

Advising Christian Business Students in an Age of Corporate Social Activism

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ABSTRACT: Attitudes conflicting with biblical teaching have become common in corporate boardrooms resulting in corporate social activism. This trend challenges Christian business professors who advise students seeking job opportunities. By applying Herrity's proposed theory of faith integration, a framework for advising Christian business students in an age of corporate social activism will be proposed. Encouragement for business faculty to build on the proposed advising approach will also be provided.

KEYWORDS: corporate social activism, Christian business faculty, advising

INTRODUCTION

As a business professor at a Christian college, I especially enjoy discussing career planning and employment opportunities with students. These discussions often entail answering questions about companies or business sectors, supplying information about the roles and responsibilities of a particular job, and providing advice on preparing a resume. Even more rewarding is helping to guide students as they identify job opportunities, interview, and accept their first job. My discussions are based on insights gained over decades of experience working in what is typically, inside of academia, called industry. My guidance and advice also come, however, from the unique *in loco parentis* perspective inherent in the tight-knit nature of a residential campus community.

In addition to faculty advising about students' potential career paths, many institutions provide students with specific career advice and resources through a career services office. Beginning as freshmen, students can use tools to assess their personality, interests, and strengths. As students progress through their education, campus career services furnish varied job opportunities and contacts with prospective employers through campus job fairs or employer visits. This allows students to explore options and hone their interests and vocational direction. As upperclassmen, students have access to tools and resources to aid them in deciding upon and securing their first job, including discussions with busi-

ness faculty. These resources, whether formal or informal, offer students substantial advice and direction to help guide them in the initial stages of their professional journey.

These discussions, however, are becoming increasingly difficult to have with business students. This is not because students lack the interest or aspiration to secure employment. Nor are they difficult because faculty, staff, or administrators are unwilling to offer sound advice. Today, one of the greatest difficulties in guiding Christian business students to the right job opportunity is the trend toward a form of corporate social activism that runs counter to the traditional biblical principles that are the foundation of Christian higher education. The purpose of this article is to bring to light the challenges of advising undergraduate business students in an environment of corporate social activism and to provide guidance to business professors at Christian colleges and universities in their interaction with students.

In recent years, societal attitudes and ideas conflicting with Christian biblical teaching have become common in boardrooms and have produced varying forms of corporate social activism. This trend extends well beyond the standard notion of corporate social responsibility and even beyond corporate statements on current social issues. Some of America's largest corporations, prompted by a small but vocal group of stakeholders, are promoting an agenda of moral relativism to support or normalize beliefs or behaviors that conflict with biblical teaching. The agenda is advanced,

however, under the guise of tolerance and inclusion. In numerous companies, activist social views are dominant, and employees holding traditional views are forced to remain quiet or are openly attacked for their positions. This presents a new challenge for faculty who advise undergraduate business students at Christian colleges and universities.

Corporate activism that runs counter to the principles of biblical teaching necessitates a reevaluation of how business faculty in Christian institutions should advise students about their career paths. This article will first focus on the dynamics exerting pressure on students to secure post-graduate employment and highlight the implications this pressure has on making sound value-based decisions about job opportunities. Next, two specific examples of corporate activism inconsistent with biblical views will be analyzed to illustrate the changing employment landscape facing soon-to-be graduates. A framework for providing career advice to business students considering these challenges will then be proposed. Finally, faculty will be encouraged to further explore novel approaches to advising Christian business students.

DO YOU HAVE A JOB YET?

The prevailing attitude about the college-level preparation of business students focuses primarily on the skills necessary to secure a job following graduation. Students expect to gain a skill set related to their majors that they can immediately apply. Employers expect functional competence in their newly hired employees (Maloni et al., 2019). Parents expect their son or daughter to be able to gain an entry-level job at a salary that enables their child to become financially independent. In addition to the expectations of students, employers, and parents, students' financial needs add to the pressure of securing gainful employment as soon as possible following graduation. Approximately 65% of students seeking a bachelor's degree carry student debt, which averages \$39,000 at graduation (Hanson, 2021). Rising college tuition is magnified when combined with the increasing length of time students take to complete an undergraduate degree—a median of fifty-two months among 2015-2016 first-time bachelor's degree recipients (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). This increases the debt of the average student, adding to the pressure to find a job as quickly as possible. Higher education is expensive, and students are borrowing against their future to secure the skills necessary to compete in today's job market. Therefore, finding a job as soon as possible after graduation is a priority. Helping students understand the basic principles of finance or marketing is important to helping debt-laden students. Christian business faculty who

concentrate exclusively on providing these functional skills, however, fulfill only half of their responsibility. To educate the whole person—a major calling of Christian higher education—faculty must help students develop both functional skills and a set of values and principles that will guide their post-college employment lives.

In addition to time and money, other pressures contribute to student stress, including academic pressure, the pressure associated with increased independence, and competitive pressures from their peers (Sukup & Clayton, 2021). Finding gainful employment before or as soon as possible after completing one's degree can help relieve these pressures. Factors like those outlined above, either alone or in combination, may prompt students to make employment decisions simply to secure a job. This could sacrifice, or at least minimize, the importance of making an employment decision based on one's Christian values.

CORPORATE DRIFT

What are students facing the pressure to be gainfully employed to pay off their debt likely to encounter when they enter the corporate world today? A different notion of what defines a business. It has long been a key principle of free-market capitalism that the role of business is to provide goods or services to meet the needs of customers at a profit, while returning value to investors (Smith, 1991). This approach applies to a small pizza shop the same way it applies to the world's largest corporation. Many corporations, however, have shifted from this core purpose into advocacy for social or political causes having little, if nothing, to do with the manufacture, distribution, or sale of goods and services.

It is difficult to identify a single tipping point that caused this shift. The current attitude of corporations such as Amazon, Google, Black Rock, and Starbucks regarding their role in society, however, differs from the traditional view of a socially responsible corporation. The notion that business has a responsibility to society began seventy years ago with Howard R. Bowen, an American economist widely regarded as the father of modern corporate social responsibility (CSR). In his landmark 1953 book, *Social Responsibilities of the Businessman*, Bowen wrote, "Corporate Social Responsibility refers to the obligations of businessmen to pursue those policies, make those decisions, or to follow those lines of action that are desirable in terms of the objectives and values of our society" (p. 6). This definition has become the basis for modern CSR principles. According to the Association of Corporate Citizenship Professionals

(ACCP), corporate social responsibility began to become popular in the United States in the 1970s, inspired by the concept of a social contract between business and society (Association of Corporate Citizen Professionals, 2022). Since then, the notion of a business's role in society has changed from improving the conditions of the community and environment in which a business operates to taking a stand on social or political issues that have little to do with serving the needs of customers or shareholders. Key events, combined with the power of social media, have accelerated the corporate shift from a traditional role of business in society to one focused on social activism. Political events, such as passage of the 2021 Georgia Election Integrity Act and the January 6 riot, as well as societal events, such as the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests, are notable for their influence on corporate America.

These events, combined with vocal internal and external corporate stakeholders, provided the impetus for a corporate response. For example, in July 2021, Toyota announced that its Political Action Committee would no longer be making donations to those members of Congress who objected to the certification of the 2020 Presidential election results (Toyota Corporation, 2021). Toyota's action resulted not from these members' lack of support for the auto industry but from public pressure generated from political and social advocacy groups—organizations that Toyota considers stakeholders in the company. In a similar example, large corporations such as Coca-Cola and Delta Airlines, following public pressure, opposed the passage of Georgia's 2021 voting law (Delta Airlines, 2021; The Coca-Cola Company, 2021).

Racism, oppression, and a lack of stewardship of earth's resources run counter to basic Christian tenets and should be actively addressed across society, including in Christian colleges and universities. Should corporations, however, play a role in addressing these types of societal issues? Should businesses take a stance on issues that do not directly relate to their products and services? Doing so has the potential to both attract and alienate customers with a net number often difficult to ascertain. Coca-Cola, for example, garnered both substantial public backlash and support for opposing Georgia's voting law (Meisenzahl, 2021; Porterfield, 2021). Taking a public stance on social issues also directly opposes a strict traditional free-market principle that businesses should only take those actions that generate value for shareholders (Friedman, 1970). On the other hand, as major social entities, should businesses not actively engage with their surrounding environment? The "triple bottom line" approach to business, first advocated by John Elkington, is a prime example of the latter argument. Businesses, while

earning profits for their shareholders, Elkington contends, should play a leading role in sustainable development strategies to positively impact populations and the natural environment (Elkington, 1994; Elkington, 1998).

Many business professors discuss the topic of corporate social responsibility and the role of business in society in courses centered on business strategy, business ethics, or global business issues. This is the first time most students are exposed to varying viewpoints about the nature and role of business. Exposure to these differing perspectives is positive. Business professors should spur students to think about the social context of their chosen majors in addition to teaching how to read a profit and loss statement and recite the four P's of marketing. Analyzing the broader role of business in society may also motivate students to seek internships or employment opportunities with organizations consistent with their values. Some students may view business contributions to society as limited to producing a beneficial product or service. Other students may be motivated to work for organizations that have principled viewpoints on social causes or which take a public stance on contemporary issues like the environment. But what happens when the social views of corporations run counter to the biblical principles upon which business courses at Christian institutions are based? How then should business professors, in their role as advisors, proceed?

EXAMPLES OF EXTREME CORPORATE ACTIVISM

Associates in the business world, former students, colleagues from previous employers, and talent managers in various organizations frequently reach out to business faculty with employment opportunities for their students. In addition, colleges and universities routinely provide students with employment leads, host career fairs, or maintain active job boards. The potential for sourcing job opportunities is plentiful but how should students and faculty evaluate those prospects in today's market? The following instances serve as examples of the challenge facing business faculty in advising Christian business students in an age of corporate social activism.

Walt Disney

The Walt Disney Company is one of the most iconic and successful entertainment companies in the world. By many measures, Disney is a very desirable landing spot for any business graduate. In 2022, the company ranked #145 on the Global Fortune 500 list, #50 on the U.S. Fortune 500, and #5 on the list of *Fortune Magazine's*

World's Most Admired Companies. The company annually generates over \$67 billion in revenue and \$1.9 billion in profit and has a market value of approximately \$250 billion (*Fortune*, 2022). From a financial perspective, Disney and its affiliated entertainment companies are wildly successful businesses. Over the past two years, however, Disney has also used its platform as a worldwide business leader to take public positions on various social issues. For example, the company pledged \$5 million to support several social justice causes and organizations during the summer of 2020 (The Walt Disney Company, 2020). In spring 2022, in a more extreme form of activism, the company generated significant public controversy by opposing Florida's Parental Rights in Education bill. In addition to the company's public statement of opposition, a leaked internal meeting video from some employees indicated that the company would use its portrayal of characters in television and film to promote alternative lifestyles and gender identities (Richardson, 2022). Disney employees who opposed the company's activist positions on the gender identity issue reported being marginalized by the company and by their fellow employees (Foley, 2022).

The actions of The Walt Disney Company represent a major change in how businesses are dealing with social issues. Disney's actions have raised the debate about the role of business in society to a new level and have direct ramifications for professors who seek to educate future Christian business leaders and advise them in their career choices. The entertainment company's stated goal of promoting alternative gender identities and lifestyles through the content they produce, as well as its reported hostility toward employees with traditional Christian values, necessitates rethinking the advice faculty members offer to students who seek employment with Disney. The company is rejecting orthodox biblical principles regarding the definition and description of gender identities. This does not, however, imply that individuals should be judged. The concept of *imago Dei*, which teaches that all people reflect the image of God, means that all individuals have value, even those who hold different views. For Christians, however, the creation narrative in Genesis, specifically Genesis 1:27, as well as the basic tenets of human biology provide solid support for a traditional, biblical definition of men and women. Disney's stated position contradicts this traditional belief.

Dobbs v. Jackson

In another example of corporate social activism, several prominent businesses have taken a public stance on one of the most divisive social issues in the United States. In May 2022, an initial draft majority opinion of a Supreme Court

case titled *Dobbs v. Jackson* was leaked to the press. The draft opinion indicated that a majority of Supreme Court justices would vote to overturn *Roe v. Wade*, the landmark 1973 decision guaranteeing federal protection to a constitutional right to abortion (Gerstein & Ward, 2022).

The debate between pro-life and pro-choice advocates ranges from legalistic and constitutional to ethical and moral. The topic routinely surfaces in political discourse and in the media and is a subject that produces passionate arguments on both sides. Yet until recently, the public viewpoints of corporations or their CEOs about the topic were nearly non-existent. In an age of corporate social activism, however, a company's position on this discordant social issue is actively sought by the media and proactively pronounced by many organizations. In response to the leaked draft majority Supreme Court opinion, several prominent companies issued statements opposing the potential reversal of *Roe v. Wade* (Marquardt, 2022). Among these organizations were Amazon, Apple, Citigroup, Starbucks, and Tesla, all attractive employers and top performing companies in their sectors. Yet none of these companies produce products or provide services related to the topic central in this debate. As an employee at one of these firms, however, one's work, health care, or Political Action Committee contributions would directly support the company's social activism.

Members of the Christian faith, across denominations, universally agree on the value and dignity of life. All humans have value because they are created in the image of God, formed in that image from the beginning of life (Genesis 1:27; Psalm 139:13). Because of the dignity of life, human beings are called to respect life at all stages, including the life of those not yet born. Corporate activism on behalf of a position in direct conflict with the dignity of life is another example of a stance that rejects biblical principles. Any business faculty member advising students about job opportunities at companies such as those noted in this example should do so with the knowledge that these organizations stand in direct opposition to traditional biblical views. Soon-to-be graduates holding traditional views must also be aware of the activist stances taken by an organization as they consider their employment options. An age of corporate social activism requires a rethinking of how business faculty and student job seekers frame the discussion of employment opportunities in light of the values and attitudes taken by prospective employers.

OPTIONS

Considering the increasingly active social role played by businesses today, business faculty members can take three

different routes when advising Christian business students about potential job opportunities. The ultimate decision lies with the student, but the active role business faculty take as advisors and mentors necessitate a discussion of corporations' values as reflected by their social activism. The possible approaches are a very faculty-directive approach, a more collaborative faculty-student approach, and a faculty-hands-off approach. Each has merits and drawbacks when considering corporate activism and the role corporate values have in determining the job fit for students.

Option 1

First, faculty could assess the values and attitudes of potential employers as they relate to traditional Christian principles and then recommend or not recommend a company. On one hand, this direct approach leaves no doubt about the view of the advisor and may strongly influence the student. On the other hand, this approach requires substantial knowledge about the company, especially its stance on relevant social issues and how those stances align with biblical values. This approach would require a significant amount of research, provided the company is publicly held, and considerable time on the part of already stretched faculty. This would reduce the job opportunities afforded students as Christian colleges and universities would need to create a list of potential employers that align with their schools' values. Given the denominational and theological variation across Christian higher education, and even among professors at individual campuses, this approach is not realistic. Lastly, this approach would inhibit Christian businesspeople from following Christ's call to be salt and light in the world, of working in companies where they could potentially change the hearts and minds of other employees.

Option 2

Alternatively, faculty members could take a less direct approach and guide students by discussing the values of various companies and whether they align with biblical principles. Employment decisions would still be up to students but could be made with the knowledge that company management and a company's work environment may be at best cool to a Christian employee and at worst openly hostile. Collaborative discussions with Christian business students would enable them to play a more active role in the discussion and take a greater sense of ownership in the decision. The desire of some students to view business as a mission field could be explored. This collaborative option would allow the student to provide input and share their perspective with a trusted advisor. The collaborative approach, however, also requires a significant amount of

knowledge about a company's values and degree of corporate activism in light of biblical principles. This still requires the time and resources necessary to acquire such knowledge, although much of the research about the company would fall to the student. Moreover, some business faculty may find it difficult not to be directive when they see a student potentially heading in a direction with which they disagree.

Option 3

Finally, faculty members could take more of a hands-off approach regarding their advisees' employment decisions. The student would be responsible for thoroughly vetting the company and deciding accordingly. This approach lessens the burden on faculty and places the onus on the student. At some point, students must bear the responsibility for making important life decisions. Deciding on a first job is a powerful learning experience. A hands-off approach could be viewed as an effective way to help students learn life lessons. The downside of this laissez-faire approach is that a job opportunity is a powerful draw and the prospect of full-time employment with a regular paycheck may tempt students to sacrifice, or at the very least compromise, their values for short-term gain. After taking the job, students may experience dissatisfaction because their values and purpose conflict with those of the company. This may lead them to underperform, feel marginalized by their co-workers, and leave the organization. In addition, less involvement from faculty members could be seen as an abdication of their responsibility to students and their institution. Business faculty at Christian institutions are charged with educating the whole person and providing guidance beyond simply what courses to schedule. A hands-off approach does not fulfill this obligation.

RECOMMENDATION

Among the options noted above, the one which is the most realistic, achievable, and actionable is for business faculty members and students to engage in a shared conversation that seeks to find an alignment between the student's values and strengths and the potential employer's stated values and skills sought in each position. This approach is based on Andrew Herrity's (2015) proposed theory for preparing students to maintain integration of Christian faith as they start their careers. Herrity put forth the theory to address the struggle business students have in living out their faith during the first years of their work life. The theory is based on what students need to learn and how best to learn, leading to an application of Social Learning

theory called demonstration-based training (Herrity, 2015). According to Herrity's theory, the two most important questions underpinning what students need to learn before entering the work world are "What are my values and what are my strengths?" These questions can be answered using various assessment tools and inventories. From the perspective of how best to learn, the theory suggests that individuals with workplace experience engage with students and model behaviors that will help students cope with the challenges associated with faith integration at work. This is accomplished through personal stories, demonstrations, and illustrations (Herrity, 2015). The main elements of Herrity's proposed theory, notably the assessment of values and strengths and engagement with an experienced individual, can help faculty advise Christian business students by aligning students' moral principles with an organization's values and strengths in the context of a given job opportunity.

Values

Values are a clear indication of enduring principles that guide a person's or an organization's actions without regard to the surrounding conditions or situations (Collins & Porras, 1994). Although individual values are developed over time through experience or guidance from others, many students cannot clearly articulate these values. Herrity (2015) recommends that prior to an advisory session with a student regarding job opportunities, a values inventory assessment tool be completed. Alternatively, an in-class exercise or written assignment may be used to help students construct a values inventory (Herrity, 2015). This could be done at the outset of a business program capstone course, typically taken during a student's senior year. The most likely source of organizational values is the corporate website, specifically sections related to mission, vision, values, or principles. In considering a job, an employee's alignment to the mission and vision of an organization benefits the employer by enhancing employee motivation, performance, and retention.

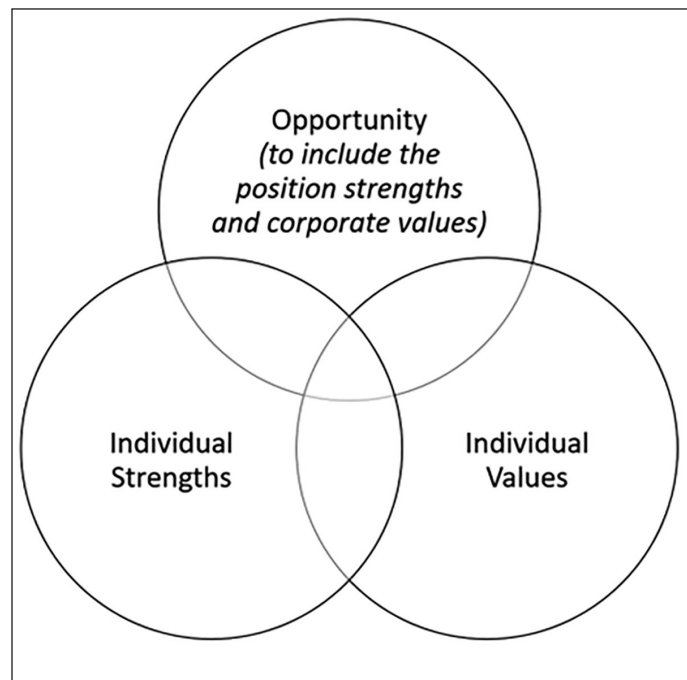
Strengths

Employers seek specific strengths in potential employees, usually outlined in a job description. These strengths are the functional abilities and/or the soft skills necessary to perform a particular job. Strengths are those enduring and unique talents that a person performs at a consistently high level (Buckingham & Clifton, 2020). Similar to the values inventory assessment, tools which identify individual strengths are widely available but vary in their objectives, design, and output (Barnett, 2011; Buckingham & Clifton, 2020). Unlike a values-based assessment, individual strength

assessments are commonly used to guide students in secondary and higher education to plan for their course of study, select a major, and choose a career. Students, therefore, are likely familiar with and experienced in their use. In addition, many career services departments on college campuses offer a strengths assessment to students, especially incoming first-year students. Alternatively, Herrity (2015) also suggests using an in-class presentation or written exercise to help students identify their strengths. Again, the in-class approach could be utilized in a course such as a senior business capstone.

From the perspective of an organization, strengths are typically outlined in the job description associated with a particular position and are usually delineated between strengths that are required and ones that are recommended. The required skills necessary to succeed in a particular role may encompass functional skills, such as proficiency in a specific software package, but they may also involve soft skills and experiences such as the ability to work collaboratively or to lead others. Aligning the individual strengths of a student with the skill set required in a particular job is likely to produce consistently high job performance, thus benefiting the firm and providing employee job fulfillment. A visual description of the recommended approach is found in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Alignment of values, strengths, and opportunity based on Herrity (2015)



CONCLUSION

Business students today face many challenges in moving from college to their first job. Fortunately, faculty members are there to guide and advise students in this unique journey. Corporate social activism running counter to traditional biblical principles makes the task more difficult. This trend extends beyond traditional corporate social responsibility and corporate support of social causes like climate change. In an age of corporate social activism, the stated values of a corporation as expressed through their support of specific social issues clash with biblical teaching. Recent developments in corporate activism require business faculty in Christian institutions to reevaluate how to best advise business students about their career paths or specific job responsibilities.

When engaged in discussions with students regarding potential job opportunities, business faculty in Christian colleges should neither abdicate their responsibility as advisors nor attempt to prescribe what students should do. The best approach is an in-depth conversation designed to align a student's values and strengths with those desired by a potential employer in the context of the job opportunity at hand. This approach is based on Herrity's (2015) advice about how to prepare students to maintain the integration of their Christian faith when starting a career. The alignment of the values, strengths, and opportunities of students and businesses can provide benefits for both the prospective employee and the organization.

Corporate social activism is likely to increase in the coming years, making these prescriptions even more relevant. Hopefully, Christian business professors will better understand the challenge of advising business students in the contemporary business and social climate and will explore and build on the approach outlined in this article.

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