

Social Mobility and Societal Impact: Transformative Initiatives at an AACSB Accredited College of Business at a Predominantly Black Institution

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This article explores the pivotal role of an AACSB-accredited business school at a predominantly Black institution in enhancing social mobility and addressing societal challenges through education and community engagement. It delves into how the institution integrates societal impact into its mission and curriculum, demonstrating a commitment to shaping students who are adept in business and conscious of their societal responsibilities. The article emphasizes a shift towards more socially responsive business education by aligning educational programs with real-world social issues. It highlights various initiatives and centers within the school that drive these efforts, fostering a deep connection between academic pursuits and community needs, ultimately enhancing social mobility and societal impact.

Keywords: social mobility, societal impact, AACSB

INTRODUCTION

Universities play a critical role in facilitating social mobility by providing access to education, developing critical skills, and fostering environments where students can thrive and achieve their potential. Institutions with a significant percentage of its student body being African American and female, like Clayton State University, serve as transformative agents in their communities. These universities design programs specifically targeting social and economic mobility, ensuring that students from diverse backgrounds can advance their careers and contribute positively to society (Strategic Plan, 2024). By integrating societal impact into their missions and curricula, universities prepare graduates for successful careers and instill a sense of responsibility towards community development and social justice. This is evident in initiatives like service-learning projects, internships, and centers of excellence that connect academic learning with real-world challenges. Such programs empower students to become community leaders and change-makers, addressing issues like income inequality, educational disparities, and economic development (AACSB, 2023).

The evolving landscape of business education reflects a growing acknowledgment of the importance of societal impact. Institutions are increasingly integrating societal impact into their missions, curricula, and program outcomes, recognizing that business schools play a pivotal role in preparing graduates for successful careers and as agents of positive social change. This shift is part of a broader understanding that business and society are deeply interconnected and that the knowledge and skills imparted by business

education can and should be used for the collective good. AACSB International (AACSB), a global business education network, emphasizes that societal impact is at the core of business education's mission. The AACSB's business accreditation standards articulate this commitment, urging schools to contribute positively to society and make societal impact central to their educational offerings. This includes embedding societal impact in research, curriculum, and experiential learning opportunities to train students as change agents who can address the pressing challenges of today's world, such as sustainability, social justice, equality, and fairness (AACSB, 2023).

However, implementing this noble ideal presents a myriad of challenges. Defining and measuring societal impact in a quantifiable manner can be a complex endeavor (Rawhouser, Cummings, & Newbert, 2019). Aligning strategic initiatives with institutional missions and community needs requires careful consideration and collaboration. Balancing resource allocation between traditional academic pursuits and community engagement poses resource constraints. Moreover, evaluating the long-term effectiveness of societal impact initiatives demands innovative assessment methods and a commitment to continuous improvement.

Despite these challenges, the call for a more socially conscious business education remains undeniably urgent (Prieto, Phipps, Giugni, & Stott, 2021; Parker, 2018; Khurana, 2007; Spender, 2016). In the face of growing social inequalities, environmental degradation, and economic instability, business schools can leverage their expertise and resources to create positive change. The following sections will explore how Clayton State University's College of Business (CSU COB) navigates these challenges, showcasing its approach to developing and measuring impactful societal initiatives aligned with its mission and the needs of its community.

CSU COB's story is transformed from a traditional shotgun approach to community engagement to a focused, data-driven, and measurable model. As one of the pilot schools under AACSB's 2020 standards, CSU COB delved deep, critically assessing its initiatives. This introspection revealed that true impact demands more than sporadic outreach. CSU COB needed a compelling, mission-aligned strategy that targeted the needs of its community, maximized its resources, and measured its progress with precision. Thus, social mobility and community development became the guiding lights (Strategic Plan, 2024). The predominantly Black student body thrives on the promise of education as a transformative force. The CSU COB see themselves as a catalyst, empowering them to secure careers and actively uplift their communities. This is in line with Greenleaf (2002) who argued universities do not encourage economically vulnerable individuals to develop leadership skills and improve the communities in which they were raised; rather, they instill in them an aspiration to move into the upper class while leaving their communities behind.

Clayton State University, nestled in South Metro Atlanta, isn't just an academic institution; it catalyzes personal transformation and community improvement. A student body comprised of 62% African American and over 70% female, with an average student age of 27, Clayton State welcomes individuals seeking career advancement, skill development, and a chance to rewrite their stories. This is evident in the 77% of first-time full-time students who are Pell Grant recipients, representing families with a mean adjusted gross income of \$28,492 (the second lowest in the University System of Georgia).

EMPOWERING TRANSFORMATION

Clayton State University's vision to positively impact Georgia through accessible education and workforce development finds fertile ground in the College of Business. This vision isn't just wishful thinking; it's the guiding light for the College's mission: driving economic mobility through developing business professionals, educational outreach, and community development. Clayton State University focuses on providing a student-centered, experience-based learning environment. This signifies excellence, community engagement, and social mobility for Clayton State. The College echoes this with its mission to develop business professionals and drive economic mobility through an experience-based and skills-focused curriculum, applied scholarship, and community engagement, equipping students with the tools and opportunities to transform their lives and their communities. With service-learning projects, mandatory internship requirements, and career-focused skills development through the Career-Spine and Analytical

Spine initiatives, the College of Business ensures a business curriculum that is experience-based and skills-focused.

Beyond the Curriculum

The college's five centers of excellence go beyond traditional academics, serving as vehicles for social impact. Students and faculty collaborate on projects that address community needs, transforming classroom learning into tangible change. By aligning its mission and vision with the specific context of South Metro Atlanta, the college demonstrates a deep commitment to its students, their families, and the community. It's not just about preparing graduates for careers; it's about empowering them to become driving forces for a more prosperous and equitable society.

Connecting Initiatives and Centers to Community Needs

The College of Business at Clayton State University understands the unique challenges and opportunities of South Metro Atlanta, a community facing disparities in income, educational attainment, and economic development. Through its five Centers of Excellence and targeted initiatives (LifeVest & VITA), the college addresses these needs and empowers residents to build a brighter future. Here's how each center and initiative connects to specific community needs:

- **Center for Research on Economic Sustainability and Trends (CREST):** South Metro Atlanta faces economic challenges like high unemployment and income inequality. CREST addresses these by researching local trends and sustainability, informing initiatives that boost job creation, attract investment, and promote economic development. This research empowers community leaders to make data-driven decisions for a thriving economy.
- **Supply Chain Management Center:** Many local businesses struggle with inefficient supply chains, hindering their growth and competitiveness. This center provides expert consulting, training, and resources to optimize their supply chains, reduce costs, and improve responsiveness, ultimately strengthening the entire local business ecosystem.
- **Center for Women in Leadership:** South Metro Atlanta has a significant gender gap in leadership roles. This center tackles this by empowering women through leadership development programs, mentorship, and networking opportunities. This fosters greater diversity and inclusion in leadership positions across the community, leading to more equitable outcomes for all.
- **Center for Social Innovation and Sustainable Entrepreneurship:** Social and entrepreneurial challenges plaguing South Metro Atlanta. This center nurtures innovative solutions through entrepreneurship programs, innovation challenges, and community partnerships. This helps create sustainable businesses that address these challenges and build a more resilient and equitable future for the region.
- **Small Business Development Center:** The region has a high concentration of aspiring entrepreneurs who lack resources and guidance. This center provides them with business plan development, financial planning assistance, and access to capital, nurturing their entrepreneurial spirit and promoting economic growth through job creation and business expansion.
- **The LifeVest Program:** This initiative specifically addresses the needs of underserved high school students in South Metro Atlanta, many of whom come from low-income families and lack access to college readiness resources. By focusing on financial literacy, college planning, career exploration, and professional exposure, LifeVest empowers them to: 1) Break the cycle of poverty: Financial literacy skills help them manage finances, avoid debt, and plan for a secure future. 2) Increase college attendance and success: College readiness workshops guide them through the application process, financial aid options, and academic planning, boosting their chances of success in higher education. 3) Make informed career choices: Career exploration activities and exposure to diverse professions help them identify their strengths and interests, leading to fulfilling career paths. 4) Gain confidence and skills: Presentation skills

and personal planning workshops equip them with valuable life skills for navigating their academic and professional journeys.

- **The Volunteer Income Tax Assistance Program (VITA):** This initiative directly impacts low-income families in South Metro Atlanta by providing free tax preparation services. This helps them: 1) Maximize their tax refunds: Trained accounting students ensure accurate returns, helping families claim all eligible deductions and credits. 2) Improve financial literacy: Information sessions and educational materials equip families with basic financial knowledge and budgeting skills. 3) Increase financial stability: The additional income from refunds can alleviate financial stress and allow families to invest in their future.

Embedding Stakeholder Theory: A Model for Socially Responsible Business Education

The success of Clayton State University's College of Business in aligning its social impact initiatives with its mission and community needs finds strength in the theoretical framework of stakeholder theory. Championed by Freeman (1984), this theory challenges the traditional narrow focus on shareholder value, asserting that businesses have obligations to a wider range of stakeholders, including employees, customers, communities, and the environment. By considering the interests and priorities of these diverse groups, organizations can navigate a more ethical and sustainable path, ultimately achieving greater long-term success (Freeman, 1984).

Clayton State's College of Business exemplifies stakeholder theory in its very mission statement. Unlike traditional business schools solely focused on preparing students for lucrative careers, Clayton State explicitly prioritizes "social and economic mobility through developing business professionals, educational outreach, and community development" (Clayton State University, n.d.). This reflects a conscious commitment to stakeholder interests beyond traditional shareholders, acknowledging the college's impact and responsibility towards its students, the community, and society.

This commitment translates into concrete action by establishing five Centers of Excellence. Each center acts as a microcosm of stakeholder engagement, addressing specific community needs aligned with the interests of distinct stakeholder groups. The Center for Research on Economic Sustainability and Trends (CREST) empowers community leaders with data-driven insights, serving the interests of residents, businesses, and policymakers. The Supply Chain Management Center strengthens the local business ecosystem by optimizing operations for local companies, benefiting both businesses and their customers. Similarly, the Center for Women in Leadership tackles the gender gap in leadership roles, fostering inclusive growth and benefiting businesses, the community, and women. The Center for Social Innovation and Sustainable Entrepreneurship cultivates entrepreneurial solutions to social and environmental challenges, creating a more resilient future for residents, businesses, and the environment. Finally, the Small Business Development Center nurtures entrepreneurial aspirations, fostering economic growth and benefiting aspiring entrepreneurs, the community, and the job market.

These initiatives transcend mere philanthropic gestures; they represent a strategic implementation of stakeholder theory. By addressing community needs, the college builds goodwill and strengthens its reputation as a responsible and engaged institution, garnering trust and legitimacy from both internal and external stakeholders (Freeman, 1984). Furthermore, collaborations with local businesses, governments, and non-profit organizations create shared visions and drive collective impact, amplifying the college's reach and resources while fulfilling its stakeholder commitments.

Ultimately, this stakeholder-driven approach fosters a virtuous cycle. Engaged students, empowered by opportunities to contribute to the community, experience enhanced learning, motivation, and career readiness, becoming future stakeholders committed to positive societal impact. This, in turn, attracts diverse funding sources aligned with the college's mission, ensuring the sustainability and expansion of programs, further benefiting future generations of students and communities.

By meticulously linking its initiatives and the centers' activities to the specific needs of South Metro Atlanta, Clayton State University's College of Business transcends the walls of academia. By empowering individuals, fostering economic development, and tackling social challenges, the college contributes significantly to building a more prosperous and equitable future for the region.

THE IMPACT SO FAR

The College of Business at Clayton State University exemplifies the profound impact of integrating experience-based learning and essential skill development into academic curricula. This innovative educational approach has significantly contributed to enhancing economic mobility, as evidenced by its impressive rankings: #32 among Top Performers on Social Mobility in the Regional Universities South category by U.S. News & World Report (2023) and securing the #5 position in Georgia for Social Mobility and #3 for Student Experience as per the Wall Street Journal (2023). The foundation of these accolades lies in the College's distinctive programs, such as the Career Spine—a comprehensive framework that embeds critical career skills throughout the curriculum—and its Five Centers of Excellence, which are pivotal in driving initiatives in community development, sustainable entrepreneurship, leadership among women, supply chain management, and economic research. Additionally, the LifeVest Program equips underserved high school students with financial literacy, college readiness, and career exploration skills, while the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) Program offers indispensable tax preparation services to low-income families in South Metro Atlanta. Remarkably, 90% of Clayton State graduates secure full-time employment by graduation, underscoring the effectiveness of an experience-based educational model and the institution's commitment to community upliftment. Through these efforts, Clayton State University and its College of Business foster career success among their students and contribute to building a brighter future for the wider community, affirming the transformative power of education coupled with community engagement.

Proposed Impact Measures

Building upon the impactful journey of Clayton State University's College of Business, the next development phase emphasizes a strategic blueprint for amplifying and measuring the transformative influence of its initiatives. This forward-looking plan, termed "Proposed Impact Measures," is designed to elevate the College's contributions to community engagement, student success, and broader societal welfare.

Deepening Community Engagement and Impact is a cornerstone of this strategy, focusing on expanding research projects that address local business needs and societal challenges. By broadening the dissemination of research findings through media, workshops, and community events, and by quantifying the research's influence on policy, economic development, and business practices, the College aims to fortify its role as a pivotal community partner. Strengthening ties with local enterprises, chambers of commerce, and government bodies further underpins this commitment to communal prosperity.

Enhancing Student Development and Career Readiness reflects a commitment to nurturing well-rounded, career-ready graduates. This involves tracking and actively promoting student engagement in research, internships, and experiential learning, thereby enriching their educational journey. Monitoring career placements and salary benchmarks will underscore the effectiveness of the College's programs, while regular feedback from students will inform continuous curricular and programmatic refinement.

Securing Diverse Funding and Partnerships emerges as a critical endeavor to ensure the sustainability and expansion of the College's impact. Diversifying funding sources to encompass private, foundational, and corporate partnerships will enable a broader spectrum of initiatives. Strategic alliances with industry, non-profit, and social enterprise sectors will amplify the College's reach, facilitated by ongoing feedback mechanisms to gauge the satisfaction and perceived value of these partnerships.

Increasing Visibility and Influence aims to elevate the College's stature and impact through proactive media engagement, public interactions, and recognition of its achievements. By fostering deeper connections with student organizations and celebrating the successes of students, alumni, and community partners, the College aspires to showcase the profound and lasting effects of its work.

By concentrating on these pivotal areas, Clayton State University's College of Business aspires to not only sustain but significantly enhance its contribution to the educational, economic, and social fabric of the region. This strategic approach promises to chart a path of continued excellence and influence, driving positive change and fostering a legacy of empowerment and progress.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

As Clayton State University's College of Business embarks on this transformative journey, its pioneering approach provides a blueprint for business education that integrates societal impact at its core. The college's success underscores the importance of institutional, state, and federal policy support to amplify such initiatives. To ensure the sustainability and growth of these efforts, the following policy recommendations and future directions are proposed:

- **Funding and Grants:** Like Clayton State's model, governments and philanthropic organizations should prioritize funding for business schools that demonstrate a commitment to societal impact. This could include grants for developing community-oriented programs, research focusing on social challenges, and scholarships for students committed to social change.
- **Accreditation Standards:** Accrediting bodies like AACSB could further refine their standards to encourage business schools to demonstrate tangible societal impact. This would elevate the importance of societal impact in business education globally. **Partnership Incentives:** Policymakers should introduce incentives for businesses and non-profits to partner with educational institutions on societal impact initiatives. Tax incentives, public recognition, and streamlined partnership processes could facilitate more robust collaborations.
- **Expanding Community Engagement:** Clayton State's model can be extended through deeper, more systemic community engagement strategies. This includes long-term partnerships with community organizations and local governments to address systemic challenges such as economic development, social justice, and environmental sustainability.
- **Innovative Curriculum Development:** The future of business education lies in curricula that are responsive to market demands and proactive in addressing societal needs. Developing courses that blend business acumen with social innovation, ethical leadership, and sustainability practices will prepare graduates for the challenges of the 21st century.
- **Research and Thought Leadership:** Clayton State and similar institutions have the opportunity to become thought leaders in the space of socially conscious business education. By investing in research that explores the intersection of business and society, these schools can contribute valuable insights to both academic and practitioner communities.
- **Global Collaboration and Exchange:** To magnify their impact, business schools focused on societal impact should seek global partnerships. This could involve student and faculty exchanges, collaborative research projects, and shared best practices that transcend geographical boundaries.
- **Embracing Digital Transformation for Societal Impact:** As digital technologies continue to shape the future of education, there's immense potential to leverage these tools for societal impact. Online platforms can facilitate global classrooms, bringing together diverse perspectives on social challenges and solutions. Moreover, digital tools can enhance the scalability of successful programs, allowing for broader implementation of initiatives proven effective at institutions like Clayton State.
- **Leveraging Alumni Networks for Sustained Impact:** The role of alumni in perpetuating the mission of socially conscious business education cannot be understated. Engaging alumni as mentors, advisors, and partners in community projects can create a virtuous cycle of impact, where the values instilled during their education continue to manifest in their professional and personal lives.

The policy implications and future directions outlined here represent a roadmap for business schools to amplify their societal impact. By adopting and adapting Clayton State University's College of Business strategies, institutions can prepare graduates for successful careers and empower them as catalysts for positive change in society. The journey towards a more socially conscious business education is both a challenge and an opportunity that requires commitment, creativity, and collaboration across the spectrum of stakeholders in education, business, and society.

CONCLUSION

The journey and transformation of Clayton State University's College of Business encapsulates a profound and inspiring narrative of how a mission-driven approach in business education can indeed translate into meaningful societal impact. This narrative is a testament to the institution's innovative spirit and serves as a clarion call for business schools globally to re-envision their roles within society. By integrating social mobility and societal impact deeply into its educational ethos—through its Centers of Excellence, strategic programs, and robust community partnerships—Clayton State has not only aligned with AACSB's accreditation standards but also vividly illustrated stakeholder theory in action.

Stakeholder theory posits that organizations thrive by attending to the broader network of value creators including customers, suppliers, employees, and the community, finds a living embodiment in Clayton State's approach. The university's concerted efforts to weave societal impact into the fabric of its curriculum, research, and community engagement initiatives showcase a dynamic application of stakeholder theory, emphasizing that the value created by educational institutions extends far beyond the immediate confines of academia. Clayton State University's College of Business has underscored the profound interconnectedness between business education and societal well-being by prioritizing social mobility, community development, and the empowerment of its predominantly Black student body.

This transformative model demonstrates that when business schools adopt a stakeholder-oriented approach, they enhance their students' educational experiences and contribute significantly to societal progress. Clayton State's initiative encourages a paradigm shift in business education, urging institutions to consider the far-reaching implications of their actions on all stakeholders and leverage their resources, expertise, and networks to address the multifaceted challenges society faces today.

Looking to the future, the narrative of Clayton State University's College of Business offers rich insights into the potential for business education to serve as a force for societal change. It challenges educational leaders to re-imagine the possibilities of their institutions' impact, guided by the principles of stakeholder theory, and to cultivate a new generation of business professionals who are adept at navigating the complexities of the business world but are also deeply committed to contributing positively to society.

In conclusion, Clayton State University's College of Business is a testament to how a mission-driven, stakeholder-oriented approach in business education can achieve remarkable societal impacts. It exemplifies the practical application of stakeholder theory, illustrating that by acknowledging and addressing the needs and interests of all stakeholders, business schools can fulfill their highest potential: to educate leaders capable of driving economic and social progress. As we move forward, let us recognize that the greatest legacy of business education lies in its ability to foster a more equitable, sustainable, and prosperous world for all.

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