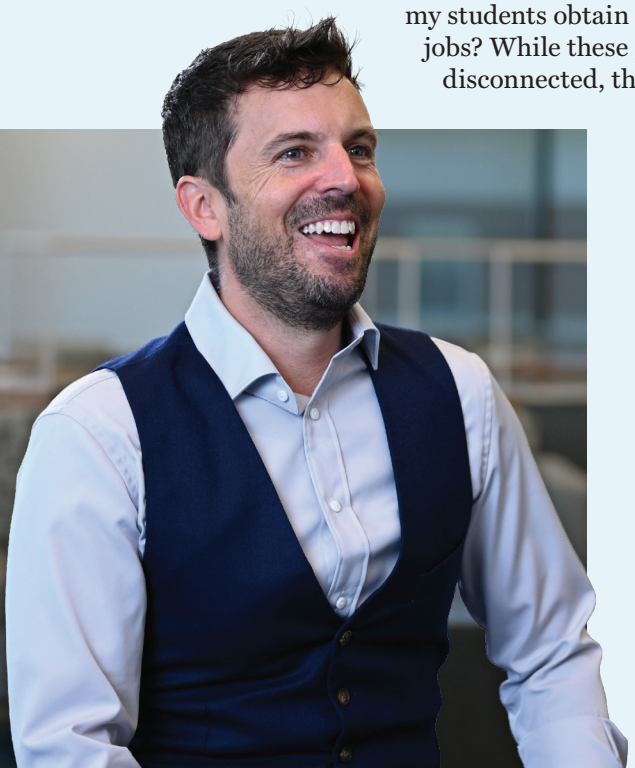
THIS GENERATION CAN MAKE SUSTAINABILITY PAY OFF

In my first doctoral seminar, I wrote and presented a research paper that investigated how firms could outperform competitors by adopting sustainable strategies in their business plans. It was heavy on idealism, light on academic rigor, but I was proud of it.

When I sat down, the next student started his presentation with, "Now that we got that out of our system, back to what we really care about: making money." Everyone laughed, imposter syndrome settled in, and soon we were back to talking about how firms could maximize profits and shareholder value. My idealism didn't fade, but I learned a lesson:

Companies aren't going to embrace sustainability out of the goodness of their corporate hearts. In a capitalist economy, sustainability needs to pay off, so how can we incentivize big business to build a strategy around sustainability?

That complicated question has driven my research, but a simpler one drives my teaching: How can I help my students obtain meaningful jobs? While these goals seem disconnected, they converge around the idea of uncertainty. For a college student, is anything more uncertain than the future? Similarly, sustainable development requires us to consider the future of our species and our planet. The environmental and social problems facing us are complex, and business solutions will require creativity, ambition, and to be blunt, smart people.



Lucky for us, young people are all of those things. The Flynn effect describes how each new generation has a higher intelligence quotient than the one before. We attribute this phenomenon to a host of things, from better nutrition and access to schools to additional free time and even removing lead from gasoline. In short, the seniors I teach today are objectively smarter than my graduating class of 2003. (No offense, friends.)

This is a good thing. As long as parents have walked uphill both ways in the snow, they wanted their children's lives to be better than their own. Increased intelligence is one indication that it is happening. Combined with unprecedented access to information, analytical tools, processing power and technical innovations, no generation in human history would be better equipped to face the challenges of today than the young people of today.

It is my assertion that businesses — more than policymakers, governments, or activist groups — must lead the charge to a sustainable future. However, this requires an incentive structure that rewards actions in the best interest of the planet and its people — not just profit. We are not there yet, and it is incumbent upon this generation of intelligent and ethical businesspeople to develop strategies that reward making the world a better place.

The future remains uncertain, but every time I step into the classroom, I am a little more hopeful.

COLIN GABLER
Associate Professor
Department of Marketing