

What Matters—and Why

Matters

Community

**Advancing
Energy Equity**
in Michigan

Engagement

**Tackling
Sustainability**
in the Banking Sector

Research & Thought Leadership

**Organizing
Sustainably**
What Business Leaders
Need to Know Now



FREDERICK A. & BARBARA M.
ERB INSTITUTE

Dear Erb Community,

As we bring you this inaugural issue of *Material*, we want to pause and reflect on what connects us all. At the heart of this community—across roles, industries, backgrounds, and stages of life—is a shared commitment to the Erb Institute’s mission of creating a more sustainable world through the power of business.

Over the past year, our community has seen extraordinary ideas take shape, demonstrations of bold leadership, and a renewed commitment to purpose. None of this happened by chance. It results from your dedication, creativity, and willingness to challenge convention while remaining grounded in collaboration and action.

We are deeply grateful for this collective energy. In a world that often feels uncertain, the Erb community is a steadfast source of clarity and momentum. It reminds us that hope is not naïve—it is necessary. And it thrives when it’s backed by knowledge, systems thinking, shared purpose, and collective action.

This issue celebrates that forward motion. Inside, you’ll find inspiring stories of creativity and innovation—internal change agents who are redefining business as usual, students who are challenging the status quo, scholars whose work is informing decision-makers at the highest levels, and alumni who are committed to supporting and mentoring the next generation of Erbers. These stories are not just impressive—they’re instructive. They offer us glimpses of what’s possible when purpose and pragmatism meet.

But beyond the features and insights, this publication is also an invitation: to continue learning, questioning, and connecting. To embrace both the urgency of the challenges we face and the long view that real change requires. To remember that transformation is rarely linear, but always worthwhile.

Now more than ever, we know the road ahead will demand more from all of us—more courage, more creativity, more humility. But we also know that we are not starting from scratch. We are standing on a strong foundation, built by years of rigorous thinking, meaningful partnerships, and a deep belief that business can and must be a driver of positive change.

So as you read, we hope you feel encouraged. Energized. Reconnected to the mission that brought you into the Erb community in the first place. This community is growing—not just in size, but in depth, influence, and vision. And with that growth comes responsibility—and promise.

Thank you for being part of this journey. We’re proud to share this moment with you, and even more excited about the future we are building—together.

With appreciation and optimism,

Melissa Zaksek, Managing Director

Charlene Zietsma, Faculty Director

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Education at Erb goes beyond the classroom. From interdisciplinary courses to immersive learning opportunities, we equip students with the tools, knowledge, and networks to lead in business and sustainability. Here, we showcase the programs, partnerships, and student-led initiatives that bring this vision to life.

Internship Funding

Hands-on experience is essential to building a career at the intersection of business and sustainability.

That's why the Erb Institute proudly invested over \$66,000 in summer internship funding in 2024, enabling nine dual-degree students to pursue purpose-driven roles that align with their long-term goals. This support allowed students to contribute meaningfully to organizations like mHUB, ARPA-E, JLL, MI-HQ, Goodwill, Hawthorne Food Ventures, and MARS Inc., while building deep expertise in areas such as life cycle assessment, circularity, greenhouse gas accounting, sustainable food systems, and impact investing. By removing financial barriers, we ensure our students are free to follow their purpose, deepen their skill sets, and confront real-world sustainability challenges—no trade-offs required.

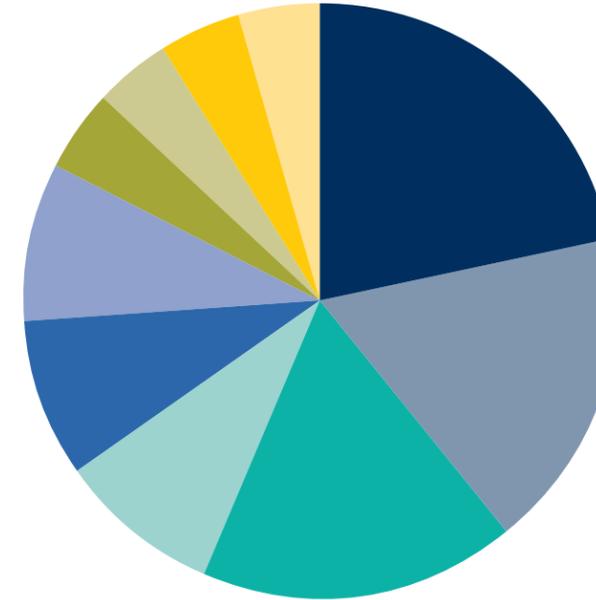


Career Outcomes

Dual Degree MBA/MS

Graduates of the Erb Institute's MBA/MS dual-degree program go on to pursue dynamic, purpose-driven careers at the intersection of business and sustainability.

With training in both strategy and science, they are uniquely equipped to lead in a wide range of industries and sectors. From corporate sustainability roles to climate tech start-ups, consulting, and mission-driven organizations, Erb students are driving impact across the globe.



Here's a snapshot of where our class of 2024 is working.

Industry	Percentage
Consulting	21.7%
Energy	17.4%
Finance	17.4%
Consumer Packaged Goods	8.7%
Technology	8.7%
Other	8.7%
Environmental Service	4.3%
Food & Ag	4.3%
Investment Banking	4.3%
Manufacturing	4.3%



Sustainability Speaker Series

At the Erb Institute, we believe that learning should extend far beyond the classroom—and our co-curricular speaker series continues to be a cornerstone of that commitment.

During the 2024–2025 academic year, we hosted 15 dynamic speakers to explore the evolving landscape of business and sustainability. Featuring speakers from industry leaders like DTE Energy, Accenture, Blue Conduit, Guidehouse, Kellanova, and ENGIE Impact, the series delivered practical insights, sparked critical dialogue, and provided a space for students to connect with professionals working at the forefront of change. More than just events, these sessions help equip our students with the tools, networks, and perspectives needed to lead with impact from day one.





Beyond the Classroom

Erb on the Road Brings Business Sustainability to Life

At the Erb Institute, we believe that sustainability can't be fully understood from behind a desk. It needs to be seen, questioned, felt. That's the ethos behind Erb on the Road, an immersive course that takes Erb Institute dual-degree MBA/MS students out of the classroom and into the communities and conversations shaping the future of business and sustainability.

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Erb on the Road is designed to introduce our incoming MBA/MS students to the complexities of business sustainability in practice. By taking this course out of the classroom, Erbers gain a more nuanced appreciation of what it means to drive change at a systems level. And it's a great opportunity for us to introduce our students to Michigan's unique and exciting innovation and economic opportunities.

Melissa Zaksek
Managing Director, Erb Institute

Led by Erb Managing Director Melissa Zaksek, Erb on the Road combines classroom dialogue with on-the-ground exposure. Over the course of several days, students travel across Michigan, meeting with nonprofit leaders, community organizers, corporate change-makers, and policy advocates. The result? A hands-on learning experience that's as challenging as it is transformative.

The course has evolved since its launch in 2019. While the first offerings focused on companies' environmental and social impact, the program has since explored questions around broader stakeholder-informed business sustainability decision-making. In recent years, Erb on the Road experiences have included in-depth examinations of environmental justice in Detroit, deep dives into rural utility-scale renewable energy siting, and explorations of the role of corporations in shaping sustainability policy. Students are presented with the opportunity to engage with leaders tackling issues in various sectors—public, private, NGO, and research—connecting academic theory with the complex realities playing out across the state.

In 2024, the itinerary included a session with community advocate Ashley Rudzinski of the Great Lakes Business Network, whose work on the controversial Line 5 pipeline brought to light the power of narrative in advocacy while challenging students to consider the interplay between economics and environmental protection more deeply. Students also met with researchers like Sarah Mills from the University of Michigan, whose analysis of property tax policy and integrated resource plans prompted new ways of thinking about renewable energy and rural equity.

Building a Learning Community

Alongside the professional exposure and intellectual challenge, Erb on the Road plays another essential role: It helps build community among the incoming Erb cohort. The shared experience of learning, traveling, and reflecting together accelerates connection and camaraderie—laying the foundation for peer support, collaboration, and a sense of belonging that lasts well beyond the course.

The immersive format gives students the chance not just to observe but also to process together: Long bus rides lead to impromptu debates, shared meals spark new ideas, and evening debriefs make space for vulnerability, perspective shifts, and reflection.

Grappling With Complexity

Erb on the Road isn't meant to provide easy answers—it's designed to surface difficult questions. The course challenges students to sit with complexity, recognize competing priorities, and reflect on what it really takes to lead change across systems.

And that's exactly the point. Erb on the Road is about seeing the intersection of business, sustainability, and justice not as abstract ideals, but as urgent and interconnected challenges that demand new kinds of leadership.

Erb on the Road challenges our students to consider the complex opportunities, trade-offs, and impacts that business sustainability leaders must take into account in their decision-making. These decisions cannot be made in a vacuum—community interests and unintended consequences must be considered, and hidden costs and benefits must be anticipated. Taking our students to the places where these decisions are made—against the backdrop of the stunning state of Michigan—helps them imagine themselves in these roles in the future.



Erb Fellows Program

Erb Undergraduate Fellows Help Rethink the Role of Business in Society

Since the Erb Institute's Undergraduate Fellows program was launched in 2020, the program has been bringing together a community of undergraduate students who want something different from their education: the skills and experiences that will help them drive social, environmental, and economic change. The program is the first of its kind.

The Erb Undergraduate Fellows include a mix of Michigan Ross BBA and Program in the Environment students. While all want to see business as an actor for good, only about half of them are pursuing BBAs—and this mix of students helps reframe the role of business in society, says Erb Undergraduate Fellows Program Faculty Director Sara Soderstrom.

Students with a traditional business education may think about how to solve a sustainability problem one way, but someone in a different discipline, like engineering, will approach it another way. "If you're bringing in this design lens, how does that shift the way that we're thinking? We have people who are in ecology, economics, environmental studies—they have different ways of both seeing the problem and imagining the solution," Soderstrom says.

"When they come together, that's where we get this power of diversity, of bringing in all of the different perspectives so that we have a better whole—a better understanding of what is wrong from all of these different perspectives, and more options of how we might think about solving it," she says.

Erb Fellows are interdisciplinary. Program in the Environment students take natural sciences and humanities classes, for example. Fellows who take these classes "bring in storytelling and the arts—and mechanisms for translating the stories of the work that we do to others," Soderstrom says.

The program currently includes about 120 undergrads, about half juniors and half seniors, which seems to be a good number, Soderstrom says. It allows the students to feel like they know each other and to contribute to the community, which would be difficult if the cohort were larger, she says.

Also, the group is large enough that smaller cohorts form based on industry or skills, so no one feels alone in their interests. Multiple students want to go into fashion, manufacturing, or energy, for example.

The Erb Fellows program is designed to deliver business and sustainability education, community, and co-curriculars, which are shaped by students' interests. Examples include a workshop on carbon reporting with Erb alumni, skills-building workshops, and bringing Erb Fellows to local businesses.

Erb Fellows' interests also shape the curriculum, as classes are introduced that appeal to Ross and non-Ross students. Jennifer Brenton, in a new faculty role, is teaching three classes that connect in different ways with business and sustainability, as well as a class on campus sustainability, which provides project-based mini consulting opportunities to make the U-M campus more sustainable, Soderstrom says. And these classes have wait lists. The business, sustainability, and justice class that Soderstrom launched with support from Erb has also been full every year it's been offered.

Beginning in the 2025–2026 academic year, leadership of the Erb Undergraduate Fellows program will transition to Brenton, faculty in the Program in the Environment and former Erb Institute Postdoctoral Fellow. She will step into the role of Faculty Director, bringing her teaching experience, research background, and deep commitment to interdisciplinary education to the Erb Fellows community.

"I'm excited to build on the strong foundation that Sara and the students have created," Brenton says. "The Fellows program is such a unique space—where students from different backgrounds come together around a shared commitment to sustainability. I see my role as supporting and expanding that community, and continuing to help students connect their learning with opportunities for impact."

The connections that Erb Undergraduate Fellows continue to make strengthen the Erb community, the ways the university addresses sustainability, and the future of sustainability in business.



Ross Climate Week 2025

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Not everyone has the ability to do a dual degree MBA/MS, yet everyone should understand the tangible ways we, as future business leaders, can engage with climate change. I want my peers to feel comfortable asking about sustainability initiatives, assessing the downstream effects of any changes, and evaluating business decisions more holistically. By combining U-M's resources and Ross alumni expertise, Ross Climate Week encourages students to become change agents within their organizations.

Rena Lahn
MBA/MS '25

Climate Week at Michigan Ross is a week-long series of lectures, panels, and workshops designed to upskill Ross business students on sustainability topics pertinent to their future careers.

This was the third annual Ross Climate Week, specifically focusing on the intersection of sustainability with traditional business functions. The sessions this year included:

- Climate Change 101
- Climate Tech Entrepreneurship Panel
- Responsible Sourcing Panel
- Environmental Finance and Impact Investing Lecture
- Emerging Technologies for Net Zero Lecture
- Emerging ESG and Climate Reporting Lecture
- Every Job is a Climate Job Panel

The planning team for this year's Ross Climate Week consisted of six Erb Institute dual-degree students: Rena Lahn, MBA/MS '25, Joshua Phan-Gruber, MBA/MS '25, MacKensy King, MBA/MS '26, Radhika Handa, MBA/MS '26, Maithilee Kanthi, MBA/MS '26, and Katelyn Parsons, MBA/MS '27.

Michigan Climate Venture

First of Its Kind



Andrew Haeger
MBA/MS '25
MCV Co-Director of External Relations



Marcus Missirlian
MBA/MS '26
MCV Co-Director of External Relations

Michigan Climate Venture (MCV), launched in 2021 and funded by the Erb Institute, is the first student-led climate-specific venture fund at U-M. Housed in U-M's School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS), the multi-disciplinary program—open to graduate students across U-M—centers around a climate tech investment fund. Gautam Kaul, the Robert G. Rodkey Collegiate Professor of Business Administration and Professor of Finance at the Ross School of Business, serves as the faculty advisor to the program.

MCV's mission is ambitious, but straightforward: Combat climate change by developing the next generation of climate tech leaders and investing in high-potential solutions.

Erb students and MCV Co-Directors of External Relations Marcus Missirlian '26 and Andrew Haeger '25 shared their insights and experiences with us.

Andrew and Marcus, thanks for getting us started with a brief overview of the MCV program.

Andrew: MCV began as a collaboration between students who felt motivated to transform what they were learning through the Erb dual-degree program into action and hands-on experience. Through MCV, students are not only developing themselves professionally, but are also making an impact on companies by helping to advance technologies that, in turn, will have an impact on climate.

Marcus: At its core, MCV is an action-based class in the form of a fund. Members are investing in real companies, doing real due diligence, sourcing real, impactful start-ups that align with our thesis. We have four different focus areas within climate tech: mobility, agriculture, materials, and circular economy. Over the course of a year, we source companies, screen them to winnow them down, and then do a deeper due diligence process on a handful of our favorites. Finally, we vote whether to invest in one to three start-ups by writing \$25,000 to \$50,000 checks.

This all goes on within the structure of a class where folks from different programs around U-M bring together different levels and kinds of expertise. The end goal is not only to give people real-world experience as climate VCs, but also to build valuable networks for our long-term professional careers.

I'm likely going down the operator path. I want to build climate tech stuff—specifically decarbonized infrastructure—and Andrew wants to be on the VC side. We're both coming out of relatively structured institutional investing backgrounds with various other roles since, and have maybe a little more background in investing than the average member. But the fund is structured so anybody can get up to speed. They can come in with no background, get a flavor of everything going on, and then within this class, interact with other folks who have the expertise they need.

How do you define “climate tech”? What kinds of technologies does it encompass?

Andrew: It all started with “clean tech,” which was built around energy and infrastructure. It earned this moniker in the early 2000s, and basically focused on investments in wind and solar. But as understanding of climate evolved, that definition expanded to be “climate tech,” which is “everything under the sun,” literally, that impacts both climate and sustainability.

Marcus: Climate tech falls on a light green to dark green spectrum. There are incremental changes that we can make in terms of operational things—something as simple as turning the lights off when you leave the room, or warming a building at a more optimal time. A shade darker may be installing more efficient appliances. But dark green involves deploying deep decarbonization infrastructure—which means that the infrastructure does not emit carbon at all. It's not about capturing the carbon later; it means that the carbon is just not there. This is the stuff I find super interesting—the opportunity to deploy new kinds of chemistries, materials, and technologies. The company that I'm working with now, Sublime Systems, is doing this. They use an electrolytic process to make cement without the emissions.

Andrew: That's what's exciting about all of this. We're at the forefront of new technologies. There's so much research and development, investment, time, and mental capacity directed towards solving these complicated problems. It's encouraging to see so many companies rolling out innovative technologies today.

Tell us about one of the important skills learned through the MCV program.

Marcus: As a venture investor, or in any role, the skill of how to ask good questions is fundamental to what we're trying to teach.

In my previous investing career in real estate, you could think it's simple: four walls and a roof. But there's always something fatal in one of these contracts. For example, let's say in the '60s, you gave up rights on half of your land to the utility company to potentially build a transmission line. And now you're trying to get this one retired dude on the phone to release that easement so the deal works.

You never learn about those issues by asking, “Hey, what are the problems with the deal?” Instead, you ask a rainbow of questions. And then one person says just the right thing that leads you down the rabbit hole to find them.

That's really what we're trying to teach, and you only learn that through experience. Having a sandbox to play in where we can make mistakes is really important—so that later, when we can't make mistakes, we've got some experience to lean on.

What do you personally feel holds the greatest value in the program?

Andrew: Post MBA, it can be difficult to pursue a VC career because the qualities and skills that land jobs are mostly acquired beyond degrees and classes. They're earned through the experience, capability, and knowledge gained while performing the functions of a VC. Which begs the question: How do you get that first experience?

MCV gives you that kind of catalytic experience—by practicing, developing, and building the skill set you need to launch your career.

Marcus: When I was looking at grad schools, I picked U-M for Erb's dual-degree program, but soon after, I was doubly excited to find the MCV program. So, for me, it's been huge—one of the best experiences I've had in my educational career, and easily the best that I've had at grad school.

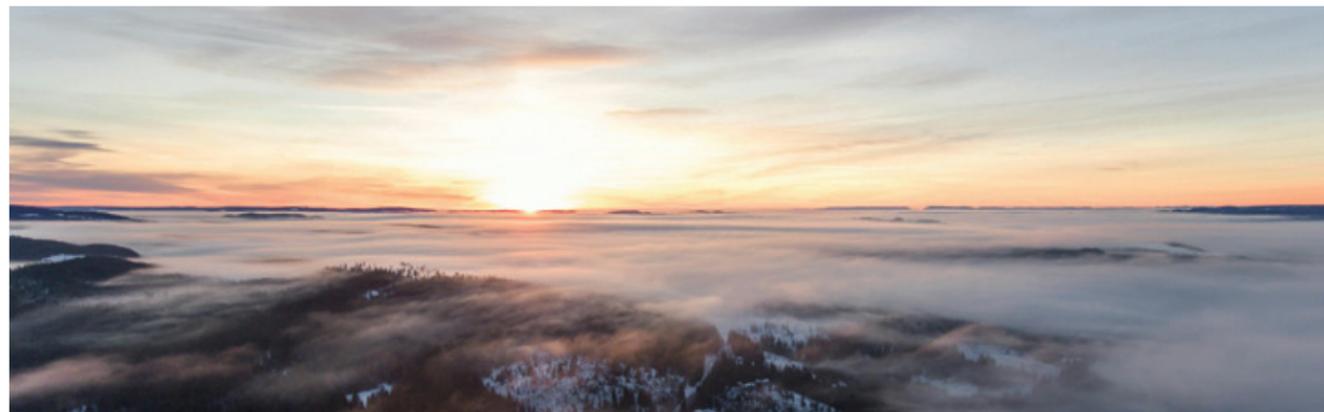
What's the best way to get involved with MCV?

Andrew: If you are a student looking at SEAS, Ross, the Erb dual degree—or any other grad programs at U-M where these are objectives that you care about, check out our website, and reach out to us.

If you are an alum who is interested in propelling the program forward with some sort of donation, Marcus and I are here to work with you. Our effort to scale the impact we have can succeed—and at a greater pace—with more capital.

Finally, if you're interested in this space and want to be involved as an advisor, a board member—or have subject matter expertise, wish to collaborate, or share opportunities, thanks for helping us to build that network. There are a lot of ways to get involved, and all of us here at MCV welcome your interest.

- michiganclimateventure.com
- Leadership:** michiganclimateventure@umich.edu
- Andrew Haeger:** ahaeger@umich.edu
- Marcus Missirlian:** mjmissir@umich.edu



Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Stories from the Erb Co-Presidents

The Erb Institute community supports, challenges, and uplifts its members as they navigate the intersection of business and sustainability. Within this community, the Student Advisory Board (SAB) plays a vital leadership role. Composed of passionate and engaged dual-degree students, SAB exists to strengthen the Erb experience—academically, professionally, and socially.



Students



Hillary McKenzie
MBA/MS '25
Co-President of Erb SAB



Sophie Geoghan
MBA/MS '25
Co-President of Erb SAB

SAB members serve as liaisons between the student body and the institute, offering feedback, organizing events, and championing initiatives that enhance student life. From orientation to graduation, SAB helps create the connective tissue that makes Erb more than just a program—it makes it a home. As co-presidents, Hillary McKenzie and Sophie Geoghan have led this work with heart and intention, carrying forward a tradition of leadership that is rooted in community. In the reflections below, they share what this role has meant to them, what they've learned, and what they'll take with them as they move into their next chapters beyond the University of Michigan and the Erb Institute.

What has been your favorite part of your Erb experience?

Hillary: The most impactful aspect of the Erb program for me has been the deeply supportive and interconnected community. The willingness of my peers and the students in the classes ahead of me to share their experiences played a crucial role in helping me understand different possibilities within the sustainability field and ultimately clarifying the direction I wanted to take as I launched my career.

Another favorite experience was Erb Returns, which took place during my first and last year. During my first year, coming into the program relatively new to sustainability, the opportunity to connect with Erb alumni was formative. Their insights into diverse career paths directly influenced the choices I made as I began to shape my own professional trajectory. Seeing many of those same alumni again during my third-year Erb Returns was a completely different experience, where those conversations took on a new depth and relevance. Despite not being in classes together simultaneously, there was still that strong sense of familiarity and shared Erb identity.

Sophie: I agree, I have felt so supported by the community at each step. Whether it's trying to find a GSI position or determining which full-time role is the best fit after graduation, there's always an Erber willing to chat about their experience. Moving to a new state is always daunting. From the very first event in September of my first year, an orientation dinner with speeches from faculty and students, my partner and I immediately felt like we were part of a fun, supportive, and active community.

What made you want to become co-presidents of the Erb SAB?

Sophie: The Erb SAB plans events, coordinates major programming like coaching and camping, and helps students with career and academics. I absolutely loved Erb camping and can't wait for this year's. My Erb coach had long chats during my first year, and she helped me make sense of which of the wide array of opportunities I wanted to pursue. SAB has been a huge part of my experience, so I wanted to support SAB in my last year at Erb.

Hillary: I was on SAB my first two years and saw how this team can really shape the Erb community. My decision to pursue the co-president role stemmed from a desire to contribute more actively to shaping the Erb student experience. I benefited immensely from the Erb community and the dedication of student leaders who came before me. I felt a strong sense of responsibility to give back and help elevate the program for my peers.

What's been your favorite part of serving as co-presidents?

Sophie: There have been many fun parts of serving as president. I think my favorite was our semi-annual event "What's Brewing." Students and staff collaborate and brainstorm how to make the student experience better. I was inspired by the ideas that both students and staff brought to the event, and think it's an excellent way for the institute to stay connected with the daily lives of students. I loved seeing the ideas and initiatives written on whiteboards around the Ross classroom.

Hillary: I second What's Brewing—it's been deeply rewarding to amplify the voices of our peers and act as a link between peers and the Erb staff and faculty. Witnessing positive changes emerge from student feedback and advocacy has been incredibly fulfilling. I also really valued the collaborative synergy I experienced working alongside Sophie and the rest of SAB. Our strengths balanced each other well, and it created a creative, energizing environment to lead in.

What lessons will you carry into your next chapter?

Sophie: Whether it's at Erb Returns, chatting with alumni, talking shop at the Jug, or reaching out to an alum and chatting on Zoom, it's been so helpful to be able to get experienced perspectives on questions about different industries, roles, etc. I've learned from this experience how important it is to reach out when I have questions or don't know what to ask and want someone's perspective on a totally new issue. In the next chapter, I hope to maintain the relationships I've built with my peers and alumni and continue to reach out to Erbers throughout my career.

Hillary: One of the most meaningful takeaways from my time at Erb is the understanding that leadership is as much about creating space for others as it is about stepping up yourself. It's about listening, building trust, and shaping communities where people feel seen and supported. As I move into this next chapter, I hope to carry that forward, continuing to lead with purpose while staying grounded in the kind of community Erb modeled so well. I don't see these relationships as something I'm leaving behind, but rather as a foundation I'll keep building on—through mentorship, collaboration, and showing up for others the way so many Erbers have shown up for me.





What are Impact Projects?

Impact Projects are the signature action-based learning opportunity of the Erb Institute. Erb staff partners with businesses and nonprofits to scope high-impact projects that will both help them meet business goals and provide our students with valuable hands-on learning experiences. Past partner-led Impact Projects have been sourced from companies such as Amazon, Lime, Panera, and Carhartt.



Impact Project

Advancing Energy Equity in Michigan

An Analysis for the State's Largest Electric Energy Provider

Energy equity is a critical concern in Michigan. Electric companies face myriad challenges to meet modern energy demands, including increasing reliability in the face of extreme weather and meeting policy targets, such as those outlined in the MI Healthy Climate Plan, to generate electricity from renewable sources.



Chelsea Silber
MBA/MS '26

Situated amid all these challenges and industry shifts is the need for the energy transition to be just and equitable. Energy equity is defined by the American Council for an Energy-Efficient Economy (ACEEE) as “policies and programs that are informed by the community’s input and designed to meet the needs of all individuals.” They must “be based on the principle that each action taken must not deepen, and should reduce social, environmental, or economic inequalities.”

The Michigan Public Service Commission outlined energy equity, in the form of assessing equity and justice considerations of communities within service areas, as a requirement in approving Consumers Energy’s 2024 payment rate structure. With the energy company seeking approval annually for rate structures, the need to take action and build community-informed equity initiatives was urgent.

To meet Consumers Energy’s needs in this area, Undergraduate Erb Fellow Andrew van Baal (BA/MS '26) and Erb dual-degree student Chelsea Silber (MBA/MS '26) were recruited via an Erb Impact Project to assess economic and environmental justice across the state, with a focus on energy issues. Over the summer of 2024, they built a justice-centered engagement framework and conducted outreach and interviews with elected officials, community leaders, neighborhood organizers, and tribal nations. These interviews sought to determine how communities currently perceived and/or worked with Consumers Energy to achieve community goals, and how processes and relations can be improved to move toward community justice and self-determined sustainable futures.

Andrew and Chelsea also connected with experts at the University of Michigan to guide their project. These included Liesl Clark, Director of Climate Action and Engagement at the School for Environment and Sustainability (SEAS). She is the former director of the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy, and lead author of the statewide MI Healthy Climate Plan. They also spoke with Sarah Mills, a professor at SEAS and the Taubman School of Architecture and Urban Planning. She directs the Center for EmPowering Communities at the Graham Sustainability Institute and conducts research on the perceptions of renewable energy siting in rural communities in Michigan. Additional expertise from the university was derived from the Ford School of Public Policy Center for Local, State, and Urban Policy, as well as the Energy Equity Project at SEAS. All these resources allowed for the project to be grounded in emerging policy, science, and validated methods of just community engagement.



Andrew van Baal
BA/MS '26

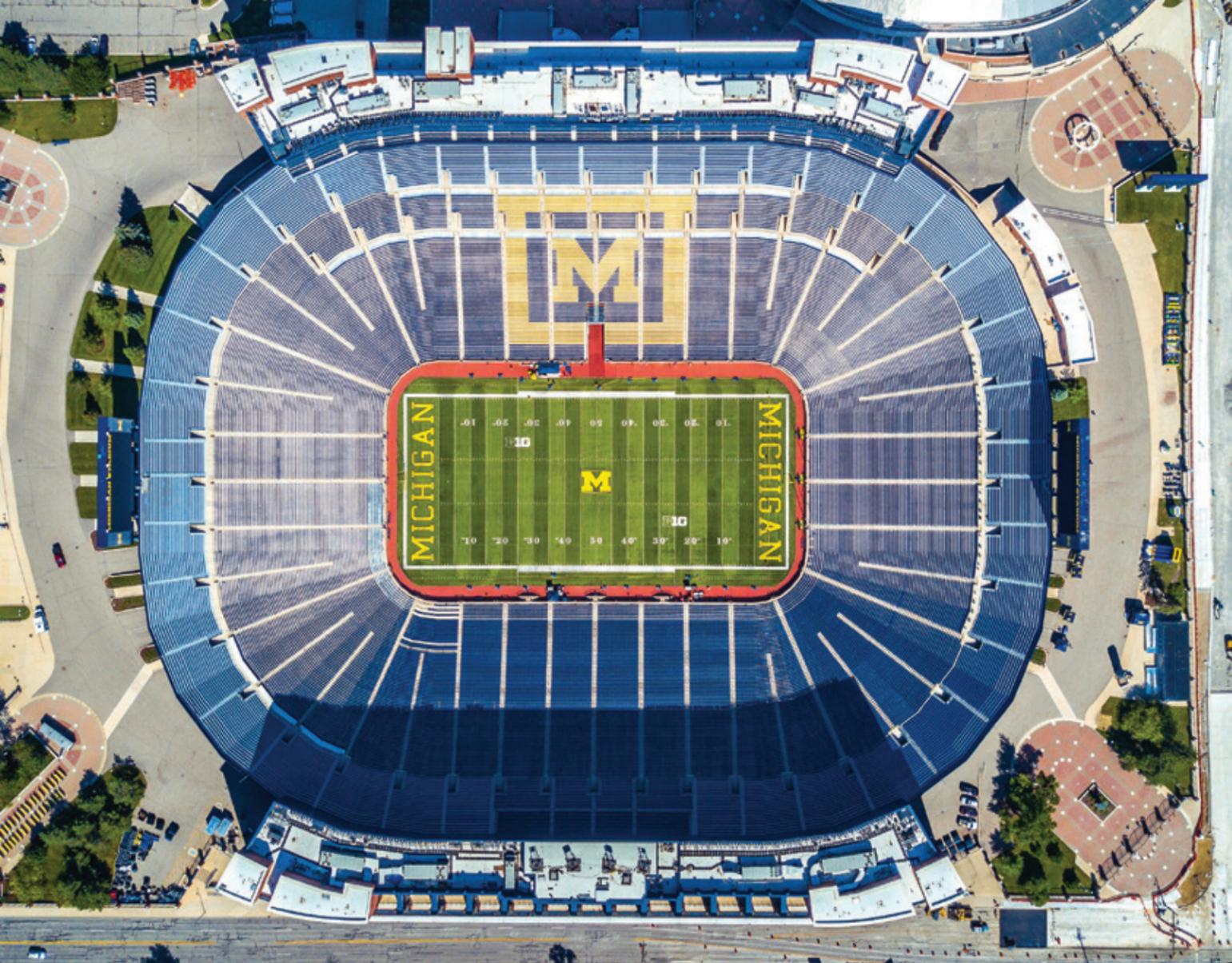
Andrew and Chelsea presented their findings in an economic and environmental justice landscape analysis to executives and community affairs managers at the utility’s headquarters in Jackson, Michigan, in late July. They received positive responses from all attendees and were assured that their work would directly inform the company’s community relations and equity strategies moving forward.

Chelsea says about the experience, “As students concentrating in sustainable systems at the University of Michigan’s School for Environment and Sustainability, this project reinforced the complex webs of energy equity. It became clear that addressing energy equity requires a systems-based approach, considering interconnected factors such as food security, educational opportunities, clean water, and housing.”



It was immensely fascinating to see how energy providers are adapting to an ever-changing regulatory landscape that appears to be directed by equity and justice considerations. Talking with folks on the ground about the issues they are facing, and elevating those honestly to Consumers was the most rewarding experience for me. I hope Consumers Energy can take further action with our findings to extend community empowerment initiatives beyond state compliance.

Andrew van Baal



From the Big House to Big Impact

Erb Fellows Drive Sustainability in Michigan Athletics

Sustainability and sports might seem like an unlikely duo—but at the University of Michigan, they’re proving to be a powerful team.

Students

Over the past two years, Erb Undergraduate Fellows have engaged with Michigan Athletics to tackle a unique challenge: What does it take to make college sports more sustainable? The answer, it turns out, is both complex and full of possibility. From analyzing greenhouse gas emissions to engaging fans and vendors, these students are helping reimagine what sustainability looks like in one of the university’s most high-profile arenas.

And now, the project has grown into something even bigger: a full-fledged course offered through the Program in the Environment (PitE), giving more students the chance to get hands-on experience at the intersection of sport and sustainability.

Taking the Field for Climate Action

It all started in 2022, when C.Y. Cheng (Erb Undergraduate Fellow '22 and former student-athlete on the University of Michigan men’s soccer team) launched an Erb Impact Project focused on Michigan Athletics. With mentorship from Professor Sara Soderstrom and support from a dedicated student team of undergraduate fellows, Abigail Williams '23, Chloe Valentino '24, Zachary Marmet '23, Julia Kaplan '23, and Zane Jones '22, C.Y. helped lead an analysis of U-M Athletics’ Scope 1 and 2 emissions—from fuel use in campus vehicles to the energy powering iconic venues like the Big House. They even developed a Tableau dashboard to visualize their findings and make future tracking easier.

The team quickly identified a bigger opportunity: Scope 3 emissions. These include things like travel, purchasing, and waste—areas that are harder to measure, but often make up the bulk of an organization’s climate footprint.

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We’re hoping to get structures embedded in Michigan Athletics to help them meet the U-M and broader sustainability goals. And we’re leveraging this work to help students connect their academics and athletics in a way that makes both better.

Sara Soderstrom

In 2023–2024, a second group of Erb Fellows took on that challenge: Ashley Dukellis '25, Natalie DeSarbo '25, Ella Simon '25, Rohan Shah '25, and Andrew van Baal BA/MS '26. C.Y., Zachary, and Soderstrom served as advisors. This group analyzed Scope 3 emissions and benchmarked Michigan Athletics against other schools in the Power 5 conferences. Their report offered concrete, actionable recommendations: from smarter travel planning to better procurement policies and data tracking.

One standout finding? Food service contractors accounted for 21% of emissions in the “purchased goods and services” category. That’s not just a number—it’s a starting point for meaningful change.

From Research to Real-World Impact

The work didn’t stop with the reports. This year, the Erb-led project evolved into a new course: Sport and Sustainability, taught by Professor Soderstrom with continued involvement of current and former Erb Fellows including C.Y., Natalie, and Rohan. The class is fully project-based, and students are diving deep into real-world challenges—creating impact reports, building engagement strategies for fans and vendors, and even working with student-athletes to launch a new sustainability club.

“For this project, it’s a neat space because we’ve been able to find synergies between what Michigan Athletics is doing and ways to amplify that through student work,” says Soderstrom. “We’ve also identified significant areas of opportunity, and the expertise of our students can help Athletics use new ideas, frameworks, and approaches to make sense of these challenges in a collaborative way.”

Why Sports Matter in Sustainability

So why sports? What makes this such a compelling place to do high-caliber sustainability work? According to Soderstrom, it’s the visibility—and the community.

“When you think about fans recognizing that the Big House is waste-free, and that compost collected there goes to Campus Farm to grow food for campus dining—it’s a powerful story,” she says. “You’re engaging with 100,000 people who might not otherwise think about sustainability. Sports can act as a societal leader because it brings people together.”

Through their work, Erb Fellows are helping to embed sustainability into the fabric of Michigan Athletics. They’re also building bridges—between student-athletes, sustainability offices, U-M units like Campus Farm, and fans. And they’re proving that purpose-driven leadership doesn’t have to stay in the classroom.

The Future of Sport and Sustainability at Michigan

With growing student interest and institutional support, the future looks bright. The goal? To continue integrating sustainability into every aspect of athletics, from vendor contracts to team travel.

It’s a game plan that combines passion, purpose, and a whole lot of maize and blue energy.

Erb Returns

A Homecoming for a Community of Changemakers

In November 2024, Erb alumni from across the country gathered in Ann Arbor for our biannual alumni reunion: Erb Returns. While each Erb Returns is a chance to reconnect, reflect, and recharge, it also offers something even deeper—a sense of homecoming. Erb Returns brings together students and alumni, faculty and staff, new faces and familiar ones to learn, share, and grow as a community.



For many alumni, the return to Ann Arbor is more than a visit—it's a return to the friendships forged in the halls of the SEAS and Ross buildings and to the shared mission of using business and sustainability as pathways to create a better world. It's a space where ideas spark new collaborations and where everyone—regardless of graduation year or job title—is invited to the conversation.

This year's program featured faculty talks from Professors Andy Hoffman, Charlene Zietsma, and Sara Soderstrom, alongside a robust lineup of alumni speakers and facilitators who shared insights from across industries and career stages.

Highlights included:

- A career panel featuring Tad Dritz (MBA/MS '02), Rachel Permut (MBA/MS '08), and Annalise Steketee (Erb Fellow '21), moderated by Allison Shapiro (MBA/MS '12).
- An interactive career session led by storytelling and leadership experts Kara Davidson and Stephanie Judd (both MBA/MS '13), founders of Wolf & Heron.
- ErbX Talks, with alumni speakers Miguel Andrés Sossa-Mardomingo (MBA/MS '13), Chris Owen (MBA/MS '20), Carmen Henrikson (MBA/MS '01), Jenny Wein (MBA/MS '11), Katherine Cunningham (MBA/MS '21), and current Erb student Marcus Missirlian (MBA/MS '26).
- A coaching workshop facilitated by Ali Boyd.
- A wrap-up reflective Words of Wisdom session with Chris Owen.

In addition to the formal programming, the event also featured a variety of networking sessions to create space for discussion on topics such as entrepreneurship, career transitions, finance, energy, biodiversity, and tech.

But the heart of Erb Returns was found in the moments in between. The welcome happy hour at Dominick's hosted by Erb's Student Advisory Board, coffee chats with undergraduate Erb Fellows and graduate dual-degree students, and informal gatherings over lunch or happy hour reminded us that the Erb community is more than a network—it's a foundation. It's where ideas are supported, careers are shaped, and lifelong friendships begin.

Whether you're a recent graduate or decades past your time in Ann Arbor, Erb Returns 2024 showed us all that the spirit of Erb remains as strong as ever. It's a place where you're always welcome. A place where coming back feels like you never left.

The Erb Institute staff would like to extend our deepest gratitude to the members of our Erb Returns 2024 organizing committee: Amira Hassan, Erb Fellow '22; Colleen Hardman, Erb Fellow '25; Carlotta Pham, MBA/MS '22; and Melissa Vernon, MBA/MS '02.



Opening Doors for Future Sustainability Leaders

2013 Alum Launches New MÁS Scholarship Fund



Miguel Andrés Sossa-Mardomingo's mother came to the United States as a refugee from Cuba when she was 13. When he was growing up, his mother always encouraged him to meet as many people as he could, travel, and learn as much as possible—because no one can take away your experiences or what you know, she told him. His father, who was a farmer in the mountains of Medellín, Colombia, instilled the importance of protecting natural resources.

Decades later, as Miguel applied to grad school, he hoped he could find a path to help him do all of these things. Thankfully, through the luck of meeting Jenny Wein (MBA/MS '11) and Cyndy Cleveland, a former Erb Institute staff member, they suggested that he consider the Erb Institute. "I was so glad they did. Erb transformed my life and really enabled me to pivot my career to one aimed at creating good in the world—and doing well at the same time," he says. He earned his dual degree in 2013.

Now, Miguel wants to open up those opportunities to more Erb students. He has recently established the Miguel Andrés Sossa-Mardomingo (MÁS) Scholarship Fund, gifting the first \$100,000 to a fund that will support dual-degree Erb Institute graduate students over the next 10+ years.

Miguel named the scholarship to honor his family's story and what they persevered through to give him opportunities. Also, he points out that not many sustainability or general scholarships are named after Latin Americans. "I want the scholarship name to inspire fellow Latinx and underrepresented minority community members to dream big and to continue giving back however they can," he says. The acronym MÁS is also a play on the Spanish word for "more," as in "How can we do more?"

Miguel appreciates what Erb allowed him to do, including a master's thesis at SEAS looking at plastic waste in Indonesia, working with professors, and "truly immersing myself with a group who is so bright and inspiring to me, to help channel what I get to do today," he says. And that Erb community has now become family to him.



Attending and serving as a student instructor in systems thinking classes really opened my mind to understanding how what we do impacts a system, which impacts another system. And so the work that I do, whether it's looking at carbon offsetting, whether it's helping a company think about green supply chain, whether it's being at Delta Air Lines and helping to catalyze a path to \$1 billion and becoming carbon neutral, which is what the CEO ultimately pledged—all of these are predicated on getting different systems to work together.

Miguel Andrés Sossa-Mardomingo

His post-Erb career started at Accenture, "where I was thankful to become the first MBA they hired into their sustainability practice. And it was on the shoulders of other Erbers who coached me on how to do a case interview, like David Yang and Mary Fritz," Miguel explains. Because of his interest in travel and its effects on climate change, Miguel moved to Delta Air Lines, where "by day, I worked in sales, and by night, I worked in sustainability as an advisor to our sustainability leadership," he says.

He later went to Climate Impact Partners, where he helped Fortune Global 500 companies offset their emissions with credible carbon offset programs. Now, he is Vice President and Americas Sustainability GTM Lead at global consulting firm Capgemini. "I get to work across North and South America, with an even broader group of clients, looking at their entire sustainability program," he says. Miguel's time at Erb uniquely prepared him for this work, he says.

Understanding the points of connection between business and science has been important in Miguel's career. "There's distinctly something that is brought to life when you can understand the science of the problems you're tackling, and you can also understand the business that drives that policy and business strategy for it," he says.

Over the years, when attending conferences, speaking with leaders, or consulting, "I oftentimes find that we are lacking the voices and the inspiration of people that come from underrepresented communities," Miguel says. "The challenge is not necessarily that we're not supporting those communities—which are most often impacted by the ill effects of climate change and other sustainability-related topics—it's that if you haven't lived that experience, it's really hard to have your strategy be led with that focus in mind, or with that point of view." He wants the MÁS Scholarship Fund to help students from underrepresented communities get into those roles.

"The more people that we see that share an experience like ours, the more we feel we can do it," Miguel says. He hopes the scholarship attracts leaders who can then serve as mentors for future generations, which he sees as a "virtuous and positive circle, bringing more and more attention to sustainability—to communities that traditionally have been underrepresented in that space."

Miguel is encouraging others to contribute to the MÁS Scholarship Fund, to take it from \$100,000 to \$1 million or more. "I'm very thankful for my professors, students, faculty, the admissions department—there were so many people that helped me, and coming from a family who valued 'paying it forward,' I am honored to now be in a position to give back."



Donate to the MÁS Scholarship Fund



Introducing the First MÁS Scholarship Recipient

"Receiving the Miguel Andrés Sossa-Mardomingo (MÁS) Scholarship has been a transformative experience for me. It's more than just financial support—it's a profound connection to a legacy that mirrors my own aspirations. Like Miguel, I come from a family that values education as a tool for service. My Nigerian immigrant parents, inspired by my grandmother's role as a public official advocating for women merchants in Nigeria, have always emphasized the importance of giving back.

The serendipity of Miguel's father being a Colombian farmer deeply resonates with my own career goals in food and agriculture. This scholarship has lifted financial burdens, allowing me to focus on making an immediate impact in these fields.

Moreover, as a fellow member of The Consortium for Graduate Study in Management, I share Miguel's commitment to increasing the representation of Black, Latinx, and Native American people in global business education and leadership. At U-M, I am eager to uphold this mission, lead alongside my peers, and eventually give back to future generations.

Miguel's mentorship extends beyond financial support—he has become a courageous guide as I navigate my unconventional career path. His example inspires me to step up, pass the baton, and invest in others just as he has invested in me. I am deeply grateful for this scholarship and the lasting impact it will have on my journey."



Amidat Sonekan
MBA/MS '27

2025 Graduation Keynote

Monique Oxender (MBA/MS '04) Returns to Erb

At this year's Graduate Dual-Degree Commencement, the Erb Institute welcomed back one of its own: Monique Oxender, Chief Corporate Affairs and Sustainability Officer at Keurig Dr Pepper and a proud alum of the MBA/MS Class of 2004.

With more than two decades of experience advancing sustainability in the private sector—from launching global supply chain initiatives at Ford Motor Company to embedding sustainability into the core of a major beverage business—Monique returned to Erb not only as a leader in the field but also as a peer, mentor, and reminder of what's possible.

In a speech that was both deeply moving and powerfully pragmatic, she addressed the graduates with a clear-eyed view of the road ahead—and an unwavering belief in their ability to shape it.

"You are emerging back into the workforce in a transformative time—during one of the most unpredictable, high-stakes chapters in recent history," she said. "Unpredictability is unsettling, but make no mistake, you are collectively prepared to navigate and shape what comes next."

A Message of Hope—and Action

Monique didn't shy away from the realities Erb graduates will face as they step into careers at the intersection of business and sustainability: backlash, greenwashing, and systemic inertia. But her message wasn't one of discouragement—it was one of persistent optimism.

"We are in a moment—albeit a tough moment—but it's just a moment all the same. So, how do we use what we have learned and protect momentum and options for the future? There was a before, and there will be an after."

Drawing on her own experience navigating corporate complexity, she reminded graduates that progress often happens in moments that are quiet, strategic, and incremental. It's not always a sweeping policy or a bold product launch—it's also the internal meeting where you shift the narrative, the data analysis that reframes a decision, the partnership that builds trust over time.

"It's about the long game and relentless curiosity. The landscape is evolving fast, adjusting for the changing roles of policy, politics, media and information flows, and the consumer. Seeking the big picture will facilitate resilience."

The Power of Community

At the heart of Monique's remarks was a theme that has long defined the Erb experience: community. She encouraged graduates to lean on the relationships they've built in the program—and to continue cultivating them long after graduation.

"Erb doesn't end when you walk across the stage. You have a super-powered network that places you in an ideal position to build coalitions and scale for impact—which is required no matter what issues you are working on. Stay connected. We need each other."

She also underscored the unique strengths of the dual-degree perspective—how Erb graduates are trained to navigate complexity, bridge disciplines, and speak multiple languages across sectors and stakeholders.

"You speak many 'languages.' You can facilitate change by meeting people where they are at and bringing them along."

Looking Forward

Monique closed with a call to action—one that acknowledged both the weight and the privilege of this work.

"This work is hard. Ultimately, your credibility will come from action, not intention. And I know that you are here for the action."

As the graduates stepped into the next chapter of their lives, her words served as more than a send-off. They were a reminder of what it means to lead with clarity, courage, and purpose.



Charging Ahead

Olivia Rath Helps Walmart Build the Future of EV Infrastructure



Olivia Rath
MBA/MS '23
Senior Manager, Strategy and Business Development, Walmart

If you've ever tried to charge your electric vehicle and found the station out of order—or worse, nonexistent—you're not alone. "Reliability is a big gap in the fast-charging industry today," says Olivia Rath, an Erb Institute alum now serving as Senior Manager of Strategy and Business Development on Walmart Energy's Retail EV Charging team.

That's exactly the gap Walmart is aiming to close.

In 2023, the company announced plans to launch its own EV charging network—fully owned and operated by Walmart. Olivia joined the team at a pivotal moment, just as the ambitious project was getting off the ground.

"It's kind of been a race to define the operating model, build a strategy that we felt really confident about, identify partners through RFP processes, go through contract negotiations, and build a product," she says.

The first site went live in March, giving Walmart customers access to clean, well-lit, and conveniently located charging stations—right by the store entrance—via the Walmart app. The goal? Combine reliability, affordability, and convenience in one seamless, retail-integrated experience.

"Ninety percent of Americans live within 10 miles of a Walmart as the crow flies, so we have a lot of great real estate across the U.S. where we can add this offering," Olivia says.

The EV network is just one piece of Walmart Energy's broader vision to ensure a clean, affordable, and economically viable energy future for the company.

Working at a major retailer wasn't where Olivia initially saw her sustainability career headed. "I had never dreamt that I would work for a retailer, as someone who's very passionate about sustainability," she says. However, she's found that Walmart's scale and reach make it a powerful platform for change. "The platform that Walmart offers in terms of making the energy transition more accessible is really energizing. And it's something that everyone who I work with at Walmart really takes seriously."

At Walmart, cross-functional collaboration is key—something the Erb Institute helped prepare her for. "The best parts of Erb for me were the times where I was building things with other Erbers," she says, recalling her experiences as a cofounder of both Michigan Climate Venture and Ross Climate Week.

That entrepreneurial mindset still guides her work today. "If there's something that you're interested in doing, and if it doesn't exist, find a friend and build it, and you will learn a ton," Olivia says.





Sustainability in Action

How Annalise Steketee is Making Change at Meijer



Annalise Steketee
BA '21
Sustainability Manager, Meijer

After graduating from the University of Michigan, Annalise Steketee stepped into a role that aligned perfectly with her passion: making business a force for environmental change. She joined Meijer in 2021 as a sustainability analyst, focusing on managing the company’s environmental sustainability metrics. About a year later, as the team grew, so did her responsibilities—and she now serves as a sustainability manager at Meijer.

Annalise’s work touches all four of Meijer’s core sustainability pillars: reducing carbon emissions, cutting food waste, advancing the circular economy, and protecting the Great Lakes. That last pillar led to one of the company’s most visible—and fun—recent initiatives.

In 2023, Meijer partnered with the Council of the Great Lakes Region to deploy beach-cleaning robots across the region. Called BeBots and Pixie Drones, the robots collect plastic pollution on beaches and in nearby waterways.

“We have partners who characterize that information, and it feeds back into larger research work, but it’s also a really good community and customer engagement and awareness tool. So that’s been a really fun project to be a part of,” Annalise says. “I’m especially excited about the continued expansion of that Great Lakes stewardship work.”

Meijer has made impressive progress on its other sustainability goals, too. Most notably, the company reached its 50% carbon emissions reduction goal a full year ahead of schedule. Annalise credits a strategic focus on renewables, including virtual power purchase agreements for solar and wind energy.

“Another achievement that’s been exciting is more publication about what we’re doing for our customers to understand,” she says, referring to the retailer’s recent Corporate Impact Report. Previously, “a lot of our initiatives had been kept to ourselves.”



That shift in communication is showing up in stores as well. Meijer has started using signage and QR codes that link customers to more information online about the company’s sustainability efforts. “If customers see something in store, they can learn more about it online,” Annalise explains.

Annalise was part of the first-ever undergraduate Erb Fellows cohort and says her time at the Erb Institute played a big role in shaping her path.

Meijer has also continued to collaborate with the Erb Institute, especially through SEAS capstone projects that sometimes include Erb students. “Our first Scope 3 inventory was a master’s project, and this year we’re working on a regenerative agriculture project and customer recycling,” Annalise says. “So having the Erb and SEAS students to provide the latest and greatest input on those topics throughout those projects has been a lot of fun and a good way to stay involved.”

“

Having an undergraduate-level business sustainability program is very rare . . . Having the opportunity to merge the two and actually have coursework or projects that were able to lend experience to get into this role was super important.

Annalise Steketee



The Power of the Erb Alumni Network

In the 15 years since graduate school, Paul Gruber has relied on the foundational knowledge and skills he gained at SEAS and the Erb Institute—and on the power of the Erb alumni network. From landing his first job after graduation to securing major funding in his current role to mentoring future sustainability leaders, Paul has continually tapped into the strength of the Erb community.

Alumni



Paul Gruber
MBA/MS '10
Program & Engagement Lead,
Fresh Coast Climate Solutions

“I got a great education at Erb and SEAS,” Paul says. “And throughout my career, the Erb network delivered again and again for me.”

The Erb Network at Work

The Erb Job Board was where Paul found his first job post-graduation, at the University of California Davis. Alongside expert faculty, staff, and students, Paul managed an alternative fuels and clean transportation research consortium, advising sponsors from Fortune 500 auto and energy companies and U.S. federal and state agencies. His sustainability energy systems background from SEAS also helped him land a job at renewable energy start-up Sierra Energy.

Eight years later, another opportunity surfaced on the Erb Job Board—this time at Michigan’s Consumers Energy. As manager of product and business development, he designed and managed clean energy pilot projects to achieve customer benefits, grid reliability, and decarbonization.

Today, Paul is at Fresh Coast Climate Solutions, based in Ann Arbor, Michigan. As program lead, he’s on a mission to help businesses—from small local firms and cleantech start-ups to global Fortune 50 corporations—advance their sustainability objectives. And once again, the Erb network proved to be a game-changer.

Paul and Fresh Coast recently got a lead on a potential contract with the Joyce Foundation from Erb faculty member Tom Lyon, Dow Chair of Sustainable Science, Technology and Commerce at Ross and SEAS. Following an extensive search by the foundation, Fresh Coast secured the contract, and their work will support the foundation’s learning about the challenges and opportunities posed by data center expansion in the Great Lakes region.

“The cool thing is, I get to do sustainability work all the time now,” says Paul, who notes that in less than three years, Fresh Coast has gone from working with a handful of clients to a diverse portfolio of 80.

Paul’s work spans the spectrum—from helping small Ann Arbor-based landscaping businesses like Net Zero Tree Care, Mary Berry’s Gardening, and MowGreenMow transition to electric equipment and boost biodiversity to advising Patgonia on supply chain traceability solutions to creating corporate sustainability action plans for global automotive suppliers like Hirotec America.

A Network for the Future of Sustainability

Looking ahead, Paul is excited to be playing a new role in the powerful Erb alumni network. Paying forward the help he’s received over the years, he and his Fresh Coast team are partnering with SEAS to train tomorrow’s sustainability leaders. Earlier this year, Paul led an Online Sustainability Bootcamp, a 12-week virtual educational program to help participants master sustainability principles and practices.

“It was awesome,” he says. “Students and professionals from all over the United States from different backgrounds and industries took part, all inspired to work in the field of sustainability.”

Through hands-on experiences and personalized coaching, the bootcamp prepared participants to lead with purpose—bridging business goals with environmental responsibility. In fact, it was such a success that SEAS and Fresh Coast are offering it again in fall 2025, growing the reach and impact of the Erb network.



I didn’t think I’d get the opportunity to teach during my career, but it’s been great. Through the skill-building and networking we offer in our bootcamp, it feels really good to be able to help advance the next generation of this important sustainability workforce.

Paul Gruber

Empowering Regenerative Agriculture and Circularity at J.Crew



Katie O'Hare
MBA/MS '11
VP, Sustainability
J.Crew

Katie O'Hare has been working in the fashion and apparel sustainability space since she graduated from the Erb Institute in 2011. She started at ANN INC., the parent company of Ann Taylor and LOFT, as its first full-time sustainability hire, and later moved to PVH, the parent company of Calvin Klein and Tommy Hilfiger. Six years ago, she joined J.Crew as one of two sustainability hires. "I was brought in to build the strategy, basically, and figure out what we wanted to stand for as a company and how we wanted to implement it," she says.

"I love the brand and have been a fan of J.Crew since I got the catalog, which I think is true of many people, and so I thought that this was a great opportunity to build the program from the ground up for a brand that I really loved and connected with," Katie says. She has moved up from senior manager to director, senior director, and now VP of sustainability. Now she's responsible for all things sustainability across all the brands, including Madewell and J.Crew Factory.

Katie sees her role as similar to an internal consultant. "We have a relatively small team, so we really work to help the company set the priorities, figure out the plan and then embed what we're doing into the business," she says.

One example is sustainable raw materials. Katie works closely with the raw materials team "to help them understand what the different sustainable material options are, help them find partners that can potentially source those materials, help them think through some of the trade-offs with cost and then help them track it," she says. "Over time, they take these initiatives and run with them, and I become more of a support role for them."

Katie's time at Erb prepared her for this work by giving her the skills to build the business case for various internal partners. "When you're at Erb, you always talk about how you felt like you were the hippie at the business school and the corporate person at SNRE [now SEAS]. You learn so much from navigating those two worlds," she says. "Being able to talk to people where they are, and represent the other side in a way that folks can understand, has really been instrumental in helping me drive change within the organization."

Regenerative Agriculture

One of the programs Katie is especially proud of is that J.Crew is supporting 35 cotton farmers across the U.S. by paying them directly to fund their transition to regenerative agriculture. "Then we're trying to use that cotton in our products, and we have about 60 products this year that are using regenerative cotton," she says.

Cotton makes up about 70% of the company's materials footprint. "But we're also using cashmere and wool and leather and all these things that come from land-based sources—from farms. So when we look at the future, we recognize that soil health is really important, not just from a sustainability perspective, but from a business perspective, too," she says. Although regenerative agriculture is not a new concept, the apparel industry has been slower to embrace it, she says.

Funding the farmers helps build supply. "Cotton farming is really hard, and cotton farmers face a lot of risk," Katie says. If changing their farming practices decreases their yield, for example, "it can really make or break whether or not they make any profit that year. . . . Even the most well-intentioned cotton farmer—or any farmer, to be honest—may want to make these changes, but they may just not be able to because of the risks involved."

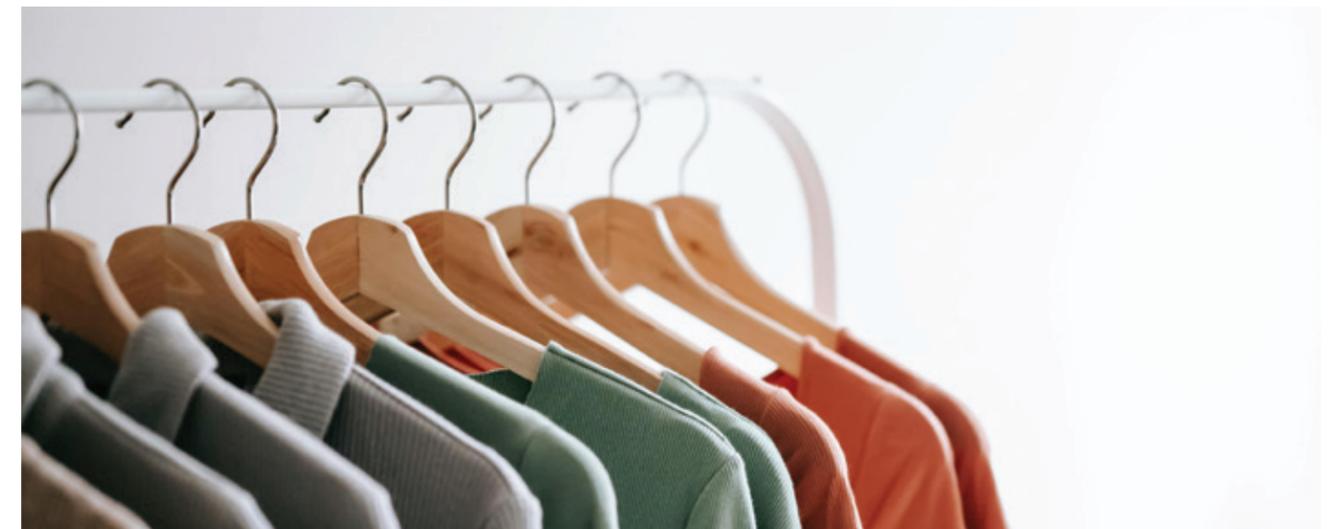
The funding gives farmers "a little bit of a cushion to make those changes, and then also shows that, as brands, we're serious about this, and we're ready to pay to help make these changes."

Equity is an important part of this program, considering the history of cotton farming in the U.S., Katie says. Two years ago, J.Crew set out to diversify the farmer pool that it was working with and partnered with the Federation of Southern Cooperatives (FSC), a cooperative of Black farmers, landowners, and co-ops, including some cotton farmers. "There are currently four FSC farmers in J.Crew's program, but we are really invested in this relationship and in the mission of the FSC and making sure that we're driving sustainable changes equitably across the U.S.," she says.

Circularity for Apparel

Another approach that more apparel brands are embracing is circularity, Katie says. J.Crew has been considering how it can think differently about its current business model, such as creating resale sites where customers can trade in their products and shop "pre-loved" products. It's not a traditional business model, "but it's something that we're leaning into, and we're starting to see that as a revenue stream and starting to figure out how we can leverage that more strategically," she says.

J.Crew launched a swim take-back and recycling program this year. "Swim is traditionally really, really hard to recycle because it's a synthetic and it's blended with elastic, which is an apparel recycler's nightmare," Katie says. But J.Crew partnered with Supercircle, which has the technology to take apart the swimsuits and sort the materials into different streams for recycling. Supercircle also can drive fiber-to-fiber recycling.



“

A lot of recycling that you have right now is what we call down-cycling, so it is shredding something to go to housing insulation or car stuffing. But we were really invested in driving what we think is the future of circularity, which is truly turning a garment into a new garment.” Some of Supercircle’s partners can take back synthetics, such as “sending the nylon to a partner who can turn that into recycled nylon to be used in future products. The goal is one day that we can buy that fiber back and turn it into new swimsuits.”

Katie O'Hare

The swim take-back program has been a huge success, with more than 15,000 swimsuits collected. "The average amount of swimsuits that people have sent back each time is six," which Katie says signals that people want to be able to do something responsible with their swimwear when they're done with it.

Katie's Behavior, Education, and Communication specialization at SNRE gave her skills that she has brought into all her roles, she says. It gave her a "foundation on what motivates people, and how to talk to people, and how to drive behavior change and organizational change."

Erb is a connector—of people, institutions, and ideas. Whether through global partnerships, conferences, or on-the-ground experiences, our students and alumni are engaging with the world to co-create sustainable solutions. This section highlights where our work meets the wider world.

From Idea to Impact

CPRT Spins Out as Independent Organization, Third Side Strategies

“

The transition of CPRT into Third Side Strategies is a powerful example of the Erb Institute’s mission in action. We’re proud to have incubated this groundbreaking work at the intersection of business, sustainability, and democracy—and we’re thrilled to see it evolve into an independent force for principled leadership.

Charlene Zietsma
Faculty Director of the Erb Institute

Since its founding in 2021, the Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce (CPRT) has operated as a bold experiment within the Erb Institute at the University of Michigan—a place where leaders from business, academia, and civil society came together to explore how companies can align their political influence with their public commitments and long-term value creation.

Now, that experiment is becoming a stand-alone organization.

The Erb Institute is proud to announce the launch of Third Side Strategies (TSS), a new action-oriented think tank and nonprofit advisory firm dedicated to helping companies integrate corporate political responsibility (CPR) into their governance, strategy, and culture. TSS will be hosted by Future500 and led by CPRT Founding Director Elizabeth Doty, who will continue to build on the initiative’s momentum as Executive Director.

This launch marks a significant milestone—not just for CPRT, but also for the Erb Institute.



Incubated at Erb, Now Taking Flight

CPRT was born out of a simple but profound insight: Sustainability innovators are often placed at a competitive disadvantage when the rules of the market don’t support long-term thinking. If companies want to lead on sustainability, their public affairs strategies must align with their values—not undermine them. This vision was articulated in an award-winning article, “CSR Needs CPR: Corporate Sustainability and Politics,” by Erb Professor Tom Lyon and coauthors, that coined the term corporate political responsibility.

With that vision, the Erb Institute launched CPRT as a strictly non-partisan forum to support businesses in managing their political influence responsibly. Under Doty’s leadership, CPRT convened hundreds of business leaders and experts to co-create tools, strategies, and frameworks—including one of its most widely recognized contributions: The Erb Principles for Corporate Political Responsibility.

These principles, publicly launched in Washington, D.C., in March 2023, provide a practical roadmap for companies seeking to align their political activities with their stated values, long-term goals, and commitments to create value. They have been supported by major corporations including IBM, Danone, and Pirelli Tire, and have shaped thought leadership across the field—from Oxfam International and the Interfaith Center on Corporate Responsibility to Harvard Business Review.

“This work has always been about helping companies strengthen the governance of their public affairs,” says Elizabeth Doty, now Executive Director of Third Side Strategies. “By embedding corporate political responsibility as a core business practice, companies can reduce risk, enable long-term value, and restore trust during an increasingly turbulent time.”

The Erb Principles didn’t just stay on paper—they have helped companies reassess trade association practices, deepen internal decision-making, and clarify how and when to engage on civic issues like climate policy and democratic institutions. As one company leader shared with CPRT, “This is much more practical than what I would have expected from a university!”

Tools, Talent, and a Thriving Ecosystem

Beyond the Erb Principles, CPRT developed a growing suite of practical tools, including the CPR Decision Tool & Conversation Guide. The principles and this tool are helping executives and teams assess complex questions of civic engagement with confidence, transparency, and shared values. Looking ahead, Third Side Strategies will soon be publishing a CPR Governance Review Guide, building on CPRT’s work.

Students and alumni have also played a critical role in developing this new body of work, from building the database of best practices to embedding CPR into classrooms and design challenges. The CPR movement bolstered at Erb has empowered companies and educators alike to integrate CPR into climate action, human rights, competitive market strategies, and election readiness planning.

A Continued Collaboration

While Third Side Strategies begins a new chapter, its roots in the Erb Institute remain strong. Longtime CPRT faculty co-lead and Erb Professor Tom Lyon will continue to support TSS as Faculty Advisor and Director of Editorial Content. His 2023 book, *Corporate Political Responsibility*, includes a chapter on the development of CPRT and highlights the Erb Principles as a critical contribution to the field.

“It’s gratifying to see the CPRT’s work take on a life of its own,” Lyon says. “This kind of spin-off is exactly what university-based institutes like Erb aim for: planting a seed, nurturing it, and watching it grow into something with real-world impact.”

Third Side Strategies’ team will also include Lauren Caplan, as Director of Governance and Risk Integration. Previously, Caplan developed the Corporate Guide to Navigating US Political Risk as Head of the Democracy-Aligned Investing Initiative with the Leadership Now Project. She has also served as Associate General Counsel in the Yale Investments Office, and now teaches at Yale School of Management.

As Third Side Strategies launches, the Erb Institute celebrates a new milestone in its own journey—proving once again that by bringing together business and sustainability, bold ideas can become transformative action.

To learn more about Third Side Strategies, visit thirdsidestrategies.org or its first product, TheCPRHub.org.

Tackling Sustainability in the Banking Sector

Erb Team Wins First-Ever ESG Dilemma Design Challenge

What does the future of responsible banking look like—and how do we get there faster? That’s the question at the heart of the inaugural ESG Dilemma Design Challenge, hosted by the Alliance for Responsible Capitalism and co-sponsored by Comerica, Business+Impact, and the Erb Institute. The months-long challenge brought together students from top universities around the world to reimagine the role of banks in shaping a more sustainable financial system. The central challenge: Design a roadmap for banks to accelerate a sustainable market transformation while effectively managing their stakeholders.

Team Capital Gains/Carbon Drains—made up entirely of Erb Institute MBA/MS students—took home first place and the competition’s \$10,000 grand prize.

The winning team, made up of Katelyn Parsons (MBA/MS ’27), RJ Juckett (MBA/MS ’27), Marcus Missirlan (MBA/MS ’26), and Rebecca Macies (MBA/MS ’26), developed a compelling roadmap for how banks can accelerate sustainable market transformation—while effectively managing the competing interests of stakeholders, shareholders, and society. The challenge emphasized nuance and depth: Submissions were evaluated via a blind judging process, with no knowledge of team affiliations, to keep the focus on ideas and execution.

A Global, Cross-Disciplinary Competition

Launched in fall 2024 and culminating in a high-stakes pitch event at Michigan Ross, the competition drew global participation.

Two teams tied for second place, each receiving \$3,750:

- Team Stella Strategy from Bard College’s MBA in Sustainability program
- Team Green Growth from Columbia University’s MA in Sustainability Management program

Other finalist teams hailed from the University of California Berkeley and the University of Southern California, creating a dynamic mix of perspectives across business, policy, and environmental studies.

Industry Leaders at the Table

The judging panel represented a powerful cross-section of finance, sustainability, and policy, including:

- Scott Beckerman, CSO, Comerica Bank
- Joe Pigg, SVP, American Bankers Association
- Chad Spitler, CEO, Third Economy
- Luisa Brasil, CPD Capital Markets
- Marcos Mancini, UNDP
- Elizabeth Doty, formerly of the Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce, currently Third Side Strategies
- Lauren Bigelow, Growth Capital Network
- Matt Elliott, Retired President, Bank of America Michigan and Sustainability Executive
- Charlene Zietsma, Erb Institute Faculty Director

The case content was developed by Alliance for Responsible Capitalism Co-Founders Russell Forthuber and Amy Gobel, who worked closely with partner organizations to reflect the real dilemmas facing the banking sector.

Powered by Purpose (and Volunteers)

The Erb Institute was honored not just to sponsor, but also to help host this first-of-its-kind event on campus. A team of student volunteers made the in-person finals run smoothly, with special thanks to:

- Praveen Mahendran (MBA/MS ’25), lead volunteer and event planner
- Ellory Overcast (MBA/MS ’27), Yale Loucks (MBA ’25), and MacKensey King (MBA/MS ’26)



“

We were thrilled to see our students’ systems-level thinking, interdisciplinary collaboration, and commitment to real-world impact shine through. This is exactly the kind of leadership Erb is here to cultivate.

Charlene Zietsma
Faculty Director of the Erb Institute

Team Capital Gains/Carbon Drains with first prize (left to right: Marcus Missirlan, Rebecca Macies, Katelyn Parsons. Not pictured: RJ Juckett)



Community and Solutions

Michigan Business Sustainability Roundtable

On February 25, 2025, the Erb Institute hosted a meeting of the Michigan Business Sustainability Roundtable (MBSR) to address pressing sustainability challenges facing businesses. The meeting focused on identifying both immediate and long-term gaps in sustainability skill sets within the labor market and exploring ways partners can help fill these gaps to strengthen business resilience.

The MBSR, convened by the Erb Institute, brings together senior business leaders dedicated to driving transformational change in the social and environmental performance of their companies, industries, and the State of Michigan.

Reflecting on the meeting and the group’s mission, Erb Institute Managing Director Melissa Zaksek shares: “The MBSR is an incredibly valuable forum for information-sharing and idea-generating. This group of trusted Michigan business sustainability leaders is committed to achieving a shared vision of an economically thriving and sustainable future for all Michiganders. We learn a great deal from our conversations with our MBSR members; the insights we gain inform how we deliver programming in the Erb Institute’s pursuit of our mission to create a sustainable world through business.”

Following the MBSR meeting, the Erb Institute hosted a networking lunch that welcomed additional business leaders, sustainability experts from across Michigan, senior leaders from the University of Michigan, and members of the Erb Institute community, including students, alumni, and staff.

“I believe collaboration is a contact sport. The networking lunch provided a valuable opportunity to connect with Erb students and professionals from across sectors,” says Kerry Duggan, Founder and Managing Partner of Energy Security Partners.

During the lunch, attendees heard remarks from Zaksek, Erb Institute Faculty Director Charlene Zietsma, and dual-degree student Alex Maxwell (MBA/MS ’26). Their remarks emphasized themes of hope, perseverance, and commitment to a shared purpose—the pursuit of sustainability.

“My partner at Energy Security Partners often says, ‘There’s nobody coming to save us. We have to save ourselves.’ This convening is a great example of that mindset—focusing on what we can do within our unique place in the world and embracing our responsibility to steward our state’s abundant resources. That stewardship is only possible through collaboration,” Duggan adds.



What is the Michigan Business Sustainability Roundtable?

The Erb Institute, along with some of our most trusted partners, created the Michigan Business Sustainability Roundtable back in 2020 as a forum for learning, strategic partnership building, and information sharing. This group digs into some of the most pressing—and thorniest—challenges facing business sustainability leaders and fosters cross-industry partnerships and collaboration. It also provides an invaluable opportunity for the institute to gain firsthand insight into emerging and horizon issues, which we use to inform our research and program delivery.



Council of Michigan Foundations and Erb Family Foundation’s Philanthropy Fellow Taylor Williams, Edward J. Frey Dean of Business, Stephen M. Ross Professor of Business Sharon Matusik, Samuel A. Graham Dean, School for Environment and Sustainability Jonathan Overpeck

Erb on the Map



1 Harvard University

Erb Faculty member Andy Hoffman spent the 2023-2024 academic year as a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for the Study of Business in Global Society, Harvard Business School.

2 Ontario, Canada

In May 2025 Erb Faculty Director Charlene Zietsma delivered a keynote address to the Administrative Sciences Association of Canada, in Waterloo, Ontario, titled: "How our theories have to change in a messed up world."

3 Finland

The Erb Institute welcomed visiting PhD Fulbright Scholar Larry Abdullai from LUT University of Finland, for the 2024-2025 academic year.

4 China

In 2024, Chang Wang joined the Erb Institute as a postdoc fellow from Fudan University, where she is continuing her research on environmental economics, industrial economics, and the Chinese economy.

5 Stanford University

In the 2024-2025 academic year, Erb faculty member Tom Lyon spent his sabbatical as a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University.

6 Turkey

Mackenzie Mock (MBA/MS '24) and Erb faculty affiliate Ravi Anupindi participated in the Fair Labor Association's celebratory board meeting in Istanbul, Türkiye, to mark its 25th anniversary and explore the future of fair labor.

7 Kenya

In 2024 and 2025 Erb postdoc Parijat Chakrabarti traveled to Kenya for his work developing a cross-sector strategy for food systems transformation to promote rural livelihoods, regional development, and ecological well-being amid the pressures of globalization and climate change.



Across the States

In 2024-2025, the Erb Institute hit the road, visiting alumni and recruiting prospective Erb students all across the country!

San Francisco

Phoenix

New York

Chicago

DC

Seattle

Ann Arbor

Detroit

Denver



Our faculty are driving critical conversations about sustainability, business, and policy—on campus and across the globe. In this section, we spotlight research, publications, and public impact that exemplify Erb's leadership in shaping the future of sustainable business.

Collaborative Action

How Diverse Groups Can Set the Stage

Diversity in a group can boost its problem-solving and innovation potential. But simply bringing diverse people together doesn't necessarily help them work well together.



Sara Soderstrom
Associate Professor,
Erb Undergraduate Fellows Faculty Director

"In addressing social issues, organizations have a responsibility to promote diverse participation, yet often struggle to harness the benefits of racial and gender diversity," wrote Kathryn L. Heinze and Erb Institute faculty member Sara B. Soderstrom in "Practicing Dialogue: How an Organization Can Facilitate Diverse Collaborative Action."

"We argue that for diverse groups, fostering quality interactions is particularly important for addressing and overcoming challenges associated with group diversity," they wrote. Their research, recently published in the *Journal of Business Ethics*, looked at how a social change organization was able to facilitate diverse collaboration.

Heinze and Soderstrom conducted an 18-month field study of the nonprofit organization FoodLab, which promotes healthy, environmentally sustainable, and accessible food systems in Detroit. The organization aimed to grow a good food economy by working with its members: local food entrepreneurs who were diverse in race and gender.

The researchers found that, through practicing dialogue, FoodLab supported high-quality interactions among participants and facilitated collaborative action on multiple issues that affect them, including shared kitchens and licensing. In collaborative action, organizational members work together to implement strategies that address shared objectives around social issues.



This dynamic process is particularly important as diverse groups work to address social issues that are complex.

Practicing dialogue includes three informal structures:

- **Intentional convening** established contact among diverse people at gatherings such as membership meetings and workshops. It included using facilitators—and shifting the facilitator role from one person to another.
- **Participatory devices** prompted participants to share their varied experiences and perspectives, such as by beginning meetings with a question for the group to consider. "Rather than starting with a more unidirectional, or 'leader-owned,' approach, . . . participatory devices set the expectation of co-creation and equal status," so everyone felt heard and respected, Heinze and Soderstrom wrote. This encouraged engagement.
- **Collective language** helped build a sense of solidarity on issues among FoodLab leaders and members. This included framing needs in terms of the collective, using "we," "us," and "our."

Together, these three structures supported high-quality interactions among FoodLab members, and participants developed resources, knowledge, motivation, and relationships.

For example, on the issue of licensing, participants learned "that entrepreneurs did not always operate with licenses, many were concerned about costs, the process was confusing, and these challenges varied by business types. This knowledge shaped the strategy of working with the city to make an easier, more affordable process, and developing guides for various types of entrepreneurs," Heinze and Soderstrom wrote.

While social issues often are complex, and people of different backgrounds who come together to solve problems may not be very comfortable with each other initially, this approach values the perspectives of diverse people, builds trust and solidarity, and encourages them to contribute to addressing issues that matter.

Organizing Sustainably

What Business Leaders Need to Know Now



Charlene Zietsma
Faculty Director,
Erb Institute

Rethinking How We Organize for a Sustainable Future

Climate change is no longer a distant threat—it's a present, cascading crisis disrupting business, government, and society. In their landmark introduction to *Organization Studies*' special issue, a team of scholars—including Erb Institute Faculty Director Charlene Zietsma—offers a bold call to action: If we want sustainable outcomes, we must rethink not just what we do in business, but also how we organize.

This means redesigning the structures, norms, and power dynamics that shape economic life. It also means embracing the reality that sustainability isn't possible without social justice and collective action.

Why It Matters

The authors argue that the tools of traditional management are insufficient for the scale of today's challenges. Instead, we need a new generation of leaders who are willing to step outside disciplinary boundaries, interrogate power structures, and envision bold alternatives.

As Zietsma and colleagues write, sustainability must be organized—through new forms of coordination, participation, and shared value creation. This is a systems-level challenge, but also an opportunity for leadership.

Inaction is no longer a neutral choice. As the climate emergency escalates, how businesses choose to organize—whom they empower, what values they uphold, and how they collaborate—will shape our shared future.

Let's make it a future worth organizing for.

Based on the research of Rick Delbridge, Markus Helfen, Andreas Pekarek, Elke Schuessler, and Charlene Zietsma, published in *Organization Studies* (2024): "Organizing Sustainably: Introduction to the Special Issue"

Four Shifts for Business Leaders

The article outlines four key themes that matter deeply for business practitioners committed to sustainability:

1 Sustainability Requires Social Justice

We cannot build a sustainable future without also addressing inequality—across income, geography, and identity. Businesses must consider: sustainable for whom? This requires transparency about competing values and intentional stakeholder dialogue, especially with those traditionally marginalized.

Actionable Insight: Integrate equity into sustainability strategy—not as a compliance checkbox, but as a core design principle. Use inclusive governance structures and invest in community-driven initiatives.

2 Think Local—and Global

Wicked problems like climate change demand both local experimentation and global coordination. The most effective business responses emerge when grounded in place, culture, and relationships—but they must also be scalable.

Actionable Insight: Pilot sustainable initiatives in specific communities, then invest in learning systems that allow for knowledge sharing and adaptation across regions and sectors.

3 Democratize Decision-Making

The climate crisis exposes the limits of shareholder primacy. To truly organize sustainably, firms must shift toward governance models that include a broader set of stakeholders—workers, communities, and even nature.

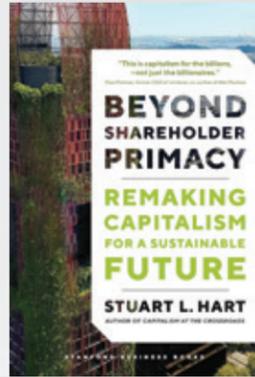
Actionable Insight: Explore governance innovations like worker voice, B Corps, and integrated sustainability councils. Treat sustainability not as a siloed department but as an enterprise-wide imperative.

4 Act Collectively

In a world facing multiple tipping points across ecological and social systems, isolated efforts fall short. Business leaders must collaborate—not just within industries, but across sectors and borders—to drive systemic change.

Actionable Insight: Join or support cross-sector alliances focused on climate action, regenerative business models, or just transitions. Collaboration is no longer optional—it's strategic, and in the long term, it contributes to the survival of not only business entities but also species.

On Our Bookshelf



1

Beyond Shareholder Primacy



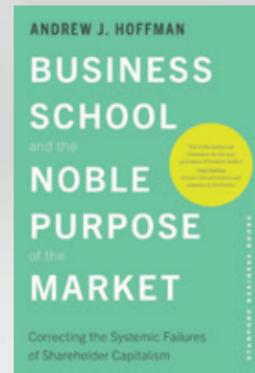
Stu Hart
Professor in Residence
Erb Institute

2

Business School and the Noble Purpose of the Market

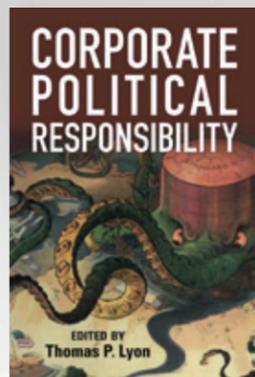


Andy Hoffman
Holcim (US) Professor
of Sustainable Enterprise



3

Corporate Political Responsibility



Tom Lyon
Dow Chair of Sustainable Science,
Technology and Commerce

On Our Bookshelf

1

Beyond Shareholder Primacy

By Stu Hart

Our current form of capitalism, focused on shareholder primacy, isn't going to cut it anymore, says Stuart Hart, professor in residence at the Erb Institute and professor emeritus at Cornell University's Johnson School of Management. In his new book, *Beyond Shareholder Primacy: Remaking Capitalism for a Sustainable Future*, he explains how a radically sustainable and just form of capitalism is possible—and necessary.

In 1992, Hart started up the University of Michigan's Corporate Environmental Management Program (CEMP), which later became part of the Erb Institute. He is also cofounder and former director of the Sustainable Innovation MBA program at the University of Vermont's Grossman School of Business.

Part of the book is historical: looking at how capitalism has evolved since the 15th century, and showing that capitalism has been reformed twice before, and it can be reformed again. While Milton Friedman-style capitalism has been the norm since the 1980s, "we're not going to be able to achieve the world outcomes that are necessary unless the ground rules for capitalism itself change," Hart says. "And that's what motivated me to write the book."

The book is intended for businesspeople, business students, and faculty—but also NGO and government leaders, as well as educated laypeople. In speaking to people about the book, Hart says he's found that "people's energy level goes up when you talk about it, because they get a sense that maybe things could be different—that we could actually run business in a different way."

Hart says, "I think the truth is: People in the business world have known and kind of felt this in their gut for a while now, that the way that the system is running, sort of the dictates of shareholder primacy, the quarterly earnings report model . . . people in public companies are kind of worn out by that, and they know it's broken, and they know it needs to change."

Beyond Shareholder Primacy lays out how it can change, including a framework to help companies build "connective tissue" between their corporate purpose and sustainability goals—which often lack connection. For example, many companies have set 2050 net zero goals, but without any clear pathway to how they might achieve them, Hart says.

Companies' foundational sustainability goals, including emissions, waste reduction, sustainable procurement, and DEI, are "crucially important, but they don't change what the company does out in the world in a fundamental way," Hart says. Beyond that, companies need what he calls "sustainability-driven business aspirations," to include a company's full upstream and downstream. And, at an even higher level, they need corporate quest—meaning that "companies need to step up to the plate to identify those system-level challenges out in the world that they need to take on in order to enable them to accelerate their business aspirations." It's a way to accelerate corporate transformation.

The last part of the book focuses on the systems change and institutional redesign that are needed. "Yes, companies need to be invested and engaged in specific sustainability issues and challenges, but it can't stop there, because that can become like whack-a-mole. . . . You're constantly looking, and then another one pops up," Hart says.

Instead, "the more stable and long-term way to get after that is what Paul Polman and Andrew Winston call being a net positive advocate. If you think of it like a tree, the issues and problems are like the canopy of the tree, with the fruit constantly growing and sprouting new things. The trunk is more enduring, and so you get after the policy agenda—that has a big effect on how the canopy grows," Hart says. Those two levels are crucial, but there's a third level—the tree's roots, which determine how it grows. "The roots of the tree are the institutions that support, define, and enable capitalism and business itself." These multiple roots include public equity markets and business education.

"As long as MBA programs and business education continue to perpetrate shareholder primacy on its students and graduates, they will be projected out into the world and continue that way of thinking and managing," Hart says.

Beyond Shareholder Primacy is a call to action, and it shows how a better form of capitalism is possible.

2

Business School and the Noble Purpose of the Market

Andy Hoffman's Book Urges Business Schools to Restore Capitalism's Noble Purpose

Shareholder capitalism is no longer serving society's needs adequately. Capitalism needs to be restored to its noble purpose, but to do this, business education needs an overhaul, says Andy Hoffman in his new book, *Business School and the Noble Purpose of the Market: Correcting the Systemic Failures of Shareholder Capitalism*. Hoffman is the Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise and an Erb Institute faculty member.

"The question is no longer: How do we get sustainability into the market or into the curriculum? The question is: How do we adjust the market to address sustainability? To answer that question, we need to rethink the role of business and society. And that means we need to rethink the variant of capitalism we've had for the last 50 years," Hoffman says.

The Erb Institute talked with Hoffman about *Business School and the Noble Purpose of the Market*, what it calls for, and the conversations it aims to spark.

Why did you decide to write this book?

This reflects a shift in my thinking over the past five years or so. For a good part of my career, I've been focusing on working sustainability into the logic of business, into the language of the market and into the curriculum as it exists in business education. But I've come to realize that when we're talking about issues like climate change, we're looking at a systems breakdown. To fix a systems breakdown, you have to fix the system. You have to fix capitalism.

At the same time, business schools are broken. They've been stuck in a model where the MBA is a package that they sell. If we're really going to deal with issues like climate change or income inequality, we have to recognize that you can't just drop an elective into a curriculum that continues to say: Maximize shareholder value, government has a limited role in the market, efficiency is always good. We have to change the curriculum.

The overall message of the book is that we need to think more deeply about business education if we're going to properly prepare students to go out and deal with these issues in the real world.

What has kept business schools stuck in this model?

The first obstacle is the reward system. I am rewarded for academic publications. Teaching has to be adequate, but publications have to be superlative, so if I'm a junior faculty member, I'm going to focus my attention on research.

The second obstacle is the rankings, which homogenize and stifle innovation. Every school wants to look like Harvard, and that shouldn't be so. There should be a distinct personality and a distinct focus at each business school.

The third is that this is an institutional challenge. One school can try and move on its own, but it's pretty risky. The whole ecosystem has to move, and that's a hard thing to get going.

What do you hope the book will provoke?

I don't expect people to just accept everything I wrote, but I want to start a conversation. We need to teach our students to be stewards of the market. They need to understand capitalism, how it was originally conceived, what it has turned into, what various forms exist around the world. We need to teach about the responsible relationship between business and government. We need to look at some of the things we teach that are problematic. Some metrics like GDP and discount rate actually take us in the wrong direction.

For example, when we say efficiency is always good, that tells you that if it lowers prices or improves the stock price, it's good, so maybe it's efficient to move manufacturing overseas. But what about the people in the town that got left behind? That's not in our equations.

I really want to encourage faculty and administrators to step forward. I want senior professors to act like elders, and elders are not concerned with their own career. They're concerned with the institutions in which others will come up. I can say this at this stage of my career, as a full tenured and chaired professor, but if I wasn't tenured, the elder would be a risky role to play.

Have students been looking for something different from business education?

I have more and more students who come to me frustrated that the education they're getting is not what they were hoping for. I had one student tell me she felt like her values were under attack every time she walked into the building.

I have a chapter in the book that is aimed at students, and the message is threefold: 1. Business schools are broken. 2. Go anyway, because the power you have within business to make a difference is enormous. 3. Take control of your education. Don't just take the curriculum as given. Challenge, question, and interrogate what you're being taught. It's how you will learn. At times, you may decide that what they're teaching you is not the way you want to live your life, and you have a choice to make. You are put in a resource-rich environment—take advantage of it to make the education what you want and need. Then you'll have the beginnings of developing the power that you need to make a difference in the world.

Do you think that enough people at business schools are poised to push business education in the right direction?

I'm not the only one thinking that things need to change. A lot of people recognize there's a problem, but people aren't sure what to do about it.

Who can change the system? Maybe the top-tier business schools can; or maybe they are too wedded to their rankings and their position to really go far outside the bounds. Maybe it's the next tier of business schools that can do it, or maybe the way for business schools to derisk change is to create a separate degree that questions these fundamentals, and let the market decide—see if students gravitate towards a program that, in my opinion, would involve much more rigorous thinking about the issues of our day.

For example, should companies be involved in political and social debates? We're actually watching a very interesting experiment on that right now with Elon Musk. He has gotten as involved in politics as any business executive ever has, and Tesla's getting hammered for it. Is this a cautionary tale for the extent to which corporations get involved? These are the kinds of things we should be discussing.

What do you want readers to take away from the book?

My hope is that students will read it and be more critical in their approach to their education. I hope that faculty and administrators read it and start a discussion about what to do about it. I am pleased that several deans have come out and said: This is the conversation we need to be having. There are people out there that see the problem. They're struggling to find a way to do something about it. I'm humble about the book's possibilities, but it at least starts a conversation, and maybe it can coalesce a community into a critical mass.

3

Corporate Political Responsibility

Can Business Help Fix What's Broken in American Politics? Erb Faculty Member Tom Lyon Thinks So.

Many Americans feel that business wields too much power in politics—and they're not wrong, says Tom Lyon, the Dow Chair of Sustainable Science, Technology and Commerce.

"If you look at certain sectors—including the financial sector, the health care sector, and the energy sector—we often create policies that aren't really best for society, but they're best for some of the companies in those industries," he says.

That disconnect is eroding trust.

"I think we've become more and more aware of that as a problem, and it's tearing down Americans' trust of their own country and their government, because they feel like the game is rigged. And if we want to try to restore some trust in the system, we need to unrig it," Lyon says.

That's where corporate political responsibility comes in.

Lyon is the editor of the recently published book *Corporate Political Responsibility*, a collection that brings together leading scholars and organizational leaders working to support more ethical and transparent corporate political engagement. The concept of holding companies accountable to their stakeholders isn't new—Lyon points to the work of the Center for Political Accountability, founded in 2003 by Bruce Freed—but corporate political responsibility (CPR) is a more recent idea.

It's about more than compliance—it's about courage.

"[It means] expecting companies to step up and do the right thing," Lyon says. "I think so many of us are cynical about what companies do in the political world that we really need to turn that around."

That might look like lobbying for protecting democracy, climate policy, or tech platforms that foster informed debate instead of polarization. But figuring out what counts as "responsible" can be a challenge, Lyon acknowledges, because values vary. The book aims to help readers navigate that complexity and find common ground, emphasizing corporate support of fundamental systems such as healthy market rules of the game, healthy democratic institutions, healthy civic discourse, and healthy ecological systems.

Corporate Political Responsibility presents new research on how and why firms shift toward more ethical political behavior. It explores the growing market and public scrutiny of corporate "dark money," and the role activists play in pushing companies to take a stand—or stop standing in the way—on major issues like climate change.

"The book was very much meant to draw theory and research together with practice," Lyon says.

Contributors include Bruce Freed, William Laufer, and Karl Sandstrom on accountability as a governance challenge; David Vogel on climate and business; Ed Walker on political disclosure; and Elizabeth Doty, who led the Erb Institute's Corporate Political Responsibility Taskforce (CPRT) and now leads its successor, the think tank and advisory firm Third Side Strategies.

Lyon says CPRT has seen a surge in interest from students, legislators, think tanks, and business leaders.

"It really does feel like it's an idea whose time has come, and it seems to inspire people to come together and try to work in support of the idea," he says.

And while CPR movement is still gaining traction, Lyon sees momentum building—not only because it's the right thing to do, but because it may also strengthen business.

"It's still very nascent, but there's growing work looking at how corporate political responsibility efforts may affect a firm's financial performance, or may insulate it from attacks by external stakeholders, or may allow a firm to motivate and mobilize its employees. And some of the chapters in the book provide new evidence on how that can happen," Lyon says.

The stakes, he argues, have never been higher.

"We have a lot of threats to democracy, writ large, and some of those come from years and years of pressures that have been building, and distrust. But we have a more active set of people who are willing to undermine democracy than we've probably ever had, so we're at a particularly fragile moment, and we really need business to step up as a responsible player," he says.

Lyon hopes the book resonates with a wide range of readers: academics, think tank researchers, policymakers, and corporate government affairs professionals. He wants it to spark new thinking—and new expectations.

"I hope people will read it to see—what are activists doing in practice? And also, what is the underlying research and intellectual capital we need to make this idea really come alive?"

Ultimately, Lyon sees CPR not just as a trend, but as a shift in mindset.

He hopes it becomes "something that citizens expect, that they ask for, that they demand from companies."

When Fixing One Problem Creates Another

The Hidden Risk in Environmental Compliance



Tom Lyon
Dow Chair of Sustainable Science,
Technology and Commerce

You just fixed your biggest compliance headache—so why are violations popping up elsewhere in your company?

Environmental regulations like the Clean Air Act are designed to hold firms accountable. When a facility breaks the rules, regulators step in with fines and enforcement. But new research by Erb faculty member Tom Lyon and former Erb Institute postdoctoral Fellow Zhengyan Li reveals a critical and overlooked consequence: Putting out one compliance fire can spark others.

Their findings are clear—and surprising. When one facility is penalized for noncompliance, nearby sibling facilities within the same company are more likely, rather than less likely, to break the rules soon after. Instead of creating firm-wide learning, enforcement can unintentionally trigger a cascade of violations.

The Compliance Domino Effect

Lyon and Li analyzed more than a decade of Clean Air Act enforcement data and found that enforcement at one facility often leads to an increased likelihood of violations at others. The cause? Internal reallocation of scarce resources.

Firms—especially private ones or those without deep pockets—often scramble to address enforcement actions at a penalized site. But that effort comes at a cost: Other facilities get less attention, fewer resources, and more exposure to risk.

This effect is strongest when:

- The firm is privately held and lacks reputational incentives to demonstrate compliance.
- The other facilities are not equipped with pollution prevention technology.
- The sites are geographically or operationally connected, and thus share oversight teams or budgets.

Why This Matters for Business Leaders

You might think a regulatory fine is a localized issue. But this research shows it's a systemic risk for a company. Here's what leaders need to take away:

- 1 Compliance is a team sport.** A siloed approach to regulatory problems is no longer viable. If one facility is facing scrutiny, the entire company is vulnerable unless leadership takes a coordinated, proactive approach.
- 2 Scarcity breeds risk.** Most firms treat compliance as a cost center, often running it lean. But when resources are scarce, reallocation creates exposure elsewhere. It's time to think about compliance resourcing the way you think about cybersecurity: as a firm-wide shield, not a plug-the-hole tactic.
- 3 Prevention pays off.** Facilities with pollution prevention technologies were far less likely to be affected by these spillover violations. Investing in proactive systems isn't just good PR—it's good risk management.
- 4 Reputation matters.** Public firms were less prone to compliance spillovers. Why? The reputational hit of regulatory noncompliance travels fast in markets. Transparency and external accountability can be powerful tools for driving internal discipline.

The Bottom Line

Enforcement actions aren't isolated incidents—they ripple across a company. If you're only focused on the site that got caught, you're missing the bigger picture. Smart leaders will treat a single violation as a signal to strengthen, not weaken, firm-wide compliance.

This is a wake-up call: Environmental compliance isn't just about avoiding penalties—it's about managing organizational risk, reputation, and resilience.

At the Erb Institute, our faculty are not only advancing the field of business and sustainability in the classroom—they're also shaping the global conversation. Through commentary, essays, interviews, and research published in leading outlets, they are challenging assumptions, sparking dialogue, and offering new frameworks for action. Here are a few recent highlights.

In Print & In Practice

FINANCIAL TIMES

Professor Andy Hoffman was featured in two recent *Financial Times* essays (January 22, 2025, and April 24, 2025) urging business leaders and educators to rethink the traditional growth imperative. He challenges prevailing assumptions about endless economic expansion and makes a compelling case for redefining success through the lens of sustainability and societal well-being.



In the "Business Education is Broken: Here Are Strategies to Fix It" article (published May 9, 2024) on Harvard Business Publishing, Professor Andy Hoffman outlines six actionable reforms to modernize MBA programs. Drawing on his extensive experience, he critiques the dominant shareholder-value paradigm and advocates integrating ecological limits, systems thinking, and multidisciplinary perspectives into business education. Hoffman calls on educators and administrators to overhaul the curriculum—not just append sustainability courses—to prepare students for complex global challenges.

Stanford SOCIAL INNOVATION Review

In *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (Summer 2025), Professor Andy Hoffman's book *Business School and the Noble Purpose of the Market* is reviewed as part of a broader discussion on the evolving role of business education. The review highlights Hoffman's call for business schools to embrace a higher purpose and prepare students to serve both markets and society.

Inc.

In *Inc.* (April 22, 2024), Professor Tom Lyon offers expert insight on how companies can steer clear of greenwashing. Quoted in an article featuring Everlane's Chief Sustainability Officer, Lyon outlines clear strategies for building authentic and credible sustainability practices that stand up to scrutiny.

MIT Sloan Management Review

In *MIT Sloan Management Review* (April 22, 2025), Professor Andy Hoffman contributes a striking excerpt from his book *Business School and the Noble Purpose of the Market*, titled "Rethink the Growth Imperative." Hoffman challenges the deeply entrenched belief that continuous economic growth is essential for business relevance and societal prosperity. Instead, he urges leaders and educators to consider ecological limits and alternative models of growth that balance resilience with sustainability.

Awards



Sara Soderstrom Named 2024 Thurnau Professor

Sara Soderstrom was named a 2024 Arthur F. Thurnau Professor—one of the University of Michigan's highest honors recognizing exceptional contributions to undergraduate education.

A longtime faculty leader within the Erb Institute and a champion of interdisciplinary learning, Soderstrom holds joint appointments in Organizational Studies (LSA), Program in the Environment (LSA and SEAS), and the Ross School of Business. Her work bridges business and sustainability, and her classes challenge students to think critically—and creatively—about how organizations can help both people and the planet thrive.

Soderstrom's impact goes far beyond the classroom. Since 2020, she has led the creation and growth of the Erb Undergraduate Fellows Program, extending Erb's legacy of leadership in business and sustainability to undergraduates for the first time. She has mentored more than 160 students through research, honors theses, internships, and independent studies—and she's earned six teaching awards along the way.

The Thurnau Professorship is a well-deserved recognition of Soderstrom's dedication to teaching, mentorship, and innovation. We're proud to have her as part of the Erb community.



Andrew Hoffman 2024 PRME Faculty Teaching Award

Andy Hoffman, the Holcim (US) Professor of Sustainable Enterprise at the University of Michigan, has received the 2024 Principles for Responsible Management Education (PRME) Faculty Teaching Award for his course *Management as a Calling*. The course is one of five to be honored worldwide at schools located in the United States, Brazil, Hungary, and India.

PRME, an initiative of the UN Global Compact, presents its esteemed award for impactful pedagogical innovations that accelerate the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across a variety of business school disciplines. Submissions were received from over 800 institutions in more than 90 countries from PRME's extensive community of business and management schools.

Hoffman, who holds joint appointments at the Stephen M. Ross School of Business and the School for Environment and Sustainability, was selected under the management discipline for the course PRME recognized for its "profound impact on students' personal and professional development," and its "commitment to excellence in education [that] prepares students not only for successful careers but also for lives enriched with meaning and ethical leadership."

"I'm very honored to receive the award," says Hoffman, "but it's less about me than it is about validating a course that is completely unorthodox."



Tom Lyon World Sustainability Award

Tom Lyon, Dow Professor of Sustainable Science, Technology and Commerce, was recently granted the World Sustainability Award from the MDPI Sustainability Foundation. The award, totaling \$100,000 between him and his co-awardees, recognizes Lyon's contribution to corporate sustainability.

Lyon, who also serves as a professor of business economics and public policy at Michigan Ross and professor of environment and sustainability at the School for Environment and Sustainability, was nominated and selected by leaders of the sustainability community.



It was quite humbling to realize that my co-winners this year were having important impacts on the ground, including bringing sanitation to villages in Africa and conserving endangered wildlife in India. My work to drive improvements in corporate sustainability seemed abstract by comparison, but I hope that it will pay dividends in the future and is perhaps already doing so.

The course, inspired by Hoffman's book *Management as a Calling* (Stanford Business Books, 2021), is centered around immersive off-site retreat experiences—the first of which is held at U-M's Biological Station—where students participate in reflective exercises, mindfulness practices, and community engagements to formulate personal mission statements.

"The retreats are designed to help students examine what kind of businessperson they want to be, what kind of legacy they want to have," says Hoffman. "I think our students are hungry for this kind of content. Too much of business education is focused on the rational intellect and not enough on the aspirational heart."

Hoffman related that student response to the course has been extremely positive—many describing it as one of the formative moments or experiences in their business education.

In a story featuring the *Management as a Calling* course in *Michigan Today* (January 26, 2024), former Erb student Celia Bravard MBA/MS '23 said that the retreats and guest lectures "solidified" her goal to use "my talents and education combined with my love for science and compassion for people to aid in catalyzing solutions for the climate crisis."

Our Board

The Erb Institute is proud to be guided by the Strategic Advisory Council (SAC), a distinguished group of executive-level leaders who bring deep expertise across business, sustainability, and society.

The SAC offers strategic guidance on emerging trends that influence global markets and the broader world. Their insight helps shape the institute's priorities and strengthens our ability to drive meaningful, real-world impact.

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Our Team

The Erb Institute team works behind the scenes to support our students, faculty, and alumni, grow our impact, and steward our mission. Here, we invite you to get to know the people guiding our work and shaping what comes next.



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For nearly three decades, our donors have helped shape what the Erb Institute is today—a vibrant, values-driven community preparing leaders to create a more sustainable and just world through business.

Thank you for your generous support in 2024 and 2025, and over the past 29 years. Your contributions have helped us fund critical experiences beyond the classroom, support leading-edge sustainability research at the University of Michigan, and provide scholarships and awards to deserving Erb graduate students. As we look ahead to the Erb Institute's 30th anniversary, we're energized by your continued partnership and inspired by what we can accomplish—together.



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