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MBA programs cross taboo line to teach spirituality in class

The aim isn't to proselytize but to teach students to remain true to convictions

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MBA students learn plenty about quantitative values. Now, more students are getting lessons in spiritual values, as well.

Business schools aren't trying to inculcate religious beliefs or encourage students to proselytize on the job. But more schools are offering courses dealing with spirituality and personal fulfilment in the workplace.

What they want to teach students is the importance of remaining true to their convictions — whether rooted in organized religion or personal morality— amid the conflicting demands and temptations they will confront during their careers.

Spirituality may seem like an alien concept in MBA programs, where many students are obsessed with landing jobs that pay six-figure

salaries and require marathon workweeks. But such courses are actually quite timely. Moral values figured prominently in the U.S. presidential election, and the book *The Purpose-Driven Life* turned into a runaway bestseller.

"It was taboo for so many years to talk about workers' spirituality," says Thierry Pauchant, who holds the chair in ethical management at the HEC Montreal business school.

"But people are suffering by not being able to address that part of themselves and lead a more integrated life. We have seen the exponential growth in antidepressants as people search for more meaning in their lives and their work."

So in his ethics courses, Dr. Pauchant covers the spiritual or "existential" dimension, which he defines as "individuals' freedom of beliefs and the development of their deepest aspirations at work."

The corporate scandals of the past few years prompted many schools to create courses on business ethics, which sometimes touch on religion and morals.

For example, at the Instituto de Empresa business school in Madrid, students' religious beliefs come into play in ethics class when they discuss the marketing of RU-486, the so-called abortion pill.

But courses that deal specifically with spirituality and values get much more personal, aiming to increase self-awareness and the desire for more spiritually rewarding jobs.

"Work hours are so gruelling these days that if you don't love what you do, you are in hell," says Srikumar Rao, who teaches Creativity and Personal Mastery at Columbia University Business School.

"You need the work you do to express your values and be of benefit to the larger society. This is very, very important, but is not acknowledged at most business schools, let alone addressed."

Professors take different ap-

proaches to encourage students to explore their spiritual side and weave it into their professional lives. In Creativity and Personal Mastery, Columbia students bare their souls in classroom discussions, a weekend retreat, their personal journals and other assignments.

They also learn breathing and meditation techniques and must participate in "total immersion exercises" that Prof. Rao calls "as ifs." For example, they might be required to treat every single person they meet as if it were that person's last day on Earth.

At Stanford University's Graduate School of Business, literature serves as the springboard for spiritual exploration. William "Scotty" McLennan, dean for religious life, teaches *The Business World: Moral and Spiritual Inquiry Through Literature* toward the end of the two-year MBA program, when students are thinking most about their futures. They read such works as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* and E Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

and share their personal dreams and failures with each other.

Joseph Holt, who teaches the class *Spirituality and Religion in the Workplace* at the University of Notre Dame in Indiana, challenges students to look beyond prestige and salary and ask whether a potential employer is a good fit morally and spiritually.'

"Every company has a lovely mission statement," Prof. Holt says, "so I tell students they should talk to someone at the company, or, even better, to a former employee to get the straight scoop."

Prof. Holt's course addresses such concerns as treating fellow employees with respect, the role of prayer in blending one's faith and work, and the ways e-mail, mobile phones and other modern technology threaten spiritual time.

Although Notre Dame is a Roman Catholic institution, the course includes readings from Jewish, Protestant and Buddhist perspectives.

Courses on spiritual values typically win rave reviews. Sreedhar Kona, an MBA student at Columbia,

says Prof. Rao's class "instilled an element of spiritual longing" and profoundly affected his outlook.

"I had struggled a lot with regard to understanding what truly made me happy," says Mr. Kona, who had consulted "spiritual gurus."

This winter, Columbia Business School's alumni club sponsored a program based on Prof. Rao's class that promised to help people "discover the purpose that can suffuse your life and bring stars to your eyes." Notre Dame also has created a *Spirituality of Work* course specifically for its older MBA alumni.

Some of them say the on-line course did indeed prove energizing. From the reading and on-line discussions, Tina Mitiguy of Portola Valley, Calif., found the courage to stand up for herself and others in her sales and marketing job at an Internet company.

"I felt a new sense of duty to bring as much fairness as I could to the workplace, with less regard for the security of my own position."

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