

Steps Forward, Steps Backward in Management Education



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Like all new deans, I came to my job with both long-held convictions and an open mind. Putting the two together, three themes have particularly intrigued me—one, an area in which I have seen great movement forward; another, a major opportunity on which we've only begun to scratch the surface; and the third, a critical way in which we have taken several steps backward.

Let me discuss each of these in turn.

Movement Forward: Corporate Social Responsibility.

As I meet with business leaders today, they seem to expect at least a conversant understanding of the responsibility business leaders have to society and our world at large. For many companies, this is a requisite as much as economics and accounting are.

Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) has been a foundation of the Leeds School's curriculum in a major way for 10 years now. The name of our school comes from Michael Leeds and his family, who began embedding social commitment into business strategy back in the 1970s. Michael famously gave all his employees a piece of the profits when he and his family sold their company, CMP Media.

The Leeds gift created, among other things, our Center for Education on Social Responsibility (CESR), and CESR has really cracked the code on how to teach responsibility to the full range of students. We start with the very first class our students take and weave it across disciplines. It is telling that CSR-related courses get some of the very highest student satisfaction ratings at Leeds.

Harvard Business School recently made big news by announcing a focus on both ethics and action learning. Neither, of course, is actually new to the business school world but we should be glad to see that they, along with so many other schools, embrace these concepts. This is a sign that CSR is here to stay.

And, by the way, these issues are even more important at the undergraduate level than in MBA programs. Students are younger, their thinking is in formation, and teachable moments are many. Perhaps I'm stodgy here, but recognition of the importance of this seems very slow in coming.

Opportunity for Improving Management Education: Mentorship.

This is a powerful idea that is woefully underutilized in most business schools, although it is on an incredible growth trajectory here at Leeds. If we get serious about making a mentorship program a standard feature of business schools, the effect will be as dramatic as almost any management education innovation in decades. In fact, I think this has similar power to the innovative push Don Jacobs from Kellogg gave us 30 years ago—advancing education through insisting on integrating teamwork as part of business education—or the impact Joe White had at Ross 20 years ago—pioneering widespread use of experiential learning.

Through our mentorship program at Leeds, we bring both alumni and other business leaders to our students as mentors. Having regular, ongoing access to a working business professional has a profound impact on students' educational experience, and their readiness for success in the business world. A mentorship experience helps shape a student's academic focus. Sometimes mentorship serves as an early warning system that students are not on the path that's best for them. And mentoring keeps students in touch with the business world in ways that deliver just-in-time opportunities to test ideas they learn in the classroom.

At Leeds, we believe that mentoring should not be reserved for the highest-performing students or those in specialized programs, a norm I often see. ALL students can and do benefit—and, in fact, some of the lower performing students might benefit most. Despite what we hope might otherwise be the case, many of us are aware of the lack of correlation between GPA and success in business. Done right, mentoring can be an unsurpassed means of helping students focus on the intellectual development they need, leaving them with a great life-long habit.

In our senior class, more than 40 percent of students have mentors. Forty percent is a start but our goal is to make it even bigger.

Steps Backward: Business School Isolation.

I've observed over the years that business schools throughout the nation have become disconnected from their host campus. Whether evaluated through curricular or collaborative research programs, we seem to have withdrawn.

What are the benefits of connecting business schools to their universities? Most business students would benefit from knowledge of the sciences that create opportunities for businesses of the future, the cultural and world history that produces forces they all will have to contend with, and so on. At the University of Colorado Boulder, we have deep research, in areas like astrophysics, engineering, and green energy. We have four Nobel Prize winners among our colleagues. When I speak with CEOs, I hear a tremendous desire for us to do more to unite business with engineering and the sciences. The same model may be applicable elsewhere on campus, too.

This integration has advantages not only for business students, but also for engineers, scientists, social workers, and even poets. They will have a whole new set of opportunities to live richer lives and contribute to society more effectively if they have at least an overview of key business principles and paradigms.

Integrating business and other disciplines should be one of our top priorities for the next stage of business school evolution. Better lives, better businesses, and better economies will result. I applaud those schools that are working to build bridges across campus, either through new degree programs or through business minors, for example. Much more needs to be done.

Why and/or how is it the case that our Provosts allowed us to become so isolated? This column is not the time or place to fully sort that out, yet I suggest that its roots are in several areas. Despite the call of the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports of the late 1950s for business schools to engage with our campuses, the last 35 years and the incentives brought on by the numerous ranking schemes we are all subjected to surely had an isolating effect. Doing well in those rankings has, in many ways, led to a recipe of "narrowness."

Surely we will not abandon many of the traditions that now define successful business education; however, now is a good time for us to clearly consider new degree programs and new degree structures. Tom Friedman and a chorus of prognosticators are not reaching too far when they warn us that today's graduates will have numerous careers, many unrelated to any single core discipline. We owe society a graduate with a broader view of life who is ready to span those career bridges as they appear.

These are some of the top-level observations of a new dean. I hope my comments provoke an idea or two that you can relate to in your college or on your campus. Although there is much more on my agenda, and I'm sure on yours as well, these three themes are a good start for grounding a new dean's thinking about the progress of management education and some of the key opportunities to keep business education progressing and moving forward.

I welcome your feedback. Share with me your impressions and, of course, please visit me in Boulder.