

CRB Mobilizes Students to Find Solutions to Patagonia's Most Pressing Sustainability Challenges



In 2016, the Berkeley Haas Center for Responsible Business embarked on a unique partnership with an industry leader in sustainability: Patagonia. Each year since then, Berkeley Haas and Patagonia have developed a case related to a real-world sustainability challenge faced by Patagonia. Each fall, the topic for the case is released, and teams from business schools around the country submit proposals to present their solutions to Patagonia's executive leadership team at Berkeley Haas in the spring.

“The greatest challenges that we all collectively face in this world demand different perspectives to come together,” says Robert Strand, Executive Director, Center for Responsible Business at Berkeley Haas. “No single perspective has a monopoly on insight. Between Patagonia and the University of California, Berkeley, we create a platform to bring together people with different perspectives, different competencies, different approaches to address a common challenge,” says Strand.

Throughout the history of the case competition, solutions to challenges faced by several departments and functional areas at Patagonia have been addressed by students.



In 2016, the case explored alternatives and improvements to Durable Water Repellent (DWR) in Patagonia's waterproof clothing, which has become a persistent environmental pollutant. In 2017, students presented ideas for how Patagonia could accelerate regenerative agricultural practices through its new food brand, Patagonia Provisions. In 2018, the company asked students to help them build capacity to reach their goal of Carbon Neutrality by 2025.

The 2019 competition will challenge students to find environmentally benign packaging solutions for Patagonia Provisions that will position them as a leader in sustainable food packaging.



For Patagonia’s leadership team, it provides a unique opportunity to source fresh perspectives and innovation from MBA students business schools across the country.

“We get tremendous perspective from the case competition process from having some 70 to 100 schools work on the intractable problems,” said Doug Freeman, Chief Operating Officer at Patagonia. They are real-life, day-to-day issues that Rose Marcario (CEO of Patagonia), the management team, and I are struggling with in Ventura at Patagonia headquarters. So we get a fresh set of eyes on these problems. It gives a new lens to look at these solutions through, and it's incredibly helpful,” said Freeman.

Phil Graves, Director of Corporate Development at Patagonia, says the case competition is one of the highlights of his year. “What we do each year is sit down with key executive members of the leadership team at Patagonia and talk about the biggest problems that they're facing [We] prioritize those, rank those, determine which would play best in a case format, and then present those challenges through the case itself,” says Graves.

“For us, it's important to find the next generation of responsible business leaders. Having a format where we can look at our company holistically, find out where we have the most authentic thorny problems that we face as a company and then presenting those in a transparent way where students from cross-disciplinary schools and functions can come together and address those problems, it's an incredible source for innovation and it's definitely one of the highlights of my year, as well as the other judges from the Patagonia executive team,” says Graves.



“Students provide us a perspective that we don't have, and they have a fresh way of looking at things.” - Rose Marcario, CEO of Patagonia

“They have a different cohort. These students come from all over the country, so we get experience from all over the country,” said Marcario. “For us it's a chance to really take a pulse of what's going on with a new generation of thought leaders and really business leaders of the future,” she said.

For students at Berkeley Haas and beyond, this case competition is an unparalleled opportunity to work on a pressing corporate sustainability issue with one of the most forward thinking companies in the world.



The experience acts as a launchpad to get more students engaged and equipped to understand current sustainability challenges throughout various industries and able to work towards redefining sustainability. Throughout the years, solutions have been presented by student teams from MBA programs across the country such as Michigan, Harvard, Texas A&M, Yale, Berkeley, MIT, Wharton and Bard, bringing perspectives from students with different backgrounds, disciplines and experience.

“The [Patagonia] case competition will be one of the greatest highlights from my business school career. Working alongside an interdisciplinary team and presenting to Patagonia's leadership team not only solidified the importance of diverse minds coming together, but reaffirmed the notion that doing good is good business,” said Aysha Malik (University of Michigan), 2016 Winner.



“I think Patagonia realizes, to solve some of these intractable issues in the world, you need to collaborate. And no one has the complete answer,” says Adrian Rodrigues, Berkeley Haas MBA ‘18.

“I think by having that experience in this competition, and seeing how much that impacts your end product, and how much deeper and more nuanced and applicable it is, it just gets me excited to go out there and have a much more open mind about the collaborators I choose to work with. And making sure that they all don't look like me, or have my background,” said Rodrigues.

“That rounding out of ideas, that friendship, is something that Patagonia really brings with its culture. And why this case competition is unlike any other case competition I've been a part of,” says Rodrigues. Following his work as a student lead of the 2017 Case Competition, Adrian was hired as a summer intern at Patagonia, working on regenerative organic agriculture with the company, and at Tin Shed Ventures.

Unlike other case competitions, it's not just an exercise - Patagonia's leadership team is committed to bringing students' solutions into practice in their operations.

“We take [the] information that we get from these cases, and we bring them back to our desks, and we work on them,” says Rose Marcario, CEO of Patagonia. “We create our business plans based on input from these students. This is not just a couple of days at the case competition to come and leave. It is really about the long term intractable business and environmental problems that we're trying to solve together with the greatest students from around the country and the greatest school of responsible business, Berkeley Haas,” says Marcario.

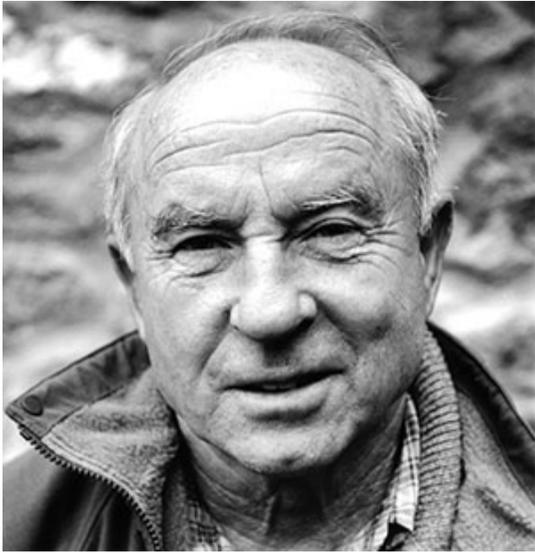
The winning teams of the finalist presentations receive cash prizes and a trip to Patagonia Headquarters to work with Patagonia's team on the issue - and have some fun...

“The unique part, beyond the case itself, is the ability to come to Patagonia headquarters and implement those solutions that the students have put forth. We have a lot of fun along the way, too. We surf, we meet with the respective teams on implementing it, and then we follow up...Whatever the specific problem that we are trying to take on and tackle through this case, we continue to address through follow up calls and meetings and make it real and implement that solution,” says Graves.



Phil Graves, the company’s Senior Director of Corporate Development, says that this partnership with Berkeley Haas has become incredibly valuable for Patagonia.

“The emphasis that Berkeley Haas places on sustainability and the Center for Responsible Business has really helped turn them into the perfect partner to be the host for this. And getting it beyond UC Berkeley into all the other universities in the US that can come together and address these problems in the case format has been incredibly valuable for us as a company,” says Graves.



“The key to confronting and truly solving any problem is to continue to ask enough questions to get past all the symptoms and reach the actual cause.”

- Yvon Chouinard, Founder of Patagonia

Yvon Chouinard, in his writings about responsible business, is quick to point out that the company is not perfect. Even as a leader in sustainability, they are constantly facing unsolved challenges.

But - they are constantly challenging themselves to find solutions and lead.

“Only on the fringes of an ecosystem, those outer rings, do evolution and adaptation occur at a furious pace. The inner center of the system is where the entrenched, non adapting species die off, doomed to failure by maintaining the status quo. Businesses go through the same cycles,” says Chouinard.



For some students, their participation in the competition may lead to a career at Patagonia, and the chance to lead and innovate further within the company. For all participants, the experience will be a defining moment in their MBA experience, and their careers in business.



Kai Hinson began a job with Patagonia Provisions while still an MBA student at Berkeley Haas, and helped drive the 2017 Case Competition.

“I think it's a great opportunity for students while they're still in this nest of the academic environment, to step out of some of the constraints that you have in a real world job and go a little crazy and have fun with it and really think outside the box.”

I think those edges of thought, are where innovation occurs and today...it's great to see people dive deeper and really push us to be thinking more about some of the aspects they've brought up. - Kai Hinson, MBA '17, Product & Sourcing Manager at Patagonia Provisions.

“Whether [students] land jobs with Patagonia or not, I think it's an outlet for them to connect and resonate with a company that is mission and values based,” says Freeman. “Especially in today's political climate - people want to seek answers to environmental problems and crises. We certainly see that, and I think the Case Competition gives certainly the universities that participated a chance to bring their research and their level of thoughtfulness to real life problems. And in today's climate. that's just so critical.”

For Patagonia's Leadership team, the CRB is an invaluable partner in generating meaningful solutions and developing future leaders.



“The program at Haas and Robert's leadership and all the folks that work on the program understand this and make it a priority in their work. They're helping us to create the companies and lead the next generation of responsible business people. So, we are honored to be a part of the school and to be active in the case challenge every year. We'll be back every year.” said Rose Marcario, CEO of Patagonia.

About the Center for Responsible Business

The Center for Responsible Business at Berkeley-Haas connects students, businesses, and faculty to mobilize the positive potential of business to create a more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable society. Building on more than a decade of research, teaching, and engaging with business, we educate and provoke thoughtful debate. The Center encourages sustainability-minded research and its application in the marketplace of commerce and ideas.

Learn more at www.responsiblebusiness.haas.berkeley.edu



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