

# Mission Possible: Introducing Sustainability as an Experiential Entrepreneurship Activity

Leo Wong

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## **Mission Possible: Introducing Sustainability as an Experiential Entrepreneurship Activity**

### **ABSTRACT**

Mission Possible explores the concept of sustainability in a simple and introductory level, from the perspective of an entrepreneur for first-year business students. Students apply their learning outside the classroom and consider the relationship between economic, social and environmental objectives. This engages students in sustainability concepts by creating a real-world experience and then forces students to use that experience to address more conceptual issues related to sustainability. Through an examination of embedding sustainability into an experiential learning activity, this chapter will provide insight on how to meaningfully introduce sustainability for first year business students.

**Keywords:** Experiential learning, sustainability, social entrepreneurship, sustainable business, social impact, environmental impact, economic impact

### **INTRODUCTION**

A shift to aligning “real world” issues with classroom teaching has meant that universities are adapting their curriculum towards a focus on social entrepreneurship and sustainability issues (Gunn, Durkin, Singh, and Brown, 2008; Schlee, Curren and Harich, 2009). Experiential learning can be an effective

pedagogical method to integrate sustainability concepts as it offers students the opportunity to experience the same passion that motivates social entrepreneurs as opposed to learning about sustainability from a textbook (Gundlach and Zivnuska, 2010). Universities increasingly look at experiential learning as a modality for integrating sustainability (Baden and Parkes, 2013; Chang, Benamraoui and Rieple, 2014) or consider experiential learning to teach entrepreneurship (Malach and Malach, 2014; Fulgence, 2015; Mcurtrie, 2015), few have combined the two to explore sustainable business practices. Furthermore, there is a gap in the literature on exploring how to do this for students who are taking a required course as opposed to an elective, and that takes place on a large scale that involves many first-year students. In this case, the potential benefit is broad and widespread as opposed to focusing on small (and typically senior) courses where a narrow slice of the student population benefits.

Integrating sustainability into a broad-based and required course at the early stages of an undergraduate program poses certain challenges related to student engagement and learning outcomes. In this chapter, I explore whether an experiential learning activity will engage students in sustainability concepts and more specifically, how do students approach the question of 'What is a sustainable business?'

Mission Possible is an experiential learning activity integrated into a first-year required undergraduate business course at a large, public undergraduate

university located in downtown Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. It is designed to introduce the concept of sustainability at the first-year level, inspiring all incoming students to explore issues of social and environmental responsibility as it relates to the economic impact of business activities. All first-year undergraduate business students, as well as students from other faculties who are minoring in business, are required to take this course. The course will typically experience enrollment of 500 students per semester.

Students are tasked to start their own for-profit business venture, work in a team of three to five students and use only a five dollar loan given to each student at the beginning of the semester. As a team they have five weeks to run their venture by leveraging their skills, knowledge and networks to generate economic, social and environmental impact. Economic impact is measured directly by their venture's net profits (revenues minus expenses). Social impact is measured through metrics such as the charitable donations they make (as a percentage of their venture's profits) and how well they promote the charity's cause. Environmental impact is measured through metrics such as the use of recycled materials in their production processes and responsible waste disposal practices. The sustainability of their business concept is assessed as part of each team's submitted business proposal and video pitch, which discusses their plan to grow their business if it were to continue past five weeks.

This chapter will benefit faculty members seeking to introduce sustainability, particularly into a course with a large enrollment. Faculty members who view sustainability as relevant to business curriculum and are comfortable with experiential activities as part of their teaching modality, will benefit the most from this chapter. Moreover, academics involved in the Academy of Management's divisions 'Entrepreneurship' and 'Management Education and Development' should take special notice of this chapter. Department chairs and school administration will also find this chapter of relevance as it highlights the potential impact a course may have on the rest of the program, in catalyzing sustainability integration. It also highlights the program support needed to sustain the experiential learning activity over time. Other instructors who may teach sections of this course will be interested in learning about the success and challenges faced during the implementation phase and the anticipated outcomes in student learning and venture success. Instructors will be able to visualize the student experience as influenced by how they approach facilitating this activity in class. Finally, community members seeking to establish partnerships with business schools will find this chapter of relevance as it offers an innovative method to partner within the classroom. It benefits students by increasing their awareness of the social impact of community organizations while also benefitting organizations financially and through new relationships with a young generation of donors.

The rest of the chapter will provide background context for Mission Possible, discussing the approach of embedding sustainability into an existing course and

the value of experiential learning. This will be followed by the details of how Mission Possible was implemented and the results across multiple semesters of experience.

## **INTEGRATION OF EXPERIENTIAL SUSTAINABILITY FOR FIRST YEAR STUDENTS**

Sustainability concepts cover a wide range of business disciplines and are considered cross-disciplinary in nature. As such, there is a strong argument for embedding sustainability into courses for all students, rather than standalone courses that are often senior-level electives (Persons, 2012; Brammer, 2005). Many of these required courses occur at the beginning of a program of study.

Introducing sustainability concepts at the outset of an undergraduate program is critical in both its extent and approach. If programs in management education are planning to embed sustainability so that all students consider their internal values and motivations for pursuing a career in business, then the manner in which sustainability is introduced needs to be examined including where it is introduced and how.

## **CHANGING AN EXISTING STRUCTURE**

To effectively embed sustainability education in a business school, it is important to ask where it gets introduced. Rusinko (2010) discusses four quadrants for integrating sustainability education along two dimensions of 'structures' (new vs existing) and 'focus' (narrow vs broad). At the university in which Mission Possible is conducted, sustainability education appears in courses that cover all four quadrants. It can be argued that the best approach to introduce sustainability to students might be with an existing structure that is broad, or multi-disciplinary. This quadrant has the best opportunity to engage the most students, setting a stage for sustainability to be introduced to a large audience and enable further learning if students become interested in the topic.

A common core course called Introduction to Business (BUSN 201) was selected as the ideal place to introduce sustainability to students. It is both an existing structure and broad in focus. The course, prior to the decision to embed sustainability, was considered to be a survey course where each business discipline was explored to a minor degree. As a survey course, it positions itself as the first business course students take. Like many similar variants across other business schools, the typical structure of this course involved students learning about disciplines such as accounting, finance, international business, human resources, management, marketing, and supply chain from a large textbook and a lecture model. This type of course has a large assortment of textbooks that faculty choose from, as is considered one of the more mainstream courses common to

many business schools. Assessments included a business plan project where students wrote a lengthy business plan on a purely hypothetical idea.

As an existing structure, two main challenges were experienced with embedding sustainability into this course. The first challenge involved curriculum and the balance between adding new sustainability concepts and removing old curriculum. The second challenge involved the business plan project and making it both personally relevant and applicable while integrating a sustainability component. To address the first challenge, a new textbook was adopted that outlined many of the sustainability principles while discussing the necessary discipline-specific concepts in a balanced approach. As the university is a signatory school to the Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME), the adoption of the Laasch and Conaway text 'Principles of Responsible Management' was a good fit. As such, the textbook provided the definitions and concepts related to sustainability such as the widely cited sustainability definition from the Brundtland Commission (*Our Common Future*, 1987). With the adoption of a new textbook, much of the old curriculum was pared down by eliminating concepts that students were exposed to concurrently in other discipline-specific introductory courses. For example, in an Introduction to Accounting course, students were learning about the balance sheet at the same time Introduction to Business was discussing balance sheets. To avoid this duplication, discussions were held with faculty of those respective introductory courses to ensure curriculum flow was not threatened.



To address the second challenge, which serves as the main focus of this chapter, a revised version of the business plan project was developed that was both experiential and real-world in nature. The revised project was given the name Mission Possible, to highlight the challenging and socially purposeful nature of the project.

Mission Possible is a venture start-up experience that is complemented with a business proposal and video pitch assignment. The business proposal is a scaled down version of the former business plan project, which now focuses on the essential elements required to convey the value proposition of a business idea. Components of the former business plan project such as the task of creating a balance sheet was removed to accommodate the added time commitment of Mission Possible. As well, a custom Business Planning Workbook was written to help students develop an effective business proposal, which also featured guiding questions (see Mission Possible: Implementation section) related to social and environmental responsibility.

The video pitch is a condensed presentation, forcing students to communicate the value of their business idea in a fraction of the time they would have had in a longer presentation. It is important to note that both the business proposal and video pitch serve as important assignments that encourage students to explore the long-term viability of their Mission Possible venture.

These changes to both the curriculum and the assignments took place over a period of three years, culminating in a change to the course delivery format to allow for the flipped classroom aspect of Mission Possible. The course was moved from a straight lecture format to a lecture/seminar format where textbook material was taught in the lecture and Mission Possible was discussed in the seminar. The Business Planning Workbook allows for the seminar to be run in a flipped environment where students progress through the workbook on their own time and come to the seminar to discuss issues related to their venture and business proposal. Research suggests that students prefer this method particularly when didactic information such as the steps involved in building a business proposal is involved (Pierce and Fox, 2012). As a course that now includes a flipped classroom environment, the survey approach that characterized the course formerly has been drastically minimized. This course is considered the cornerstone course for all business students, which lays the necessary foundation students need to be successful in their program of study. Finally, given the drastic nature of the changes to the course, the course title was appropriately renamed to Introduction to Sustainable Business.

## EXTREMELY EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

An experiential learning activity (Kolbe, 1984) is “the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (p. 41), and allows for sustainability concepts to be applied in a personal manner where the relevance of

those concepts is realized during and after the activity. As a result, students have the opportunity to become engaged and start to develop a meaningful understanding to the question “What is a sustainable business?” By having students make their own decisions about the role social and environmental responsibility have in their business ventures, the sustainability concepts become real and consequential, not just ‘textbook material’. Realizing that their economic performance can be positively influenced by their social responsibility (ex. attracting customers because sales are tied to donations) may contribute to students understanding that sustainability contains both a moral and economic proposition.

New business ventures, as part of a course, are not new (Barram, 2011; Koch, 2005) and the activity itself has been referred to as ‘extremely’ experiential (Glick, 2013) relative to case studies and hypothetical simulations. Case studies, for example, are considered experiential learning as well, since it often places the student in the shoes of the decision maker. However, the distance between student and student as decision maker is apparent particularly as case study assessment uses written and/or verbal reports as opposed to experiencing the actual consequences of good and poor decisions. More over, first year students are further removed from the ‘experience’ as they have even fewer life experiences to draw from to enhance their learning. Kraft (1999) argues that this type of learning is better described as vicarious learning, where students are imitating a decision maker and experience no consequences from their own behaviours. Simulations

are also experiential in nature, however they tend to be restricted to a limited number of variables and are often conducted in class. Furthermore, the consequences of good and poor decisions can be hard to imagine for most first year students (ex. earning a million dollars in a fiscal year) and are in fact, not consequential in their own lives.

In Mission Possible, the students are the decision makers and the consequences of all their decisions have a direct impact on their success. Although there are other forms of assessment involved in Mission Possible including written reports, part of their assessment involves their actual economic impact measured through their financial performance. These are actual dollars from the pockets of the students themselves. Throughout the exercise, students are handling money from customers, spending it with suppliers and donating it to charity.

One can argue that if case studies and simulations, as two popular forms of experiential learning, are difficult for first year students to appreciate and benefit from, how can an even more extreme form of experiential learning be any better? Coakley and Sousa (2013) discuss the value of experiential learning in a first year course, but use a hypothetical business plan project as their example of experiential learning. Mission Possible, as extreme experiential learning, is not without its risks in terms of student benefit. The potential for learning from an experience in Mission Possible is dependent upon the ability of students to reflect upon their decisions and its consequences. Their ability to do this is related to their

level of engagement with the exercise and opportunities to conduct those reflections.

Another risk with Mission Possible is the fact that students can lose their own money. Although present, this risk is reduced because of a small five dollar loan we restrict students to using and emphasize that no other start up funds be used. In addition, there is no penalty academically for not making a profit, safeguarding students academically in the case their ventures are unable to turn a profit within the five week exercise.

The benefits to this type of experiential learning are multi-faceted. Students get to experience an actual business, which they have complete control over. They must adapt to changing scenarios that are unique to their own business and the final results are completely determined by the effort they put in and the quality of their venture idea. Success comes, not from memorizing terms and definitions, but from adapting to situations (Hascher, Cocard, and Moser, 2004) and working well in a team environment. In this regard, successful teams do two things well: 1) they respond well to expected issues related to the exercise such as how much they should donate to charity or how much money to reinvest in subsequent weeks; 2) they develop intuitive knowledge about their industry, suppliers, customers and charity partner which adds value to their venture such as changing product design to better serve existing customers or understanding their charity's audience to improve their marketing communications. Furthermore, lecture material taught in

class is more meaningful now as students experience challenges throughout the five weeks, which can be referenced such as how to manage their human resources, constraints working with suppliers, how to identify the right target segment, etc. Lastly, as a result of increased levels of student engagement, sustainability concepts are more meaningfully adopted. Experiential learning has been shown to produce reflective students, with a higher degree of sustainability-focus (de Loura, 2014). As discussed later in this chapter, reflections by students and instructor-student debriefs underline this finding.

## **MISSION POSSIBLE: IMPLEMENTATION**

The implementation of Mission Possible uses all components of the course, but most prominently the seminar and the Business Planning Workbook (BPW), and more selectively the lecture. (Refer to the course syllabus in Appendix A for a detailed listing of Mission Possible elements.) A major contributor outside the course is an innovative partnership with a group of local student leaders from the local Enactus chapter.

Enactus is part of an international network of Enactus chapters which focus on developing projects that combine entrepreneurial spirit with the commitment to having positive social and environmental impact. The local Enactus chapter manages the day-to-day operations of Mission Possible including the venture idea

approvals, loan distributions, building business workshops and the celebration event.

Discussion of the entire Mission Possible project will be divided into three sections: pre, during and post. Each section will include a description of the specific course activities as well as a discussion of the challenges associated with both the entrepreneurial nature (Malach and Malach, 2014) and the sustainability components of the project.

## PRE MISSION POSSIBLE

Mission Possible is introduced at the beginning of the semester in the lecture, described to all students as the major group project for the course. It is described as an experience that will challenge students, but ideally will help students explore the question of 'What is a sustainable business?' Both the lecturer and former students from Mission Possible share their insights to help motivate students. As mentioned earlier, all ventures must choose a charity and a percentage of profits to donate, or their donation promise. In the lecture, the charity partners present to the students what they do and their mission.

Enactus, who assembles a team of past Mission Possible participants to volunteer for this project, also conducts the selection of charity partner options. As part of this responsibility, they look at a variety of criteria including diversity of issues, local

impact and the ability to cooperate by allowing students to reference them on marketing materials and the ability to issue automatic tax receipts via email. The automatic issuance of tax receipts allows for Enactus to verify the final donation amounts made by ventures.

In the first three weeks of the semester, the seminars are used to discuss business ideation and refer to the BPW for how to create a business idea. As well, students participate in a survey called StrengthsFinder ([www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com)) to help them identify their own natural talents. In seminar, students meet each other while doing an icebreaker related to their StrengthsFinder results to help form groups. Groups can be any size between three and five students. This was done to provide some flexibility for students when they are self-selecting into groups.

The challenges related to this part of the semester involve helping students feel comfortable in the course and with their peers, as many are new to university. Outside of Mission Possible but part of the course is an assignment asking all students to consider their own online brand and how to manage an online profile (ex. LinkedIn) to present themselves professionally. This assignment, along with doing an icebreaker and having them talk to each other early on in the semester helps with students feeling less anonymous in the class.

The other challenge is related to business ideation and the difficulty for first year students to generate a business idea to commit to. The restriction of adhering to



the five dollar loan simplifies the options for students so that capital intensive ventures are avoided. It is also emphasized to students to develop a venture based on their group member's skill sets, knowledge and interests. As a result, many venture ideas revolve around services such as lawn mowing or snow shoveling (depending on the season) or simple products like candles or dog treats. Many of the product-related ideas are sourced from popular online social media sites dedicated to homemade products (ex. Pinterest).

Once students have formed a team, committed to a venture idea and a charity partner, and decided upon a donation promise, they will submit a venture idea proposal to Enactus for approval. All proposal and reports are submitted online through a course website. The proposal details their venture name, description, charity partner, donation promise and how they plan to use their loan money. The approval process is conducted in collaboration with faculty and the students association, to ensure no ventures being proposed infringe upon any laws or university-associated vendor agreements. For example, students are not allowed to sell food on campus because of a university contract with a food services vendor. As a result, students are deterred from submitting a food producing venture proposal, if their goal were to sell to the university community. As well, any proposals that inappropriately represent themselves as associated with the university or integrate a reference with their charity partner in their venture name/logo, is also rejected.

All teams are notified within three days of their proposal results. Teams must schedule a time to see Enactus in person, to receive their approval and loan money, or to adjust their proposal in-person before being approved. After this approval process, Mission Possible is ready to begin.

A few variables with the set up of the project are tempting to explore. Firstly, the loan amount of five dollars has the advantage of keeping all students at the same starting point, with no relative advantage financially. However, it does limit venture ideas to a point where students have asked if they could take out more money. An option might be to consider allowing students to borrow more, at some risk/reward scenario, but still within reasonable amounts (ex. up to \$25 per student). Secondly, the formation of groups can be made more structured by assigning types of students into groups such as those with complementary strengths or those with similar interests. Both of these suggestions would involve significantly more coordination, which is a challenge in a course with a large number of students enrolled.

It is important to note at this point in the semester that the discussion of sustainability has been fairly limited, in regards to Mission Possible. Students are learning about concepts related to sustainability in the lecture and have been exposed to charity options for their business ventures, but very little discussion has been conducted on the value of corporate social responsibility and of community involvement, despite the students already making preliminary decisions on which

charities to engage with and how much to donate. This is done strategically, to allow students to make a decision free from what they might anticipate is the expected behaviour. This allows for a more meaningful debrief after Mission Possible is over as these early decisions were made from a position of relative inexperience. Furthermore, the choice of two decisions related to social sustainability (charity choice and donation promise) are considered to be meaningful decisions that first year students can make at this point in their experiential learning.

#### DURING MISSION POSSIBLE

The next five weeks of the semester is where all the experiences are gained. Each week, teams are expected to submit a weekly report detailing any activity from the past week including financials such as expenses incurred and revenue earned. In addition to the weekly reports, teams have the opportunity in seminar to discuss their progress with the instructor, while working through more of the BPW. This part of the semester focuses teams on identifying target segments and conducting an environmental scan of their industry, as well as deciding on their product/service details, marketing communications, operations and management structures. Specifically related to sustainability, the BPW asks specific questions that reference social and environmental impact such as:

- What considerations do you have for your social responsibility within the communities you are operating in? Do you plan to support community organizations and/or provide social supports to your employees, and if so, how?
- Will the business produce air contaminants, radiation or contaminated waste materials? Will the business use or produce toxic chemicals or hazardous materials? Will the business affect the health or safety of humans or animals? Will the business' environmental impact arouse public concerns?
- Will the business meet environmental standards and/or environmental legislation? If so, explain what level of standards are you hoping to maintain and how you might go about doing that.

The weekly reports track student progress and financial results are tallied each week and reported online. Instructors in the seminar are able to use these results to trigger further discussions with students about what is working and what is not. For example, students in the seminar may bring up difficulties with selling to customers beyond friends and family, which is a typical challenge most teams face after a few weeks. Fellow students may share their ideas on reaching new markets, such as using social media sites to promote their products or accessing local farmer's markets or similar venues. The main goal for instructors at this point in the semester is to encourage engagement and maintain a positive attitude, as many students begin to experience frustration with needing to adapt to unexpected

challenges with their ventures. Enactus also plays a role outside the classroom, by organizing workshops conducted by former students in Mission Possible, to help teams address their frustrations.

It is at this point in the experience that students start to gain an appreciation for the goodwill offered to them when they promote their charitable affiliation. Many students realize that customers are more willing to support their business when they realize a portion of the profits are being donated to a good cause. For the students, there is a variety of approaches to addressing this marketing opportunity, from a subtle reference in their promotions to redesigning their product/service to fit the same clientele that their charity appeals to. For example, one venture was donating to a mental health organization and sold succulent plants called 'Care Plants'. Their story was that by caring for their plant, they are helping people relieve the stress people experience on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, some teams address the environmental impact of their business by sourcing recyclable or biodegradable materials as part of their product or packaging. One venture was able to create a body scrub material using used coffee grinds donated by local coffee houses.

## POST MISSION POSSIBLE

As Mission Possible concludes, students are accountable for their final reporting and reconciling financial information. Final reporting involves a final reflection

submission by each student, discussing his or her successes and failures and what they learned from the experience. This is the main mechanism for learning from the project. In addition, students must reconcile their financial information by uploading to the course a copy of the tax receipt they received when they made their donation to their associated charity, and ensuring their profits are derived from the revenues less their expenses. As simple as this equation is, it has proven challenging for first year students to ensure their numbers balance and the subsequent donation amount is an appropriate amount based on their profit and donation promise. With all teams, a process involving Enactus and the instructors is in place to reconcile the financials, by checking the tax receipts submitted with the figures reported in the final weekly report. Any discrepancies are addressed directly with members of the team involved, over a period of a week following the final week of Mission Possible.

Students now turn their attention to completing their business proposals and video pitches which have been discussed throughout the semester. These two submissions emphasize how teams plan to continue their business further. Another point of reflection and learning takes place after the video pitches are submitted, as instructors question students about their business concept. In this exchange, instructors ask students about the sustainability of their business and specifically what role does giving to charity and pursuing environmental responsibility have in their future plans. Although at this point, it is conceptual and no longer consequential like during the start-up experience, students seem to take these

questions seriously and reference their actual experience in justifying their social and environmental objectives relative to their economic objectives.

Once all financial information is finalized, the teams are short-listed to compete in the celebration event in which top teams are invited to pitch live in front of a panel of local business leaders. The celebration event is organized by Enactus and is not associated with any academic grades but rather, promises top performing teams with additional exposure and networking opportunities with business and community leaders. For example, finalists may get the opportunity to sell their product in the university bookstore via a partnership established between the author and the university bookstore. The event is also an opportunity to showcase the impact made with the charity partners, where the final results are announced.

The top teams are invited to prepare a live eight-minute presentation, based upon how they would grow their venture beyond the five weeks. By this point in the semester, all students will have completed their business proposals and video pitch as part of the course, so this live pitch becomes less overwhelming as students adapt what they have done for the course. Other teams are also invited to attend the celebration to showcase their venture at booths around the venue, or just to cheer on their classmates. This event typically is well received with about a hundred people in attendance ranging from students, faculty and university administration. A small budget of approximately \$800 is set aside for catering

costs. No other expenses are incurred in the administration and organization of Mission Possible.

The winning team each semester is presented with the Mission Possible Champions trophy and are awarded with a lunch with the School of Business Dean and often are invited to represent the School of Business at subsequent events where there is an opportunity to showcase student success.

## THE SCALABILITY CHALLENGE

The scalability of embedding an experiential learning activity in a common core course at the first year level is one of the larger challenges faced with making sustainability relevant and part of a student's transformative education. In order to be successful with scaling this activity to engage hundreds of students at a time, support from a number of stakeholders is critical. Malach and Malach (2014) discuss a number of other recommendations to consider when including an entrepreneurship activity into a course such as planning the course outline carefully, being prepared to discuss student ideas and debriefing their subsequent successes and failures. They point out that as the class size increases, the complexity does as well. With a highly complex activity, the support from a number of stakeholders is recommend to achieve success.



Support from school administrators is important, to provide support and opportunity for these changes to thrive. The Dean and Associate Dean of the School of Business were supportive of the three year plan to redesign the course and integrate sustainability throughout the curriculum. For example, their support was helpful in securing changes with the Office of the Registrar in regards to the the scheduling format. As well, both the Dean and Associate Dean are guest speakers in the course welcoming all incoming students and delivering unique content related to the StrengthsFinder survey and entrepreneurship, respectively.

Support from faculty creates a team environment when considering proposed changes to the course and helps diversify the idea pool when discussing sustainability concepts to introduce. With this course, the author along with another key faculty member have been central to the changes made to the course, but a team of three other faculty and five teaching assistants have helped implement those changes. The size of this instructional team is ideal for coordinating the changes made to the course and engaging the students, particularly around Mission Possible. In effect, a smaller seminar team consisting of one instructor and one teaching assistant are responsible for engaging approximately 120 students per semester split among three seminar sections. These smaller seminar teams also act as a valuable channel for constant student feedback.

Support from student leaders such as Enactus helps provide a valuable engagement piece for the students enrolled in the course. Students have the

opportunity to approach their peers with questions that they might otherwise be too unsure of asking their instructors or communicate challenges they feel fellow students might better relate to. Since many students create ventures targeted at fellow students, feedback about the viability of their venture ideas from Enactus leaders is seen to be more valuable than from their instructor. Other student groups can potentially serve the same function as Enactus, such as Net Impact or an entrepreneurship-based student group on campus.

Lastly, support from charity partners is helpful in communicating the potential impact students can have on their community. When the charity partners come into the class to talk to students, students gain an appreciation for the work they do and understand beyond just a marketing message how donations will be used to make a difference. At the end of Mission Possible when the final results are tallied, students who make donations to a charity see their contribution combined with those of their classmates and realize the total impact that was generated. For many, this is a source of inspiration that being a student in a course can not only impact them but also have a positive impact on the lives of others in need.

## **MISSION POSSIBLE: RESULTS**

The results from Mission Possible have been overwhelming within the first two academic years it has been in place.

SEE APPENDIX B FOR TABLE 1. SUMMARY RESULTS

SEE APPENDIX B FOR TABLE 2. CHARITY DONATIONS

The summary results were beyond expectations and served as the main 'storyline' for the publicity generated from Mission Possible. The level of financial performance coupled with the notion that students were only given a five dollar loan to begin with, is a compelling story that has captured university, local and national attention. Mission Possible has been featured in numerous university publications showcasing student achievement, as well as in the local media as an example of entrepreneurship and philanthropy, and nationally as an innovation in the classroom. Most importantly, the foundation has been laid in the course that enables the School of Business to continue this activity every semester, providing both students and charity partners with an ongoing source of learning and social impact.

In addition to the overall success, it is important to examine the outcomes at the team and student level. In each semester, a single team is crowned the Mission Possible champion. In the first two semesters in which Mission Possible was conducted, the winning team was determined solely by their financial performance. As a result, the winning team in the fall 2013 semester was called 'Just Picture It' in which they ran a successful photography business, targeting weddings. They ended up generating over \$1500 in profit and donated 100% of it to charity. In the

winter 2014 semester, 'Purge that Rug' won by performing a carpet cleaning service, generated over \$2200 in profit and donated 85% to charity. In the next academic year, the process of determining the Mission Possible champion was changed. The top financially performing teams were shortlisted and invited to compete in a live pitch to a panel of judges, who awarded the Mission Possible trophy to the team who presented the most compelling business concept that involved economic, social and/or environmental impact. In the fall 2014 semester, 'Speed Demons Detailing' was crowned champion. They generated over \$1700 in profit and donated 50% to charity. Moreover, they presented an innovative business model targeting a niche in the car detailing industry while using environmentally conscious cleaning materials. Lastly, the winter 2015 semester champion was 'Bliss Fizz & Co.' They were the first product-based team to win and generated over \$1100 in profit, donated 85% to charity and created environmentally conscious bath and shower bombs tailored to women and men respectively.

To provide more insight into the team-level outputs, Table 3 breaks down financial outputs of teams across a number of categories.

**SEE APPENDIX B FOR TABLE 3. FINANCIAL OUTPUTS PER TEAM**

Over the course of 4 semesters, it appears that students are donating relatively less (percentage-wise) and increasing their expenses. It will be interesting to note

whether this trend continues and whether an optimal balance between donations given and profits kept will emerge. As well, it has been observed that more students are expressing an interest in continuing their business ventures after the semester is completed. In the winter 2015 semester, there were six teams that expressed an interest in pursuing their venture compared to the fall 2013 semester when no teams expressed an interest to continue. This will be important to track moving forward.

The student learning that took place, as a result of participating in Mission Possible, can be assessed through the final reflections they submitted as well as from the oral debrief at the end of the semester. The final reflections asked students to describe things they each learned, and what successes/challenges they experienced as part of Mission Possible. The oral debrief was conducted as a question and answer exchange based on the video pitches that were submitted. As part of this exchange, the question of what is a sustainable donation promise was asked to students.

Final reflections shared common topics such as insights on one's leadership capacity, entrepreneurial spirit and sustainable business practice. A sample of excerpts follows:

*'This experience has truly highlighted the importance of team composition and team intentions.'*

*'I can be a leader and not just a follower. I had never knew that about myself.'*

*'It was inspiring to know that I was capable of this type of endeavor.'*

*'I surprised myself by accomplishing something I had never done before.'*

*'I learned that there is some serious merit to having a sustainable business practice because when people see that one of your goals is to help the community they are way more likely to support you and that includes giving you their own money.'*

*'Management practice must embrace ethical decision making and create moral excellence. This is why we made sure our product was 100% eco-friendly.'*

The video question and answer period involved questions such as how students planned to grow their business and whether their donation promise and choice of charity was effective. Almost universally shared were student sentiment that if their ventures continued past the start-up experience that donation promises would have to be lowered to allow for reinvestment of profits to grow their business. More importantly, all students seemed to want to retain a donation promise, albeit a lower percentage. Many students cited revising their donation promises to anywhere between 1% and 25% and seeking a charity partner that would align well

with the business' objectives. This demonstration of corporate philanthropy is an example of a concept gained through experiential learning.

Despite the positive results thus far, there are some implications that need to be discussed. It is important to note that while a proportion of students succeed in this activity, there is a proportion of students who fail, or at least do not become as engaged in the activity. Due to the size of the student enrolment in the course, it is natural to expect some critical feedback from less than interested students. Those students tend to view the course as focused on entrepreneurship, and even though an individual student's experience might focus on accounting or marketing, they are less motivated to participate because they are not keen on entrepreneurship.

Another implication is the meaningful involvement of instructors in the course, namely the seminars. The seminars are very much about group discussion and facilitation, and less on teaching material during class. Fortunately, we have found instructors who care about the objectives of the course. We assign a teaching assistant to each instructor to assist with marking assignments, so that they can focus more of their time on the learning experience for their students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Mission Possible has transformed the university's Introduction to Business course (BUSN 201) and positioned it as an undergraduate cornerstone course. The

concept of an experiential learning activity is not new, but the scalability of this entrepreneurial activity is innovative as it can effectively integrate sustainability concepts appropriate for a first year student while allowing faculty to manage student engagement with a course enrollment of over 1000 students per academic year.

As Mission Possible continues to evolve within the context of a university course, several research questions have emerged which act as potential channels for future scholarship. Comparing the impact on learning outcomes of an 'extremely' experiential activity (Glick, 2013) such as Mission Possible, as opposed to other experiential learning activities such as case studies and simulations would be intriguing. The comparison could shed light on the value-added from pursuing Mission Possible and determining whether all the effort required to facilitate Mission Possible leads to improved student learning outcomes.

Additional, although the aggregate financial outputs of Mission Possible are positive, further analysis into the individual student can be explored including any relationship between individual characteristics and their Mission Possible experience. Individual characteristics may include academic performance within the course and their strengths as revealed from their StrengthsFinder survey. Mission Possible experiences can include perceptions and attitudes of their entrepreneurial successes and failures. Furthermore as existing research suggests (Bolinger and Brown, 2015; Bell, 2015; Kassean, Vanevenhoven, Liguori and



Winkel, 2015; Vasbinder and Koehler, 2015), entrepreneurial experiences may in turn help students develop more complex descriptions of their past performance, produce higher levels of engagement with their learning, and lead to increased interest in entrepreneurial careers. A longitudinal study examining student's critical thinking and entrepreneurial interest particularly related to social enterprise is of interest.

The role of student learning not only takes place among students enrolled in the course, but the students involved in the Enactus chapter also learn from their managerial and leadership contributions (Pittaway, Gazzard, Shore and Williamson, 2015; Munoz, Miller and Poole, 2016). Many of the Enactus student leaders were students in the course participating in Mission Possible, and decide to participate as an Enactus leader. They organize opportunities for them to pursue entrepreneurship which may have positive impact on their own student learning. Further research may examine how student leaders in Enactus benefit from their experience mentoring other student entrepreneurs.

The world needs innovative businesses to strengthen the economy, to improve communities and the people who live in them, and to champion the preservation of our environment. Mission Possible challenges students to do something they did not think they could accomplish. Starting a business venture and considering how it can become a sustainable business using a triple bottom line perspective is the mission at hand.



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## **APPENDIX A – COURSE SYLLABUS**

*See attached file.*



## APPENDIX B - TABLES

*Table 1. Mission Possible Outcomes and Results (across two academic years 2013/14 and 2014/15)*

	<b>Fall 2013</b>	<b>Winter 2014</b>	<b>Fall 2014</b>	<b>Winter 2015</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b># of students</b>	386	323	471	426	1662
<b># of teams</b>	83	75	111	97	380
<b>Avg # students/team</b>	4.7	4.3	4.2	4.4	4.4
<b>Total revenues (\$)</b>	31,722	41,172	62,877	50,698	187,946
<b>Total expenses (\$)</b>	5,397	6,571	15,087	13,474	40,053
<b>Total profits (\$)</b>	26,325	34,599	47,289	38,206	147,478
<b>Total donations (\$)</b>	22,930	31,643	34,146	27,664	119,090

*\* There are additional results for spring and summer sections of this course not reflected in the table above, but contribute to the total figures reported.*

*Table 2. Mission Possible Charity Donations (in the same time period)*

<b>Over \$15,000 donated</b>	<b>\$10,000-\$14,999 donated</b>
Dogs with Wings Assistance Dog Society	Elizabeth Fry Society of Edmonton
Stollery Children's Hospital Foundation	Hope Mission
Youth Empowerment and Support Services	iHuman Youth Society
<b>\$5,000-\$9,999 donated</b>	<b>Less than \$5,000 donated</b>
Autism Society of Edmonton Area	Alberta Cancer Institute
Enactus Student Entrepreneurship Fund	Boyle Street Community Services
Special Olympics Alberta	Make A Wish Foundation

Students' Association Food Bank	
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*Table 3. Mission Possible Financial Outputs (per team)*

	<b>Fall 2013</b>	<b>Winter 2014</b>	<b>Fall 2014</b>	<b>Winter 2015</b>
<b>Avg revenues (\$)</b>	382	549	566	523
<b>Avg expenses (\$)</b>	65	88	136	139
<b>Avg profits (\$)</b>	317	461	426	394
<b># of unprofitable teams</b>	1	0	3	2
<b>Avg donations (\$)</b>	276	422	308	285
<b>Avg donations (%)</b>	87	85	73	77
<b># of teams donating 100%</b>	57	47	44	39