

Social Responsibility: A New Graduate Program

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In July of 1997 the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities Board approved a new Masters program in Social Responsibility. As the person who initiated and titled the program, I thought it would be useful to write a brief paper on my vision of the program. This program draws on the course work and expertise of four programs across two colleges. The four programs are: Sociology, Human Relations, American Studies, and Women's Studies.

Background of the SR Concept

The concept of social responsibility would not have emerged with its current level of importance if social conditions, as pertain to the vast majority of people in the United States and around the world, were not worsening. Disruption and destruction of human and non-human cultures and habitats have rapidly accelerated with the acceleration of the globalization of the economy. Massive destruction to our environment and corresponding natural resources brings each generation of nearly every species closer to being the last. Poorly regulated genetic engineering and experimentation pose serious threats to even greater destabilization of our ecosystem while claiming to do the opposite. Uncontrolled technological development and utilization literally displace thousands of people for the benefit of a relatively small select group of corporate stock holders. This displacement starts with the removal of people from the work force, but subsequently results in their removal from their place in the community and society in general. Uncontrolled capital investment and divestment world wide, under the guise of "free trade", continues to rapidly increase stratification in the United States and around the world. International business councils, not elected by the millions of people they "represent", are systematically usurping the sovereignty of nations, local constitutions and corresponding legal protection, and the right of people to self govern through democratic practices. All of these forces contribute to serious imbalances in the many affected local communities, resulting in noxious social conditions of scapegoating, intergroup competition, hatred, and violence.

What is Social Responsibility?

Social responsibility, as originally selected for the name of this program, has two main dimensions. The first dimension is that of social causation. Who and what are responsible for the most serious social problems in society? What are the links between the various social problems? How do macro and micro levels of social reality interact to facilitate and maintain these links? What social psychological phenomena motivate decision-making leading to macro global social problems, which then filter back down into the micro world of interpersonal interaction and consequences for individuals? The study of this dimension starts with the assumption that there are serious social problems, and that we can identify them within and across cultural and environmental systems. Social theory and social research are the primary tools of this dimension. The second dimension of social responsibility is remedy. What is each person's responsibility toward the creation of viable solutions to social problems?

This is the practice component of social responsibility. It is heavily grounded in social change agency, but not entirely. Sometimes social practice requires preservation skills?albeit rarely in a manner completely independent of change. This dimension has numerous components in United States cultures and societies, as well as around the world. We can start by identifying formal and informal mechanisms of social change, which allows us to differentiate institutions such as the political, religious, economic, educational, media, military, and criminal justice systems from informal familial and peer socialization processes?as well as grass roots activism and social movements. Remedies can come from working within, around, and against any and all formal institutions, and can involve socially acceptable or unacceptable activities (e.g., civil disobedience). They may take the form of eliminating laws or creating them; elevating social conscientiousness, and mobilizing people into social action. There is not one simple solution or approach to the many complex social problems of the world.

Social remedies are not value neutral??any more than social problems are value neutral. Remedies are superimposed on a backdrop of core cultural or cross?cultural values and beliefs. This backdrop is supported with ever evolving, as well as long standing (e.g., indigenous), corresponding knowledge about the importance of all forms of life and the relative peacefulness of their coexistence/ interdependence. The forces that create social problems are based on a very bold application of presumed "knowledge" about the world. This knowledge is a support system for beliefs about who is entitled to what, who is superior and who is inferior, and why. Social responsibility requires social scientists to recover from their self consciousness about value neutrality. While we have been believing and teaching that we cannot attempt to address social problems without risking "inappropriate" imposition of our values on others, those in positions of power and control have not been reluctant or bashful about the quick application of whatever "information" they can attain that will further their personal interests. If there is to be any hope of addressing the many serious social problems we face, social scientists must follow their example and boldly apply the wealth of knowledge we have accumulated over the years.

The Masters of Science in Social Responsibility Program at St. Cloud State University was approved by the MNSCU board in July of 1997 and already has approximately fifty students enrolled. Some students are in the program to advance in their existing positions. Other graduates will find appointments to positions in institutions looking for people who understand the interrelationship of the many problems facing social organizations and communities today. Some of these positions will be with government or government? funded agencies. Others will be with nonprofit organizations and activist organizations involved in advocacy or social change work. Some may find jobs in the more progressive comers of the private for?profit sector working as diversity consultants/ directors/ managers, etc. We invite anyone interested in the program to contact one of the co?directors: John Alessio in the Sociology Department at 320?255?4739 or Semya Hakim in the Human Relations Department at 320?255?3264.

NOTE: Co-directors and phones are now different.