

The Role of Social Responsibility in Consumer Studies: Strategies for Developing a Value System of Social Responsibility

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Abstract

Consumer Studies departments in higher educational institutions have traditionally emphasized the rights of consumers, along with consumer responsibilities. However, these responsibilities more often related to “wise consumption” and self-protection, than to a responsibility to build ethical, satisfying public and private environments. The former responsibility relates to our understanding of consumer interactions and specifically the responsibility of an individual consumer to act in ways that improve one’s own economic quality of life (ie. engage in information searches, critically evaluate advertisement claims, etc.). The latter responsibility underscores the concept of social responsibility; the responsibility to help shape and participate in markets that improve qualities of life on a global scale. While the concepts of social responsibility and the principles of consumer studies as defined in consumer economics and family economics (Metzen, 1993; NCR-52; <http://www.hec.ohio-state.edu/cts/osue/consumerecon.html>) share several commonalities, including the study of people in their environments, an emphasis upon decision-making and a philosophical orientation towards change to improve quality of life, social responsibility is not emphasized explicitly enough in current curriculums of Consumer Studies or related departments (Dickinson, 1996; Harrison, 2003). It is our thesis that the new challenge for departments of consumer studies is to educate students to provide leadership for the development, implementation and evaluation of strategies, programs and policies that are socially responsible and minimize harmful economic and social effects on consumers.

This presentation provided an educational model for developing a value system of social responsibility for undergraduates in consumer studies departments. Examples were drawn from the Department of Consumer Studies at the University of Delaware. The curriculum described is designed to encourage our students to: focus upon vision, integrity and ethical decision-making in examining the interactions among leaders, organizations and consumers; develop strong visions for the future which are based upon global and social responsibility; become leaders in building and supporting environments that are globally and socially responsible to consumers; and become leaders in building and supporting environments that encourage socially responsible consumer behavior.

The following were discussed in the session: 1) the process that was employed in developing such model; 2) classroom examples that demonstrates the success of the model; and 3) how the interdisciplinary model could be adapted to a broader academic setting. We hope to generate a discussion among practitioners and educators centered on the importance of, and strategies for, emphasizing the role of social responsibility in the curriculums of consumer studies departments.

References

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Endnotes

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