

# The Colleges

## What Are They Doing to Prepare Students for a Business Career?

Russell Lee Doré

Managers of training and development programs in industry should be aware of changing trends in business administration programs in our colleges and universities. What the colleges are doing, and what they are *not* doing, has a critical impact on training programs for college graduates in industry. The focus of this article will be primarily on the four-year college, but the topic cannot be covered without touching on graduate programs and junior, or community colleges.

### Recent Recommendations

We will not discuss in detail the current state of business education in colleges. There are some serious shortcomings of these programs, as we shall see in the second part of this article. These shortcomings have been recog-

nized for some time, and have led to at least two comprehensive studies of business education, one financed by the Ford Foundation<sup>1</sup> and the other by the Carnegie Corporation.<sup>2</sup> These studies produced some strong recommendations for improvements, and it is felt that many colleges are in the process of implementing these recommendations. Therefore, it seems more appropriate to assume that in the near future most of these changes will have been made.

The question we wish to deal with is what the effectiveness of business education will be *after* the changes have been made. So let us look at some of the primary recommendations made by these studies. The significant recommendations in both studies were quite similar, and what we will discuss is a combination taken from both

Russell Lee Doré

*Manager, Training and Development, Northwestern Mutual Insurance Company, Seattle, Washington. Previously Supervisor, Personnel Testing and Research, Boeing Company and Personnel Research Specialist, U. S. Naval Personnel Research Activity. B.A., honors, psychology and M.A., psychology, Michigan State University. Graduate study, University of Oregon.*

studies.

There are three primary types of objectives which business schools have in mind in planning their educational programs. The first objective stresses preparation for a career in business without regard to the kind of business or job except that it assumes that eventually the future businessman will attain a position involving a significant amount of administrative responsibility.

The studies strongly supported this objective, and recommended that business programs meet the objective in the following manner. First, students should take *at least* half of their work in general liberal arts (non-business) subjects. Secondly, the professional, or business, portion should consist of a large core of required courses with the emphasis on managerial decision-making. By managerial decision-making is meant a three-part process of determining the problems that need managerial decisions, of making those decisions, plans or policies, and of implementing them effectively. These core courses would be in the following areas: managerial accounting and statistics; advanced economics, including both internal economic management and the external economic environment of the firm; organization and administration; a series of courses in the functional fields (marketing, finance, etc.); some work on the legal, political, and social environment of business; and a capstone course in business policy. A few electives in broad areas would be offered in addition to the required core, but there would be *no* specialization within the field of business at the undergraduate level.

### Pre-Professional Majors

Although the recommendations above were made with respect to un-

dergraduate business study, it should be noted that recommendations were also made which were preferred even to the ideal program above. These recommendations called for all business education to be obtained in a broad program at the graduate level, after a "pre-professional" undergraduate major in specified liberal arts areas or a broad engineering curriculum. Although this was the preferred program, it was realized that over half of the future business students will continue to terminate their formal education at the bachelor's level, and the undergraduate program outlined above was worked out.

The second type of primary objective of business schools also implies preparation for a lifetime career, but puts the emphasis on imparting knowledge of subject matter in some particular area of business such as accounting, marketing, production, or insurance. The studies recommended strongly *against* such specialization at the undergraduate level. The feeling was that the current widespread dissatisfaction with the quality of undergraduate business education is due primarily to the fact that schools are trying to do the near impossible; that is, to provide both a general and a specialized professional education. Their solution is to offer a quality general education and broad business education, and drop any attempts at specialization. The exception is in accounting, where some undergraduate specialization was recommended, prior to a fifth year for preparation for C.P.A.

### The First Job

The third type of objective is not often admitted publicly and is never the sole objective of a department of business. This is training for the first job after graduation. "Among the leaders of educational opinion, the view is

unanimous that preparation for the first job is not a legitimate objective of business education at the collegiate level. At best, training for the first job should enter only as an incidental by-product of training for the entire career. Otherwise, purely vocational rather than professional education is being offered."<sup>1</sup> (pg. 40). When discussing training for the first job, which reflects an evaluation of employers' needs, Gordon and Howell<sup>1</sup> (pg. 241) state that "It is in the junior colleges and not in the business schools of the four-year colleges that these vocational programs belong."

### Current Criticisms by Businessmen

According to Pierson,<sup>2</sup> weakness in written expression is the greatest criticism of graduates made by businessmen. This was verified by business executive Fred Foy<sup>3</sup> (pg. 15) during a symposium on business education when he stated

"One of the greatest weaknesses in our executives at all levels is their utter inability to state clearly and understandably in writing the nature of a business problem, what they want to do about it and why . . . We have a right to expect the business schools to do a much better job than they seem to be doing on this score. You can't leave it up to the English Department."

This lack of writing ability was noted in the Gordon and Howell study,<sup>1</sup> and was also obvious in a recent survey of company presidents made by *Modern Office Procedures* magazine.<sup>4</sup> When asked what subjects need more emphasis in colleges, the most frequent responses were verbal communications and business writing.

Pierson says that business majors should take more English, especially literature, and should write more

themes. My own observation is that *taking more English literature and writing more themes might make students' writing worse* for business purposes. Clear businesslike letters and reports are quite different from essays in colorful descriptive literary style. That is, in fact, what is wrong with their writing. It is too colorful and literary, and lacks clarity and conciseness. Gordon and Howell do not share my view either, because they state that businessmen speak and write the same language as the rest of us, and they are convinced that courses in business English and letter writing as such have no place in the university curriculum. They do indicate that more writing could be done as a part of the various core courses in business, and these could be evaluated for form and expression as well as for content. This approach seems far superior to requiring more English literature as a solution to the current writing deficiency of business students.

### Quantitative Relationships

The second greatest weakness noted by businessmen in the Pierson study was the inability of college graduates to grasp quantitative, statistical relationships. It appears that by stressing a better liberal arts education, including more mathematics, and by beefing up the core area in managerial accounting and statistics, this weakness will be overcome through the recommendations outlined in the first part of this article.

There is another important criticism that appears frequently in business periodicals, and has been stated well in a recent article by Professor Edgar Shein<sup>5</sup> titled "The Wall of Misunderstanding on the First Job." This "wall of misunderstanding" refers to the differing perceptions held by the college graduate and his company, in particu-

lar that important representative of the company, his first boss. The business graduate, after being educated in techniques of broad managerial decision-making, expects to start in a job where he can very quickly use his "managerial" abilities. The company, and his boss, expect him to start in a fairly narrow, specialized job. Much as they would like, they cannot start him in a "managerial" assignment until he acquires some experience, job knowledge, and proves that his judgment is satisfactory for making managerial decisions.

With these different expectations, it is not surprising that college graduates are unhappy on their first job, and often move on to other similar unhappy situations. Likewise, it is not surprising that business is unhappy with their college graduates for looking down their noses at their first job, and for grumbling until they get a lot of responsibility or a management position. This situation can be expected to get worse, not better, as more colleges adopt the "managerial decision-making" model for their business curricula.

### "Wall of Misunderstanding"

What can be done about this "student-to-management" time gap? One solution would be the program recommended by Gordon and Howell, where all business training is deferred until graduate school. The undergraduate "pre-professional" business major could take a job after graduation, and then after working for five years, could return to college on an educational leave for his graduate business degree. When he returned to work, he would now have the proper experience and education to be placed in a managerial position. The other alternative, suggested by Gordon and Howell, that of placing the managerial decision-making content in the last two years of

the undergraduate program, is responsible for this "wall of understanding" on the first job. Their reasoning for such a program is given in the following paragraph:

"In the development of business competence, experience and training after entrance on a career play an even more important role than in the traditional professions. Hence, it is particularly important that schools of business concentrate on the educational foundations upon which a student can develop competence through continued self-education since, as many have suggested, the most important thing a student can take away from college is the capacity to learn for himself. These educational foundations should emphasize the kinds of fundamental knowledge and those skills and attitudes which are most common to all types of business positions, are the more important the more responsible the position, and are the most difficult for a student to acquire after college."<sup>1</sup> (pg. 48).

These statements are quite a strong argument for their point of taking the managerial approach to undergraduate education. But do we really need to accept this "now or never" approach? The "now or never" approach says "Better get managerial business courses now, even though you can't use these skills for several years, because you will never have the chance to get them again."

### An Alternative

An alternative is suggested here to try to overcome some of the problems. A student could take the recommended two years of general liberal arts education, then one year of generalized business education, and a final year of specialization in a broad field within business. He could then take a job in his field of specialization, to his

satisfaction and his employer's. Those students who desired could obtain the managerial material later, by pursuing a graduate degree on a part-time or full time basis. This means that both employers and business schools must view education as a continuing process, and stop living by the "now or never" philosophy. Employers would have to recognize that they must allow some employees to attend graduate school on a part-time basis, and also to grant educational leaves, if they are to have people with the managerial education required for their management positions. Business schools must accept the fact that students will get *some* preparation for a specific career field, and that many will return for graduate work. They must admit graduate students on a part-time basis, and offer evening programs where possible.

A final related criticism from the business community is the problem of acquiring enough educated people for their entry level jobs. If more business programs stress the managerial decision-making approach, college graduates will continue to suffer more frustrations in their first jobs in such areas as sales, accounting, purchasing, and personnel. How will business fill these positions with people who will be motivated rather than frustrated? The answer here may be twofold. First, jobs can be re-structured somewhat, and higher level positions created for these more sophisticated graduates. The lower-level jobs can be filled with junior college people. These people may be students who took two years of general transfer education, who could finish their four-year degree on a part-time basis while working.

Others would be two-year terminal students who would receive some specialized business training in their second year. In either case, these two-year graduates would view the entry level job as a rewarding and challenging position, rather than a frustrating one.

### Summary

The recommendations of studies sponsored by the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation call for more general liberal arts education for business students. A core of broad business subjects, all taking the managerial decision-making approach, also is called for. It was recommended that no specialization should take place in undergraduate programs.

The business community feels a need for more skill in written communications and quantitative analysis in college graduates. They also have a problem motivating graduates in entry level jobs. This problem will become worse as more emphasis is placed on managerial decision-making business education programs.

Solutions were offered to the problems expressed by businessmen. Written communications skills could be improved by requiring effective written reports, memos, and letters as a part of various business courses. Graduates of programs stressing managerial decision-making could be assigned to jobs structured for them, and more junior college graduates could be used in entry level positions. Business education could become a continuing experience, rather than a "now or never" one-shot affair, with the cooperation of business schools and employers.

### References

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## Private Participation in Government Education Programs

A coordinated effort to encourage increased voluntary citizen participation in local, State, and Federal education programs has been initiated in the U.S. Office of Education, U.S. Education Commissioner Harold Howe II has announced.

The program is designed to improve and expand the active participation of neighborhood residents and other private citizens, business, industry, and organizations in the development of better educational programs and services, Howe said.

"The need for effective citizen participation in the educational enterprise is essential if our schools are truly to serve their communities," he added. "This program will enable us to provide technical assistance, information and advice to communities, officials, and organizations seeking effective ways to encourage interaction between the school and the community it serves."

Mrs. Elinor Wolf has been named to coordinate citizen participation activities and to stimulate both existing efforts and new programs at the State and local levels, Howe said.

A resident of Philadelphia, Mrs. Wolf has extensive professional and

volunteer experience in social and civic action activities and programs. She was instrumental in creation of such citizen groups as the Committee for the Marshall Plan and the Committee for a National Trade Policy, has served as an officer of many civic organizations, and has been a trustee of Lincoln University, Oxford, Pennsylvania, for the past 10 years.

In her new position with the Office of Education, Mrs. Wolf expects to concentrate her attention on organizational activities in major cities, where many efforts currently are being made to establish new and more constructive relationships between parents and schools.

Mrs. Wolf will be responsible for helping local school districts to develop methods, techniques, and policies designed to encourage the greatest possible citizen participation in educational programs utilizing Federal funds and support.

The program will serve as a clearinghouse and communications center for business, labor, church, parent, civic, and other groups interested in citizen participation activities involving the schools.

