

## *A Commentary and an Overview of Key Questions on Corporate Social Performance Measurement*

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This article has two purposes. First, the author will provide a commentary on Donna Wood's article on theory, research, passion, and integrity in business and society. This is in response to an invitation to serve as a raconteur on Wood's article. In fulfilling this role, the author will provide summary comments and then remark on each major section of her article. She provides a helpful and engaging overview of the business and society field that provides a backdrop for a consideration of Corporate Social Performance (CSP) theory and measurement. Second, the author will present what he considers to be a few key questions or issues that need to be addressed as we seek to advance CSP measurement.

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The first time I saw the word *raconteur* and thought about it was in 1974 when I was invited to one of George Steiner's celebrated G.E.-sponsored business and society workshops held on the campus of university of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). I remember thinking at the time that raconteur was a mighty elegant word for "discussant." I really do not see the word used very often so I did not have an occasion to look it up in the dictionary and find out what it really means until I was invited by John Mahon and Steve Wartick to be the raconteur on Donna Wood's paper at the First Annual *Conversazione* on Business, Issues, and Society held on the campus of the University of Northern Iowa. This paper is also published in this volume (Wood, 2000).

Well, I finally did look up the word and was kind of surprised at the definition: *Raconteur*—one who tells stories and anecdotes with skill and wit.

This definition worried me because it did not sound like being a discussant. Then, I reread Dean Willis Greer's invitation to the conference, and

his letter said that "the particular role of the raconteur will be to offer prepared, perceptive, finely focused comments about (the) paper in order to add to the rigor and vigor of the discussion." Now, this finally sounded like something I could do—be a discussant, but be a "prepared" discussant; hopefully one with rigor, vigor, and wit. I can assure you that I have prepared my remarks. Whether they turn out to be perceptive, finely focused, rigorous, vigorous, and witty remains for someone else to judge.

### *COMMENTARY ON WOOD'S ARTICLE*

Let me start by saying that I enjoyed reading Donna Wood's article very much. Being one of the "elder statesmen" in the field now (which she labeled me in an earlier article), and having attended my first Social Issues in Management meeting in 1972, just when the division was founded, it is always gratifying to reflect on and provide overview comments on what is going on in the business and society field.

What struck me first, however, was the title of Donna's article, especially the "not ready for prime time" part. That tipped me off as to where she thought our field stood. I guess the second thing that occurred to me was that the article really did not directly address the topic of corporate social performance (CSP) measurement, the theme of the session in which the paper was being presented. Consequently, I took the article to be Donna's first thoughts framing this subject and thought I would just go ahead and comment on the article as I was asked to, thinking of it as an overview of the field out of which the topic of CSP measurement has evolved. Then, I could reserve some of my own brief comments on CSP measurement for the last section.

To make sure my comments are focused, I would like to briefly comment on each major section of Donna Wood's article and then provide my own summary comments in the final section of this article.

#### *Overview and Introduction*

In the beginning of the article, Donna lays out her major concerns. They seem to be this: that we face a continuing dilemma between the rigorous demands of good scholarship, on one hand, and the personal and pragmatic demands of our constituencies and ourselves, on the other. She calls this an ethical dilemma, with which I agree, which is solvable by paying closer attention to theory and methodology. The part of this I would question is whether it is "solvable." To be sure, I think we can do it better—I think we can make incremental progress—but I do not think this dilemma

is solvable. No matter what we do, I believe this dilemma will be a continuing one.

In the introduction, Donna sounds somewhat apologetic when she says that the world has too rapidly caught up with where we (business and society scholars) thought it should be. Yes, companies have made progress, but I doubt that they have gotten to where we think they should be. True, many of them now espouse to be doing the kinds of things we teach, but if you dig just below the surface, you may discover that many, if not most, of their initiatives have rather shallow roots. For example, she mentions codes of conduct. Sure, most companies of any size today have codes of conduct, just as any organization worth its salt today has a mission statement and probably a vision statement as well. But, I cannot help questioning how many of these firms actually implement, that is, use their codes of conduct as living documents, the way we teach that they should.

The following is another example: At a conference a few years ago I sat next to a company's ethics officer. He was bragging about the extensive ethics training program his company had—how they trained 30,000 employees a year in business ethics. I kept asking questions about this and eventually discovered that all they do is offer one hour of ethics training per year to 30,000 employees. At that rate, they get just twice as much as my local Rotary Club talks on business ethics, which last 30 minutes, or they walk out on you. In short, I think there is more adoption of the form than the substance of many social issue and ethics initiatives.

#### *The Sweetness of Marginality*

Donna has appropriately observed that our field, such as it is, sits on the margin, on the edge, of the university, the B-school, and the disciplines. I believe it will always be this way. No matter what we do or how we do it, our field is not about the core functions of business as they are popularly conceived—producing, marketing, financing, and distributing goods and services. If we just restrict it to the management function, we are still on the margin, and I believe we will always be on the margin. I am not sure about her conclusion that most of us like being on the edge. We wish more people paid attention to us, but we understand why they do not—they just do not see it, perceive it, or understand it. They just do not get it. But, this is the plight of our field, and I think we may need to accept it and move on. Of course, we are always striving to be seen as more legitimate in the eyes of our peers and the business community. Why else would we be discussing CSP measurement? Our students really do not care much for this subject. The business community only cares somewhat. Or, stated differently, only

some people in business care. Obviously, we pursue the topic in the expectancy that we can be taken more seriously. That is, if we can just prove or document that strong social performance is related to, or ideally, causes, strong financial performance, then we think we will become business school blue bloods. In actuality, even if we were able to document this, I think we would still remain on the edge—but that does not mean we are unimportant.

### *The Scent of Success*

Donna appropriately discusses the reality that we have, as a field, gained a measure of legitimacy—of success. We have a growing number of endowed chairs (most in business ethics, not business and society, because this is what people understand today, and it is fashionable); we have our own courses (though they do not seem to be growing in number); our faculty get promoted, often with suspicious glares by our colleagues; we get grants; we have our own journals; we get to write books; we get to consult; in short, we are a “field,” somebody “likes us, they really like us!” In short, for a field that is on the edge, we are doing reasonably well.

We must not forget, however, that many of us are anchored in some other discipline in which we teach and achieve partial legitimacy, whether it be management, strategy, law, marketing or some other business school discipline.

### *What Does All This Mean?*

In Donna's next section, she poses this question and then offers three possible answers: (a) We have sold out big-time, (b) We have done a great job, or (c) Our ideas have come of age, regardless of anything we have done.

*Have we sold out?* Donna suggests we may have sold out to the left or maybe even to the right. I do not think we have sold out to the left, as a field, though some of our members have. Over the course of the almost 30 years that I have now been in the field, I have seen us move more toward the middle and less toward knee-jerk social activism. Our field has become more management-oriented and less social-issues-oriented. At the same time, I think most of our members are genuinely concerned about businesses' role in society and are striving to make it more responsive to human needs and problems. We have not sold out to the right either, especially as Donna has articulated it—as being the well paid, secure, autono-

mous free agents that most business school professors are perceived to be. (In my school you need to be in finance or management information system (MIS) to get the big bucks these days—so there is always someone further to the right). Donna wraps up this alternative by saying that we have not sold out, and I agree with her.

*Have we done a great job?* Donna's answer here is yes and no. Yes, we have built for ourselves a pretty commendable field. I agree with this. Her "no" pertains to whether we have done a good job of building a strong intellectual base for our research. I would not be as hard on our field as she is, especially when you consider the breadth of the topics we research ("business" and "society"—pretty high level units of analysis!), the methods available for researching these topics, and the eclectic colleagues we have—coming from so many different disciplines and professional world views. In this "Tower of Babel" context, it is hard to get consensus on anything, much less being thoroughly understood by your colleagues, or having paradigms around which researchers rally.

*Have our ideas come of age?* I agree with Donna's assessment about whether our ideas have come of age. Many have, to some extent, but there is much more to do and to achieve. I think we stand closer to the "promised land" than to the "edge of disaster."

*Are we ready for success?* In this subsection, Donna provides an emphatic "no," tempered by an enthusiastic "maybe." In general, I concur with her assessment here. We should be more global in perspective. We do need better theory, though I do not consider that what we have is incoherent. We do have a number of theory-bits and some promising streams. We cannot seem to agree on whether we have a paradigm, several paradigms, or we do not need a paradigm. Again, given the nature of our field and the level of analysis at which we are working, it is doubtful to me this will ever change. I have talked with some colleagues in strategic management and they say the same about their field. The consensus seems to be that progress will be made incrementally and that this is all we should realistically expect.

If I had a suggestion here for our newer scholars in the field, and all those who attend the Academy of Management's Social Issues in Management (SIM) meetings, International Association for Business and Society (IABS), Society for Business Ethics, or future *Conversaciones*, it would be to thoroughly immerse yourself in the literature of the field. Read and learn it all. Then, you will be in a stronger position to make a

contribution to the body of knowledge. We have so many people coming into this field from so many different disciplines that it is hard to do this, but I think it is essential for our future success, especially if we are to become more coherent. Our field just may have more people in it who were not trained in our field than any other segment of the Academy of Management. We embrace members from management, marketing, law, sociology, ethics, and philosophy, just to mention some.

*What Can We Do?*

In her next section, Donna envisions a parade coming our way and she poses five possible responses. It is not clear to me who comprises this parade, but I surmise from the alternatives she poses that it is the "real world" parade of corporations and executives who are addressing many of the same kinds of issues we are addressing but do not have the luxury we academics have to sit around and study the alternatives at length. They need to just keep moving.

Donna poses five alternatives, two of which we can reject outright. Undesirable responses would be to "jump out of the parade's path," and "block the parade." It is tempting to reject the third alternative—"follow the parade"—as well; however, to some extent, we need to do some of this in academe. We do not have all the answers, and we do need to watch business, learn from business, and follow their lead on many issues. Theory development is often the result of an interactive dialogue between academics and practitioners.

I also do not reject outright the fourth alternative, to "ride the floats in the parade." By this, Donna is alluding to becoming part of the parade, though her references to smiling at the crowds below and tossing out strings of beads makes this look like a superficial role.

There are more substantial ways of riding the floats in the parade—becoming a part of the parade—by working closer with the business community in addressing the many issues we have in common. This can be done through consulting, serving on boards, leading executive education seminars, or more indirectly, through educating business majors in the colleges and universities in which we teach by using realistic material that is relevant to the challenges and issues that companies and managers face on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis.

This leaves the fifth alternative, "leading the parade," as Donna's choice. (Let me assure you that if I had been given these five on *Who Wants to be a Millionaire?* this is the one I would choose, though I do not reject outright some of the others.)

*Let Us Say We Want to Lead*

In the next major segment of Donna's article, I think she offers an interesting and really valuable overview of what it would take to lead the parade and a realistic assessment of some of the assets or resources with which we could fashion this leadership. She talks about what is in our hearts, what is involved in our roles (as scholars, activists, management advisors, and human beings), what is in our research (that has promise), and which research paths seem most promising (descriptive, normative, and instrumental). She provides a number of pages summarizing "what we have to offer at the present." I think this is an excellent section on which I will not comment further, but rather, let stand as an extremely useful description of some of the work in our field to date.

*Conclusion*

In her conclusion and summary, Donna offers an optimistic depiction of the future of our field. We know more now than 30 years ago. We face many contradictions and challenges in our roles. We have had an explosion of theory in the past decade in our field. Yet, at the same time we need to be more deliberate in our theory building, in our self-examination, maintaining our integrity at all times. In short, we need to keep on moving toward paradise in spite of the challenges ahead of us.

Donna originally titled this article the "Not-Ready-For-Prime-Time-Scholars," which I think is clever. However, she seems to be saying, toward the end of the article, that we are now ready for prime time. This thought should provide some interesting discussion in future venues.

I think Donna's article has been a valuable and insightful overview of the status of our field and some of its inherent challenges. The article was at a level of abstraction at least one or two levels above the topic of "CSP measurement," however. I thought I would add to my remarks thus far just a few overview thoughts about the specific issue of CSP measurement.

**OVERVIEW COMMENTS ABOUT  
CORPORATE SOCIAL PERFORMANCE MEASUREMENT**

To conclude this article, I would like to offer a few brief remarks about CSP measurement that perhaps will generate discussion in future settings. I would like to frame them in the form of six questions that I think are important to answer for the field of business and society and CSP measurement to advance:

- What is CSP?
- Should CSP be measured and why?
- Can CSP be measured?
- Should CSP measurements be linked to corporate profitability measures?
- Can CSP measurements be linked to corporate profitability measures?
- What future directions should CSP measurement take?

*What is CSP?* I do not want to provide a literature review here, but I think it is very important that scholars who aspire to teach and do research on this topic delve into what has been written and see how they can synthesize it and/or add to it rather than reinventing the wheel each time. My major concern here is that CSP be perceived as a comprehensive assessment of a firm's social performance and not isolated on the firm's performance with respect to one social issue (e.g., environment, minority relations, corporate giving, product safety) or one stakeholder. At a minimum, I believe the firm's social performance with respect to at least four to five key stakeholder groups—employees, consumers, owners, community, and, perhaps, the environment (if you do not fold this into the community category)—are needed if we are to talk about CSP.

So often we see researchers look at only one or two of these stakeholders or topics and yet call it CSP. And, many of you know from my own CSP model (Carroll, 1979, 1991), that I would add to economic, the legal, ethical, and discretionary or philanthropic performance arenas. I would not just limit CSP to a small set of performances (e.g., only legal, only ethical/environmental, or only philanthropic/corporate giving).

*Should CSP be measured and why?* In short, my answer to this question is "yes." Why? Because it is an important topic to businesses and to society, and measurement is one part of dealing seriously with an important matter. Furthermore, good management would insist that an area of business performance be subjected to measurement, just as so many other arenas of business and management are measured.

*Can CSP be measured?* Of course, virtually anything can be measured. The real question is whether valid and reliable measures can be developed. It is so difficult to develop performance measures, however, which focus as nearly on outcomes as possible. Outcomes imply results and impacts and the field of social science research has so often retreated to surrogate measures here because actual measures are often so difficult to get. Consequently, we tend to rely on stakeholder's opinions or assessments of performance and then try to configure them into some kind of overall measure that will provide a coherent depiction of CSP with respect to the stakeholders mentioned earlier. I really think this is the challenge: developing



comprehensive measures of CSP that really address "social" performance. If we do less than this, we should not call it social performance.

*Should CSP measurements be linked to corporate profitability measures?* I think it is a desirable goal to search for statistical and experiential linkages between CSP and corporate profitability measures or other bottom-line indicators. It would certainly strengthen our field if we could document bottom-line impacts of CSP initiatives. However, I do not think this is a life or death matter for our field. Whether we can prove this linkage or not, the topics we study are vital for business and society relationships, and although it is not my goal to develop these arguments in this discussion, I believe they could be developed.

*Can CSP measures be linked to corporate profitability measures?* Again, I think the short answer is yes, but the quality of the measures and linkages are what is important. In attempting to understand the various findings that have appeared in the literature that support positive, negative, or no relationships between CSP and profitability, I think most of these can be explained when one carefully looks at the measures used and the research that has been conducted (Griffin & Mahon, 1997; Mahon & Griffin, 1999; Preston & O'Bannon, 1997; Roman, Hayibor, & Agle, 1999; Waddock & Graves, 1997).

So many researchers use so many different measures, some of which are pretty good measures of CSP, some of which are weak measures, and some of which only partially measure CSP (i.e., only look at philanthropy or environmental spending), that we can begin to understand the many different findings. Very few of these studies are able to handle the many and multifaceted confounding variables that may be at work, and this is one of the major challenges of our field. It may very well be that the benefits of CSP are so deeply buried in the many different organizational relationships that it is naïve to think that we can partial out or isolate some demonstrable relationship on financial performance (Carroll, 1991). This does not mean that the CSP efforts are not valuable. Think of the many different activities, structures, processes, and programs that organizations employ for which they have no statistical proof that they are valuable. This does not prevent them from engaging in them if management thinks they are important and useful.

*What future directions should CSP measurement take?* My short answer is that I think we should do less of this kind of research than more of it, and we should do it better. I know this sounds like a cop-out, but let me explain. Why less research on CSP measurement? I think our field has

been overwhelmed by researchers throwing together some correlations of data sets he or she has happened on and then presents at International Association for Business and Society (IABS), Social Issues in Management (SIM), or the regional meetings. Thus, we have to spend lots of time separating the wheat from the chaff. This is a serious topic folks, and it should only be done in a serious way. By doing less of it, we will be more careful. We will more carefully build our measures on sound theoretical developments. We will more carefully study the literature. In the past few years, some excellent articles, many cited in the reference section of this article, have come out, and these must be thoroughly digested before someone embarks on this topic.<sup>1</sup>

We need to do research on CSP measurements better. There are many improvements that need to be made to our research to make it stronger. Briefly, my major concerns are that the measures of CSP be comprehensive, that is, that they capture all important aspects or dimensions of business-stakeholder relationships. If the researcher is only measuring environmental performance, it should not be called CSP. If the researcher is only measuring philanthropy, it should not be called CSP. If the researcher is studying reputation, it should not be called CSP. To be called CSP, the researcher needs broad, robust measures to qualify their work as CSP. In addition, the measures need to be realistic assessments of results. It is okay to use some surrogate measures, but these need to be valid.

I also think there is room for other bottom-line measures than just profitability. (Let me add at this point that we have not even addressed the whole issue of financial performance measures that should be used. That is another whole subject for another day. In our field, we are obsessed with CSP measures, but our finance, accounting, and economics colleagues have parallel discussions about how to measure financial performance).

In terms of other bottom-line measures, some of you are aware of the paper that Kim Davenport and I presented at the last IABS meeting in Vermont in which we considered what the literature had to say about the business value of corporate citizenship (Carroll & Davenport, in press). We found considerable empirical and anecdotal evidence that corporate citizenship, which embraces CSP, leads to improved employee relations, improved customer relations, enhanced company marketing efforts, and improved business performance, such as positive impacts on the bottom line, increased competitive advantages, and improved cross-functional integration. These are all results that are thought by business executives to be positively related to the bottom line. These are proximate measures of the impact of social programs, and many of them are qualitative in nature. I would argue, however, that they are, nevertheless, real contributions to business performance.

At this point, I think I will end my commentary. For further reading, I am including a number of selected readings that I have found useful. The list is not comprehensive, but it should give you an excellent overview of this topic of CSP measurement.

In conclusion, I would like to return to Donna Wood's article for which I gave a commentary at the beginning of this article. I think it has set the stage for future discussion by providing an excellent overview of the business and society field—a field in which CSP measurement has become a vital topic.

## NOTE

1. For example, see Arlow and Wogan (1996); Aupperle, Carroll, and Hatfield (1985); Brown (2000); Conference Board Research Report (1999); Davenport (1998a, 1998b); Frooman (1997); Gerde and Wokutch (1998); Husted (2000); Johnson and Greening (1999); Logsdon and Gerde (1999); Maignan, Ferrell, and Hult (1999); McGuire, Sundgren, and Schneeweis (1988); Mitnick (1993); Sharfman (1998); Simerly (1999); Stanwick and Stanwick (1998); Starik and Carroll (1991); Swanson (1995, 1999); Szwajkowski and Figlewicz (1999); Turban and Greening (1997); Wartick and Cochran (1985); Wokutch (1998); and Wood (1991).

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