

Positive learning on carbon neutrality

A leading Canadian school helps students to live their sustainable curriculum. By **Simon Pek, Rick Cotton** and **Mackenzie Ford**



Growing a world-class, competitive business school and being a leader in sustainability may seem like two juxtaposed goals but the University of Victoria's Peter B Gustavson School of Business, in Victoria, BC, has found a way to do both. In fact, not only is the school a leader in teaching sustainability curriculum, it is believed to be the first carbon neutral business school in the world.

How has Gustavson accomplished this feat? The answers lie in the four pillars that are the foundation of the business school: international, integrative, innovative and socially responsible/sustainable. Gustavson students are taught that a holistic perspective on business is valuable and they realise that their impact within business cannot be limited to pursuing financial goals while ignoring impacts on people and the planet.

The school raises leaders—not the kind who are looking to be titans of Wall Street but the kind who think outside the box and truly want to affect change across sectors and geographic locations; they recognise that one way to do so is through sustainability efforts.

This focus on sustainability is reinforced for both students and faculty through in-class content and discussion. In the 2017/2018 academic year, 92% of required Bachelor of Commerce courses, 84% of required Master of Business Administration courses and 100% of required Master of Global Business courses included sustainability-related content.

In accounting courses, Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports are analysed in combination with annual reports. In marketing courses, students are taught that transparency is valuable, and that greenwashing should be avoided.

2009

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For students in the Bachelor of Commerce programme, there is an entire sustainability course that includes content related to human rights, ethics, cultural sustainability, biomimicry and, in recent years, managing one's own carbon footprint.

Realising that carbon emissions play a large role in sustainability efforts, Gustavson started seriously examining its carbon footprint in 2009 with guidance from Dr Basma Majerbi. In that year, the school began collecting data on its carbon footprint by tracking the scope of its emissions: Scope One (natural gas for heating); Scope Two (electricity); and Scope Three (paper, travel and commuting) emissions.

In 2010, to further analyse this footprint, Gustavson began gathering data on its annual greenhouse gas emissions. In tandem with this research, grassroots sustainability efforts and a series of behavioural changes were encouraged within Gustavson, including: the creation of Bike to Work Week teams; the installation of water fountains to replace bottled water bottles; Earth Day meat-free diet awareness campaigns; and plastic reduction initiatives.

The school was also a leader in implementing a comprehensive recycling programme. These initiatives helped track and reduce the school's emissions.

In 2010, the University of Victoria was mandated by the provincial government of British Columbia to offset its Scope One and Two carbon emissions. However, it was not until



the launch of Gustavson's Centre for Social and Sustainable Innovation (CSSI), that the business school formally set a goal to offset its Scope Three emissions and become completely carbon neutral.

In 2017, the school received faculty approval to create the Carbon Neutrality Plus (CN+) committee, comprising students, faculty and staff with the goal of off setting and finding novel ways of reducing Gustavson's carbon emissions. In taking this on the school realised three things:

- carbon neutrality could not be achieved by carbon reduction efforts alone, meaning that carbon offsets needed to accompany reduction efforts
- the initiative had to have buy-in from all of the school's stakeholders, including its students
- the initiative had to be positioned and perceived as a strategic investment rather than a "sin-tax".

These conclusions gained urgency when Gustavson realised that over 80% of its carbon footprint was Scope Three-related—largely due to travel.

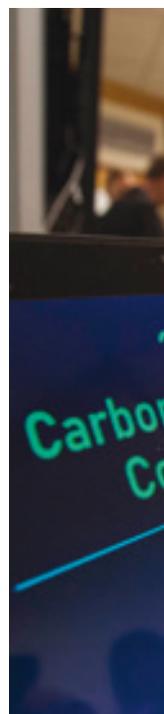
As an international business school, global engagement is woven into the fabric of the schools identity. After all, Gustavson faculty members regularly collaborate with researchers around the world while each year 80% of undergraduates and 100% of masters students participate in international exchange.

Exchange has become a key differentiator for the school and a crucial factor in developing internationally focused and culturally sensitive stakeholders. As these programmes gained momentum, higher numbers of students were admitted to the school while associated faculty and staff support increased as well, resulting in a ratcheting up of emissions.

So the question became: "How does Gustavson maintain its international focus and connections while also remaining true to its sustainability and social responsibility values?"

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PICTURE COURTESY OF GUSTAVSON

The school sought to find a strategy that would offset these emissions without demonising travel itself. It was through this thinking that Gustavson and the CSSI saw the potential for a carbon offset competition, which would focus on offsetting the costs of travel, and would involve the students—key contributors to the school’s carbon footprint—in the process.

In 2017, the CN+ committee launched its first initiative to involve Gustavson faculty, staff and students in the carbon offset selection process. In its inaugural year, the initiative presented these groups with an opportunity to vote for their favourite carbon offset projects from a set of projects identified by the committee.

While this was a great strategy to engage Gustavson’s faculty, staff and students to have a voice in addressing the school’s carbon footprint, the committee and the dean, Dr Saul Klein, felt there was a larger opportunity for experiential learning for the students.

With this in mind, in 2018 the CN+ committee announced its first annual Carbon Offset Pitch Competition. Here, students learned about offsetting by evaluating different projects and then creating a portfolio summary description that they pitched to the voters in a 90-second video proposal.

All students were invited and encouraged to participate. Teams of one to five students from Gustavson’s undergraduate, masters and PhD programmes offered their portfolio recommendations from a list of 26 off set projects, from four different off set providers that were selected using rigorous criteria developed by the CN+ committee.

The portfolio considerations and the reasoning behind the committee varied greatly. Each of the final teams took a different approach to carbon mitigation and reduction, piecing together different projects from a reforestation on Quadra Island, to more efficient cooking stoves in Uganda, to a wind power project in New Caledonia.

In the end, after the votes were tallied among the five competing portfolios, the winning team selected two offset projects for their portfolio, allocating 65% to a Bundled Solar Power Project in India and 35% to The Great Bear Forest Carbon Project in British Columbia, Canada.

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This winning portfolio offset Gustavson’s previous calendar year’s carbon footprint of 796 tonnes. Mikiya Hobbs, a member of the winning team, spoke about her desire to participate:

“As a group, we decided to take part in the competition because of our passion for the environment. This competition was also a unique way for us to engage with Gustavson and an opportunity for students to have a say in how the school spends its money. Personally, I wanted to gain experience learning about sustainability initiatives and making pitches.”

Seven-hundred-and-ninety-six tonnes of off set carbon is an incredible number that the school can be proud of. But equally important, the school can be proud of the international, integrative, innovative and socially responsible mindset reflected by Gustavson students throughout the competition.

Two initiatives, the solar power project in India also has ancillary benefits including boosting economic activity in the region. And The Great Bear project will provide jobs for local Indigenous communities while acknowledging their deep-seated cultural knowledge that has protected the coastal land for centuries.

These initiatives are closely aligned with Gustavson’s pillars, and in choosing these initiatives as part of their portfolio recommendation, the students demonstrated how they are truly looking to make a difference by considering the benefits to both people and the planet while also considering the per tonne project costs to the school. This is an example of what Gustavson calls “triple bottom line thinking”.

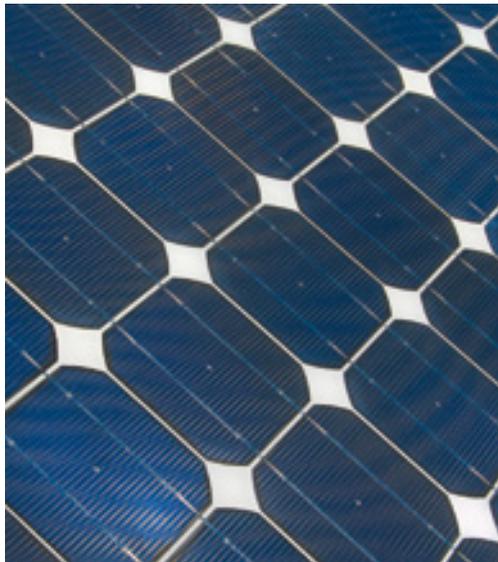
But even with the tremendous success of the 2018 competition Gustavson continues to look for opportunities to deepen engagement and increase its alignment with its pillars. In 2019, the CN+ committee has developed plans to have students connect their portfolios to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, and hopes to see even more portfolio submissions and a larger voter turnout.

In the future, the committee would also like to explore the possibility of creating its own carbon offset projects that students could include in their portfolio submissions.

Another learning outcome for the committee is that carbon offsetting must include individual accountability. This led them to conduct research into what small daily changes can be made by students, faculty and staff to have the largest impact on carbon reduction.

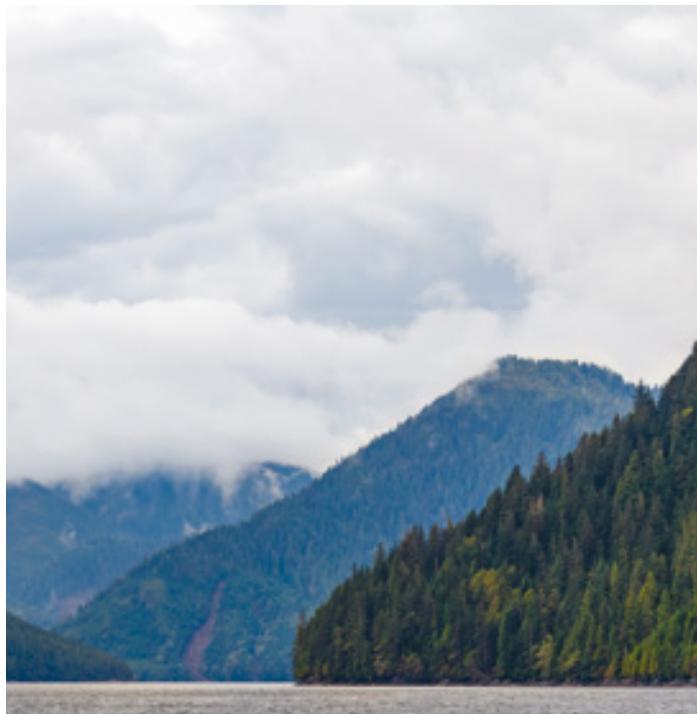
They have studied flight path emissions, looked into sustainably sourcing supplies and brainstormed campaigns to reinforce the notion that carbon offsetting and sustainability require everyone's ownership and commitment.

Although Gustavson is proud to be a leader in this field, the school hopes that it can provide other organisations, schools and businesses with guidance to launch similar types of value-driven initiatives in the hopes of accelerating positive, sustainable environmental change.



Making sustainable business decisions has always been a key focus of Gustavson but the school truly believes that these changes cannot simply come from the top down or pursued as a fad. The school recognises that its staff, faculty and – most importantly students—play an instrumental role in offering unique insight into important global issues, including carbon neutrality.

By harnessing and rewarding ideas such as the ones offered by the students during the Carbon Offset Pitch Competition, the school can propel a generation of open-minded and visionary business leaders into the world. By continuing to foster a collaborative problem-solving environment, Gustavson believes that together we can create a positive social and environmental impact on a global scale.



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