West Michigan Management Memo

Volume 1 | Issue 2 Article 3

4-1-1981

Theory vs. Vocational Training in College Business Programs: An Evaluation and Analysis

Bennett L. Rudolph

Follow this and additional works at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wmbm

Recommended Citation

Rudolph, Bennett L. (1980) "Theory vs. Vocational Training in College Business Programs: An Evaluation and Analysis," *West Michigan Management Memo*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 3.
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/wmbm/vol1/iss2/3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Seidman College of Business at ScholarWorks@GVSU. It has been accepted for inclusion in West Michigan Management Memo by an authorized administrator of ScholarWorks@GVSU. For more information, please contact scholarworks@gvsu.edu.

Theory vs. Vocational Training in College Business Programs:

By Bennett L. Rudolph

The Dilemma of Business Education in America

University business curricula undergo constant change and revitalization in the search for better methods of preparing people for suitable careers and for entry into the literate and cultural worlds which are vital for a full and satisfying life. During the 1960's, the emphasis in American business education was on abstract courses relying on the humanities and social sciences. For example, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and mathematics were especially stressed in marketing courses during this period.

The most heavily stressed marketing course during the 1960's and early 1970's was consumer behavior, a course which was both adopted and required in almost all upper-level university marketing programs. This course drew heavily on psychology, social-psychology, and mathematics. Consumer behavior was substituted for the introductory marketing course at several of the more prestigious universities, and some schools went as far as requiring consumer behavior as a prerequisite for the introductory course for marketing majors. Thus, during the 1960's all quality marketing programs required a thorough liberal arts background, and many marketing courses themselves emphasized the application of liberal arts knowledge to business problems.

More recently, the trend has been toward pragmatic vocational courses. Even at prestigious universities, liberal arts requirements have been reduced or eliminated and course content has, in many cases, been rearranged so as to emphasize vocationalism and specific trade skills. In marketing programs, for example, the trend in the last decade has been a re-emphasis on such courses as professional selling and retailing, the teaching of which had had a ten-year hiatus at most major universities in the United States.

In this article I would like to examine the reasons for the dramatic change in emphasis which has taken place in business education and investigate the consequences of these changes from a social perspective. I will then attempt to delineate the proper roles for conceptual theory and vocationalism in a business program defined in a liberal arts context.

Dissatisfactions with Conceptual Business Education Programs

There are several reasons for the recent emphasis on vocationalism. Probably most important was the feeling on the part of business students that the liberal arts and conceptual business courses were not relevant to the specific career goals they had in mind. Business faculty members had to deal with complaints of this nature on an almost daily basis. Typically, they would be phrased in the following manner: "I want to become a retail store manager. Why should I have to take courses in literature, philosophy, or social psychology? Furthermore, your class in consumer psychology is not directly related to what I plan to do. I will never have use for such courses in my career."

Courses such as professional selling, advertising, and retailing, which cover skills that can be immediately applied in a career, fill up quickly, while liberal arts courses and courses on conceptual business topics such as consumer behavior and quantitative business analysis attract small enrollments, except when required for graduation. In periods of declining enrollment, such as at present, student desires are an important factor in curriculum design.

A second reason for the recent emphasis on vocational education was the number of complaints from the business community that marketing majors, for example, had few real skills that could be directly applied to their first jobs. Some business enterprises, especially smaller ones, expected the marketing graduates they hired to be at least partly trained for their jobs, thus allowing the enterprise to save on training costs. Managers of such businesses were extremely disappointed to find out that business training at the university level was usually highly conceptual and theoretical and that marketing graduates still had to be trained for a particular job. Furthermore, many of the theories and concepts advocated in marketing programs were esoteric and recondite. Many proved useless, irrelevant, and inimical to normal business operations.[1]

Finally, it was apparent that courses in applied areas such as marketing are worse than useless if taught on a purely conceptual level by a professor who has never spent a day in the actual business world. There is nothing quite so sad as an applied pragmatic course made arcane and abstruse by such a professor. Unfortunately, few professors have had much high-level marketing experience and such occurrences were, and still are, very common in business schools.

Pernicious Consequences of the Emphasis on Vocational Skills

Despite the strong case that can be built for a vocational emphasis in marketing programs, many scholars have grave doubts about the wisdom of following such a course. There are several reasons for these doubts.

First, vocational and trade skills are constantly changing and tend to have a rather short period of usefulness. They therefore do not constitute the basis for a sound lifetime education. Much of what is taught in today's vocational marketing courses will be obsolete by the time the present students are in a position to apply such skills. Vocational marketing courses therefore tend to become anecdotal and leave the student with little of real substance.

Moreover, an emphasis on vocational courses deprives the student of opportunities for taking valuable courses in the liberal arts, which are necessary to join the society of literate and educated people. At many regional universities, it is possible for students majoring in marketing to graduate without ever having had a class in literature, philosophy, geography, anthropology, or political science. It is really rather difficult to consider anyone without at least a basic course in each of these areas as a well-educated individual. In fact, such students might more appropriately be described as culturally deprived. The only difference in the curriculum for marketing students should be a few specialized courses in marketing in the junior and senior years, which would follow the liberal arts courses and give all business students a solid background in the business functional areas of accounting, finance, management and marketing. Detailed vocational courses should not be required or encouraged.

A further problem with vocationalism is that most young people do not really know what career they will choose until they enter the job market after leaving the university. It is both frightening and implausible to hear eighteen-year-old students claim that they know exactly what they want to do for the rest of their lives. Empirically, we can verify that it has been the experience of most college graduates to end up in vocations they never imagined they would go into. Over half the jobs in marketing offered through the Placement Office at Grand Valley State Colleges are taken by students majoring in other areas,

An Evaluation and Analysis

while nearly a quarter of the marketing majors get their first jobs outside the area of marketing. Moreover, very few marketing students know in advance which specific type of marketing job they will eventually land (such as marketing research, marketing management, retailing, sales, advertising). Finally, a person's first job does not usually indicate what he or she might be doing later in life. In summary, not many undergraduates are in a position to make prognostications about what specific vocational skills they will need for the remainder of their career.

The concluding argument against vocational marketing education is perhaps the most cogent and salient of them all. That is that, on the whole, vocational skills are difficult if not impossible to teach in a traditional academic setting. Most business people already know that one cannot learn vocational skills vicariously. The only way to really master such skills is to do them. There is really not much to conceptualize or examine analytically in the case of most vocational skills. They often are just a matter of practice. Such practice can take place in a classroom environment, but it is less real and meaningful if it is done there. The best pedagogical method for teaching these skills is to have the student take the job and do it under the supervision of an experienced worker.

It would seem obvious, then, that the people who should be teaching vocational business skills are not those in academia. Rather, these skills should be taught in industry itself. Industry has the people who know these skills firsthand. They have the funds and incentives to keep up with changes in skill areas; they are the ones who need the trained employees; they offer the best opportunity to put these skills to direct use in a situation where they can be practiced repeatedly with careful monitoring of the results. Moreover, industry is in a position to perform this task more economically and efficiently than it can be accomplished in the world of higher education.

The attempt on the part of a minority of people in industry to pass vocational training costs onto higher education plays into the hands of some college administrators who want to expand their institutions without considering the quality of the graduates being turned out or the suitability of the educational program to the resources and talents of the institutions. The inefficiencies are such that the result is likely to be higher long-run costs to society for vocational training and many personal disappointments on the part of students and employers.

The Role of Business Education In Higher Learning

Given the negative aspects of the two extremes, pure vocationalism and abstract teaching, it is clear that business education can serve its most useful function in a middle position, i.e., a *realistic* introduction to each of the major subject areas within business administration without attempting to teach specific vocational skills. More specifically, business education should be treated eclectically, much as liberal learning programs treat the various components of the liberal arts. In this manner the university can perform the task it does best by introducing the student, in a relatively short period of time, to many topics that concern educated people.

In such a program some emphasis must be placed on learning about the subject areas that the student does *not* intend to work in for the rest of his or her life. The one area the student is planning to work in should receive not only the same introduction that the other areas receive but some concentrated study. After graduation, on-the-job training will allow the student to eventually learn more about the particular vocational skills than the professor (who in most cases has never performed the task) will ever know about it. Nonetheless, the

(Continued on page 8)

West Michigan Management

MEMO

The *West Michigan Management Memo* is published twice a year, in the spring and fall, and is sent to all contributors to the Enrichment Fund. Every two years a dinner is held to honor those leaders who helped found Grand Valley State and who by their interest and involvement continue to enrich the development of the institution as well as the quality of life in our community. The fund enables the Seidman College to support activities and programs designed to increase understanding of our economic system, facilitate exchanges of ideas between students, faculty and businessmen and, in general, enrich the business and academic communities. Persons interested in more information about the *Memo*, the published articles, or the Enrichment Fund should contact the Dean's Office, F. E. Seidman College of Business and Administration, Lake Huron Hall, Grand Valley State, telephone 895-6611, ext. 271.

Faculty and Staff Notes

Dr. Jitendra M. Sharma, Professor of Management, participated in the AACSB's (American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business) two-and-a-half-day workshop to "Internationalize the Business School Curriculum" at the University of Illinois (Chicago Circle) recently. **Dr. Earl Harper,** Associate Professor and Chairman of Management, participated in the AACSB's workshop on the same topic at Georgia State University.

Dr. Donald Klein, Professor of Accounting and Chairman of the Accounting Department, received his C.P.A. certificate recently. Don is a C.M.A. and spent the 1979-80 academic year on sabbatical working with Seidman and Seidman to complete one year of practice required for the certificate.

Dr. R. Bryant Mills, Associate Professor of Public Administration and Director of the B.P.A. and M.P.A. programs, will be on sabbatical during the fall semester of the 1981-82 academic year. He will complete post-doctoral study in the Labor Relations Institute at Michigan State University.

Dr. Benjamin Rudolph, Associate Professor of Marketing, will also be on sabbatical during the upcoming fall semester. He will be involved in completing research in the areas of mass transit marketing, real estate usage, and industrial private branding and expects to prepare several articles for publication.

Dean Marvin DeVries spoke at the annual meeting of the Wolverine Council on April 4 in Battle Creek. This council includes all chapters of the National Management Association in Michigan. The title of his talk was "Current Economic Conditions, the Reagan Administration, and the Future of Capitalism."

Theory vs. Vocational Training in College Business Programs

(Continued from page 3)

professor can make a real and legitimate contribution by introducing the student to many topic areas that the student would otherwise have little or no knowledge of. This is a valuable service since it would broaden students' horizons and allow them to understand better those broad areas of business and the liberal arts with which they will have no vocational contact in later life.

Carrying this concept one step further, I believe it is vital that business education be considered part of a quality liberal education. To put the issue more directly, education about economic issues is no less important to a liberal arts education than education about many other issues which have traditionally been considered part of the liberal arts. The liberal arts educator's traditional disdain for discussions of economics and business, usually based on some type of mystique that money is materialistic and therefore unclean, is not valid. The simple fact is that economics, money, and business are increasingly the determinants of world history. They are therefore topics which every educated person should know about. Liberal arts majors who have not studied these subjects on a realistic, albeit non-vocational, level are as culturally deprived as business majors who have not studied philosophy and literature.

Furthermore, business courses, if properly taught, are no more vocational than many traditional liberal arts courses. Are not art, music, and theatre vocations? For that matter, training people to teach philosophy can also be considered vocational training. In fact, any topic can become vocational if improperly taught.

Business education can serve its most useful function by building on a solid base of liberal education. Business majors should be required to take a complete and thorough liberal arts education. The undergraduate business students in the Seidman College of Business at Grand Valley *must* complete two years of general and liberal arts education (including some basic business courses) before they are permitted to start a business major program in accounting, finance, management or marketing.

Concomitantly, liberal arts majors should be encouraged to take some introductory business, economics and marketing courses as part of their liberal education. Considering the importance of business and trade in the world and the role it is likely to play in the future, this suggestion is not outrageous or unreasonable. At the present time liberal arts students are allowed to develop an ignorance and disdain for commerce and its functions which is in every way equal to the ignorance of business students concerning the liberal arts. What is worse, both groups of students are sent out to work in the business world with these nefarious attitudes.

It is apparent that the lessons about eclectic learning taught by Robert Maynard Hutchins in the 1930's have not taken hold or prospered in American higher education.[2] Until these lessons are taken seriously and adopted, marketing education will continue to pursue the Holy Grail of vocationalism, a task for which it is poorly equipped and at which it is doomed to fail.

1. Kover, Arthur J. "Careers and Non-Communication: the Case of Academic and Applied Marketing Research," *Journal of Marketing Research*, 13 (November, 1976).
2. Hutchins, Robert Maynard, *The Higher Learning in America*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1936.

Bennett L. Rudolph, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Marketing at Seidman College of Business and Administration.

Business Strategic Planning Lecture Series

Business students in Seidman College had the privilege of hearing three top corporate leaders speak on the topic "Business Strategic Planning" recently. The speakers were Mr. Larry Woods, Executive Vice President of Mobil Oil (February 25), Mr. Kenneth Cole, Senior Vice President of Union Camp Corporation (March 11), and Mr. Frederick DeTurk, President and Chief Executive Officer of Phelps Dodge Industries, Inc. (April 16). Each lecture was given on campus in the afternoon, and each speaker addressed strategic planning in his organization.

After the formal presentation, students had an opportunity to meet informally with these business leaders at a mixer.

The executives arrived in the morning and had lunch with several graduate students, Seidman College faculty and Seidman College Affiliates before the lecture.

SCB to Offer Undergraduate Degree In Public Administration

(Continued from page 1)

are formulated, and the role of interest groups in this process, the legal requirements and restraints in administering public programs, and the role of democratic ideology in the operation of government agencies. Finally, the successful public administrator needs to develop an appreciation of the unique requirements for administering the public's business efficiently and effectively.

Students enrolling in the B.P.A. program will have access to an extensive curriculum in all aspects of management science, personnel administration and labor relations, human resource development, finance, budgeting, and accounting. This highly applied professional curriculum is supported by high-quality liberal arts courses in Grand Valley State's other colleges. Public administration students may pursue a general management curriculum or they may elect to minor in public policy analysis, urban and regional planning, social service management, labor relations and collective bargaining, criminal justice administration, and health care management. Many courses in these areas will be given during evening hours to provide continuing education students and those working full time an opportunity to increase their skills and knowledge.

To strengthen the applied nature of the public administration program, students will be encouraged to intern in a public or non-profit agency for a term. Internships are available in a variety of local and state agencies and in the state legislature in Lansing.

We are pleased to announce that Dr. Samir Ishak and Dr. Robert Clarke, formerly of Grand Valley State's College of Arts and Sciences, will be joining the Seidman faculty to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in public administration. Dr. Ishak holds a Ph.D. from Indiana University and is a recognized expert in comparative and international administration. Dr. Clarke holds his Ph.D. from Notre Dame University and is well known in Grand Rapids for his work in urban administration and in local public policy analysis. Dr. R. Bryant Mills, coordinator of the Seidman College's Master of Public Administration Program and a professor in the management department, will assume administrative responsibilities for the undergraduate program as well. Anyone desiring additional information on either the undergraduate or graduate program in public administration should contact Dr. Mills.