance and quantitative analysis to the exclusion, often, of leadership, collaboration, and critical thinking is an approach that is limited, particularly in today’s world. To be entrepreneurial, to think on one’s feet while moving forward, to respond to a rapidly changing planet, requires a multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach.

It is quiet, and humid, as we move deeper into Pisgah State Park. Here the land has never been farmed, the stone walls built to keep sheep contained disappear, and there are no cellar holes and other signs of past human inhabitants. This ecosystem has survived for thousands of years; cycles of codependence continually moving and balancing. It is a place to be revered, listened to, and respected. There is, I sense, a deep and abiding awareness, and gratitude, among all on the hike that we are a part of something much larger than our individual existences.

“Systems can only grow so large because resources are finite. The more resources we use the more we degrade our natural world and all the services it provides. Our human systems should be based on the law of self-organization, which means that as they grow they should become more complex. This complexity results from the parts in the system becoming ever more specialized with each part of its efforts to support itself and the other parts in the system. What results are systems that increase their efficiency of energy and material use and become more stable through time,” postulates Tom Wessels.

At Antioch University New England there is a central tenet, “Because the world needs you now.” This is, perhaps, at the center of each student’s decision to embark on graduate studies at this school. It is both motivator and goal.

ANE’s Green MBA program intertwines numerous disciplines and philosophies and, in the process, attempts to forge a new way to think about the world, the future, and how one might be of service.

“Getting my Green MBA is not the goal; discovering how to make a difference in the world is,” declares student Preston Alexander.

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