

A Clarion Call for Business Schools

The economic crisis has sparked sharp debate about how MBA degree programs influence the behaviors of their graduates, as critics cite the failures of high-profile business leaders and financial firms. At the same time, spiced-up, recurring surveys report that MBA students generally evidence a questionable moral compass and a weak ethical foundation.

As business schools are called to account for the philosophical tenets they impart or reinforce, many have responded by restructuring the curriculum. Some have expanded practicums and introduced community service programs. Others have added new courses in social responsibility and sustainability, put heavier emphasis on behavioral topics such as leadership and management effectiveness, and clarified their curricular focus.

Yet the skeptics believe these efforts are mere nods to topical concerns. Moreover, business schools face overarching questions: How will they help students acquire the mindsets and attributes of respected businesspeople and citizens? Do they have an obligation to teach MBA students not only how to pursue business success, but also how to meet societal obligations? Should the educational contract include a clause for teaching individual values? For the institutions that grant MBAs, reconciling these concerns with the motivations of MBA students is not a distraction but a serious dilemma.

Rebalancing the MBA is a daunt-



ing task for faculty and administrators. Curricular overhauls do not come quickly, and they always pose some risk to the business school brand. Among elite universities, protecting reputation can easily trump the benefits offered by unpredictable educational makeovers. Schools that take up the challenge should weigh two principal categories of questions: how they impart *skills and competencies*, and how they approach *learning and understanding*.

As schools consider teaching skills and competencies, they should ask:

■ How can students be engaged in economic, social, and political subjects while acquiring

essential management knowledge?

■ How will the curriculum reflect re-regulation, calls for enhanced executive accountability, and government's expanded role in private enterprise?

■ What programmatic and curricular adjustments will improve management skills applied across commercial organizations, the public sector, and not-for-profit enterprises?

■ How can business schools equip graduates for careers that may encompass multiple changes between public and private sectors over their working lives?

They have a second set of questions to answer when they consider learning and understanding:

■ How can MBA programs promote a worldview that goes beyond simply affixing the "global" adjective?

■ How can management be joined with social science subjects to provide MBAs with an enriched context for their career endeavors and personal lives?

■ Can humanitarian subjects find a legitimate place alongside the hard-nosed empiricism of business analysis and management science?

■ How can MBA programs help instill responsibility, integrity, civility, and character among their graduates, contributing to their development both as professionals and as people?

In the MBA classroom, discipline area studies and integrated analyses of business issues help students learn and apply fundamental skills. Outside the classroom, projects and group work expose students to valuable simulations of the real-world workplace. I don't suggest that these time-tested elements of the business school experience should be cast aside, but perhaps they could be enhanced if they were combined with the basics of a liberal arts education.

Arguably, what a liberal arts education does best is help students understand themselves and cultivate an ability to think, while guiding them to an appreciation of moral, social, and political principles. Integrating the teachings of *Pride and Prejudice*, *Walden*, *Animal Farm*, or *The Grapes of Wrath* in MBA study can broaden student perspectives. This enriched context can go a long way toward shaping how students will relate to the workplace roles they will find among commercial and public enterprises.

In Everett D. Martin's 1926 book *The Meaning of a Liberal Education*, he wrote, "It is the aim of education to develop the insight and foresight and breadth of vision which make it possible for an indi-

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vidual to take responsibility for the results of his behavior.” He also noted, “Before a man can think for himself, he must have learned to think at all. There is only one sound method of moral education. It is in teaching people to think.”

Six decades later, in *The Closing of the American Mind*, scholar Allan Bloom questioned whether these principles were being honored in academia generally. He cited the MBA in particular as a negative example, since he considered it a “great disaster” that the world viewed the MBA as the moral equivalent of a medical or law degree. He added, “Premed, prelaw and prebusiness students are distinctly tourists in the liberal arts. Getting into those elite professional schools is an obsessive concern that tethers their minds.”

We may reject Bloom’s critique, attributing it to the possibility that some MBA students have deficient undergraduate experiences. But there is no avoiding the fact that business schools share a common obligation to maintain the MBA’s educational value. Understanding self is a prerequisite for making contributions in work and in life. The intangibles of business and management—including accountability, integrity, stewardship, and humanity—scream for attention. We should bear in mind what American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1949: “Life has no meaning except in terms of responsibility.”

I believe that MBA students have a right to expect, as part of their learning compact with schools, that graduate business study will enhance their self-awareness as both responsible human beings and capable businesspeople. In addition to teach-

ing students how to address business challenges, coursework should offer them opportunities to develop their personal principles and characters.

Perhaps we don’t need to make our MBA students familiar with the philosophies of Plato, Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau, but we can certainly find room in the curriculum for more recent—and relevant—business authors. Our syllabi can accommodate easily and with relevance works such as Thorstein Veblen’s *The Theory of Business Enterprise* and *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, William Whyte’s *The Organization Man*, Peter Drucker’s *The Practice of Management*, and Douglas McGregor’s

The Human Side of Enterprise.

The most visible business schools should be in the vanguard of those preparing MBAs for influential roles in business and society. But all business schools have ample opportunities to experiment with broadening the educational experience as we prepare students. Educating students to be good executives and good people is fundamental to our *raison d’être*. It is the legacy we impart to our graduates. ■

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