ISEN 472 Climate Activism and its Business Impacts (0.5 credit)

Instructor:
Sarene Riley Marshall, https://www.linkedin.com/in/sarene-marshall-41559927/ (Links to an external site.)

Faculty Sponsor and Guest Lecturer:
Dr. Brayden King, https://www.kellogg.northwestern.edu/faculty/directory/king_brayden.aspx (Links to an external site.)

Office Hours: By appointment

Class Room: Frances Searle 2407

Class Timing: Mondays, 12:30-3:30pm CST

Course Synopsis: This course will offer an overview of climate activism and its business impacts over time. It will analyze the way in which consumer behavior, public policy and corporate practices are interrelated and affected by activism of different types. Students will gain an understanding of how today’s activism has built on the past and will investigate what has changed — demographics, consumer attitudes, global messaging and social media. Students will learn about different components of activism that are impacting businesses, and the variety of ways companies have related and responded to activists. Case studies and current events will be used to bring the modern role of climate activism to life for a variety of stakeholders.

Course Goals:

• **Understanding Climate Activism & Its History**: Students will understand the varied forms that activism generally – and climate activism in particular – takes, especially when aimed at business.

• **Impact Analysis of Activism**: Students will analyze the impacts of different forms of activism from different perspectives, such as financial, reputational, operational, and political.

• **Changing Demographics & Attitudes**: The course will consider how the values and priorities of modern consumers are changing and how shifting demographics affect climate activism specifically.
• **Business Responses to Activism**: Students will explore ways in which companies can relate to and react to activists, including legal, regulatory, marketing, financial and operational responses.

**Grading Policy:**

• Grades will be assigned based on all the work you have completed during the semester following the traditional practice of A=90-100, B=80-89, C=70-79, D=60-69, F<60, and adjusted for Northwestern Spring 2020 policies for online learning.

**Grading/Assessment:**

Grading will be based on the following rubric:

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<th>Component</th>
<th>Weight</th>
<th>Details</th>
<th>Due</th>
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<tr>
<td>Class Participation</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Students will be expected to attend class with all readings complete. Students should be prepared to engage in thoughtful dialogue, both about the topic questions posed by the instructor and discussion questions generated by classmates.</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
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<td>Case Analysis Papers (x2)</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>Written, individual, 2-3 page submissions. Students will be given a case study, which they will have to analyze using the methods learned in class. They will have to answer questions about the methods and impacts of climate activism, and corporate responses.</td>
<td>Week #2, Week #3</td>
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<td>Final Paper</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>Students will find an instance of a climate movement targeting a company. Students will be asked to write a 4-5 page paper analyzing the tactics of the activists, the final impact, and the corporate response. Students should explore the demands of the movement, the factors that may have led to its success or failure, and the rationale behind the company’s response.</td>
<td>Week #5</td>
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<td>Weekly Topic</td>
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| **1: Course Overview and Foundations: Climate Change, Demographics, Activism** | - Introduction to course: syllabus, logistics, and grading.  
- Climate Change 101 – science, solutions, stakeholders.  
  - What change is needed? By whom/when? What types of companies will/should play a role?  
- Portrait of a (Climate) Activist.  
  - Who are they? What are their goals and tactics? What are their direct and indirect ways of pressuring corporations? What roles do non-governmental organizations (NGOs) play? Has this changed over time?  
- Understanding the market  
  - How have demographics changed? What are the values and choices of millennials + Gen-Z? Does climate change affect them differently?  
- Climate activism in the 20th and 21st centuries  
  - Similarities/differences from other types of activism (more business–focused)? Successful and failed (climate) activism. |

**Required Readings:**


**Supplemental Readings:**
2: Modes of Activism: Sources and Strategies

- What are the different forms in which modern-day activism manifests?
- What is the role of mass media and its coverage of activism?
- What factors have influenced the growth of organic activism? Where do technology and social media fit in? (e.g. Arab spring)
- Can activism come from inside a business? How do the dynamics differ?
- How is climate activism specifically different? Could climate activism be considered more government-focused rather than corporate-focused?
- What roles have corporations themselves played in climate activism (e.g. US Climate Action Partnership, We are Still In, etc.)?
- What has driven recent activity (Greta Thunberg, #FridaysforFuture)?

Required Readings:

Supplemental Readings:


CASE ANALYSIS #1

- Which activist tactics yield which kinds of impacts on businesses? Do impacts vary by industry, region?
- What are the financial, operational, regulatory, and reputational impacts of activism on business? How are they inter-related?
- How are other types of organizations – such as cities/governments, financial institutions, or academic institutions – impacted by activism, and what does that mean for businesses?
- Are certain tactics (e.g., boycotts) more effective than other methods (e.g., divest movements)?

Guest Lecture: Dr. Brayden King

Required Readings:

- Employees are Fighting for a New Cause at Work: The Climate. (Links to an external site.) EcoWatch, April 27, 2020.

**CASE ANALYSIS #2**

4. Corporate Responses to Activism: Defense vs. Offense, Deep vs. Superficial

- How have companies responded to climate activism?
  - Explore options, from new product development to greenwashing to lawsuits. Where does CSR fit?
- What proactive moves have corporates taken?
- Have corporations capitalized on the young demographic's values? How?
- Where do B corps and Socially Responsible Investment Funds and other constructs fit in?
- How do corporates respond to internal activism? What is an effective way to balance a culture of internal activism with productivity?

**Required Readings:**


**Supplemental Readings:**


5: APPLICATION: Climate Activism and Exxon Mobil

- In-class analysis of protests and activism against Exxon Mobil in Dallas and New York.
- How does activism tie into the fact that Exxon was standing trial at the time?
- Have protests had an effect in shaping Exxon’s company policy? Has Exxon’s CSR focus been affected by activism?
This analysis provides practice for students to write their final papers.

**Required Readings:**

- [https://exxonknew.org/](https://exxonknew.org/) (Links to an external site.)
- [https://www.climateliabilitynews.org/2019/01/16/exxon-climate-change-drilled/](https://www.climateliabilitynews.org/2019/01/16/exxon-climate-change-drilled/) (Links to an external site.)