

Liberal Education: Preparing Tomorrow's Business Executives

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In an interview conducted in 1961, A. Whitney Griswold, then president of Yale University stated, "Politics is not and never can be a science. The human race is not that logical or inert or controllable. Politics is an art, one that has been called the art of the possible. The best possible preparation for the practice of this art is, in my opinion, a good, sound liberal education, given relevance to world affairs by taking the world for its province as it ought to do anyway."¹

I would submit that "business management" could be substituted for "politics" in the above statement, and its veracity would remain unaltered.

It is interesting to note that more recently, in an article entitled "Pluralism and Diversity in American Higher Education," Milton Schwebel, dean and professor at the graduate school of education, Rutgers University, contends, "One of the challenges to all our institutions is in planning educational experience that stirs the intelligence and imagination of students in those courses that are not simply the pathways to certification and income; that is, experience that hits home."²

The same thought is echoed again in the recent study by the Committee for Economic Development entitled "The Management and Financing of Colleges." Six general purposes of higher education are identified, the first of which is "Knowledge and the Stimulation of Learning." In expanding on this goal, it is stated "The primary function of a college or university undergraduate program is teaching-learning. It is the generation and dissemination of knowledge and the discipline of the intellect. It entails induction into the uses of reason, the cultivation of critical intelligence, and

the stimulation of a continuing desire to learn. The full development of the individual also requires the refinement of the moral and aesthetic sensitivities and the cultivation of a concern for human values."³

Each of the above statements reflects a concern which I wish to develop more fully in this paper. I would contend that they have relevance for any undergraduate student; however, for the purposes of this paper, I shall confine my purview to business management. Plain and simple, a liberal education, which I more fully define later, is the optimal vehicle in undergraduate years for preparing for a business management career. I speak not as an academician but rather as a practicing executive who contends daily with the many-faceted challenges of business, utilizing many of the techniques and disciplines taught in business schools.

The latter remark introduces a concept which I think we continue to lose sight of in assessing the role of educational institutions, namely, the distinction between education and training—a distinction that goes clear back to the Latin origins of the two words. The distinction is useful and important but we are apt to forget it in talking about the role of educational institutions. It appears to me that the great bulk of what is today called education is really training, whether it be in specific professional disciplines such as engineering, medicine and the law, or in more prosaic but no less necessary vocational training.

In no way do I wish to demean or minimize the importance of training or the role of educational institutions in providing it. My immediate point is that the majority of our students complete their undergraduate years under the misconception of being educated, when in reality they are undergoing sophisticated training. This brings me to my central point, which is that the undergraduate years of a student, especially if that student wishes a career in business management, would most profitably be spent *not* in taking business courses leading to a degree but rather in undergoing a liberal educational experience.

It then becomes incumbent upon me not only to define what I mean by a liberal education but to enumerate those qualities, characteristics and skills that may be necessary for a fulfilling career in business management. I must further make a distinction between those characteristics which for the most part are innate and those which are acquired. Understand, please, that in describing characteristics, I am thinking of those individuals who will rise above middle management ranks into the levels of top responsibility.

Necessary Innate Characteristics

1. High degree of intelligence—intellectual curiosity
2. Creativity
3. Goal orientation
4. High energy—drive
5. Leadership capabilities—interpersonal skills.

Acquired Characteristics

1. Problem solving—analytical skills
2. Synthesis capabilities—ability to relate seemingly disparate factors into a meaningful whole
3. Perspective—ability to maintain a balanced consideration of factors—an overview
4. Critical judgment—in part, a synthesis of the three preceding characteristics
5. Specific skills acquired through on-the-job training supplemented by formalized modes of instruction, including school courses, seminars, reading:

Technical—Engineering, Scientific
Financial
Legal
Marketing
Manufacturing—Production
Behavioral Sciences

The above is not an all-inclusive list, and there are areas where no sharp distinction can be made between those characteristics acquired and those innate. Further, it may legitimately be doubted whether the specific skills I have enumerated can be acquired on the basis suggested. I differ, and will endeavor to explain why by submitting my concept of a liberal education.

Let me begin by citing an article, "What Will Become of the Past?" by G. John Roush in *Daedalus* magazine. In speaking of the humanities, Roush cites two notions of tradition regarding their study: one the syncretic, the other the dialectical. The basic idea of the syncretic tradition is that truth is a "discoverable unity," much like the Platonic Ideas. Implicit in this approach to the humanities is that men through the ages have seen the truth in a manner that

is essentially either correct or incorrect. It seems to me that this approach to the teaching of the humanities has been the predominant one. The other, the dialectical tradition, "seeks out differences, plays with them, and demands that men make choices among them."⁴ (Does this have a familiar ring to those of you in top management? Is not this one of your principal roles?)

Later, Roush contends that "we need to make room on all our faculties for doers as well as thinkers, and we need to devise ways to assimilate them. Such a faculty would engage its students in judging their environment and acting in it and on it. The resulting curriculum would appear problem-oriented, but the problems would be set by the students themselves, continually revised and refined as the result of a real dialectic, with teachers, with books, and with the world. The problems would certainly not all be 'contemporary' in the usual sense of the word, but they would reflect the concerns of living men."⁵

It should be no secret that I am a proponent of the dialectical approach to education. And now, what areas of concern should comprise a liberal education in my definition? Obviously, one cannot quantify it in a specific manner and be consistent with the spirit of the dialectical. However, there should be general areas of concern to which a student might be exposed, and with which the student should interact.

My ideal student would have exposure to the natural sciences, engineering and/or mathematics, with in-depth study in some specific area. This should comprise at least 25 per cent of a student's undergraduate activity. Such a student should also have an introductory exposure to the social sciences, and this area of activity might occupy as much as fifteen per cent of his time. The balance, and certainly no less than half of the student's activity, should be in the humanistic studies, with in-depth involvement in at least one area. I recognize that in any such educational process there are certain elements of training as distinct from education. In my experience, these can be minimal, and the emphasis should be on a Socratic, dialectical approach.

Hopefully, it is not necessary to paint the picture in full to see that such an educational experience is almost precisely designed to develop more fully the innate characteristics I previously cited as needful for a manager, as well as enabling that individual to acquire the aforementioned skills of analysis, synthesis, perception and critical judgment. To put it another way, I strongly contend

that such a program, designed as it is to expose a person to the achievements, scientific, technical, political, social, philosophical and artistic, of great minds past and present, will nurture the heart and mind of the student, so as to incite to fever pitch his curiosity, increase his ability to assimilate new ideas and skills, nurture and sensitize his spiritual, moral and aesthetic sensibilities, and promote the self-generation of perspective and overview. In short, develop the critical and analytical faculties without dulling that individual's vision.

Now it may be fairly asked how, in fact, such an individual with no specific skills is able to enter the job market. I would submit that, at entry level, any management or professional position (the law and medicine excepted) requires very little in the way of skills that such an individual would not have or could not readily acquire. I speak of positions ordinarily filled by newly graduated engineers, scientists and holders of degrees in business. An honest appraisal of starting positions would show that they demand very little in the way of technical knowledge that the individual would not already possess or could not acquire on the job, supplemented by study. I contend that merely to train an individual as a mechanical engineer, as a chemist, or in business is to unnecessarily narrow his vision, and possibly deny him broader horizons.

To be sure, many individuals, despite such training, go further, but why not provide the kind of educational experience that will enable more to do so? Griswold, in the aforementioned interview, stated that the original purpose of educational institutions was to provide a liberal education. He points out that "as American society grew in diversity and size, and in the variety of its enterprises, it put an ever-increasing demand upon all educational institutions to become service institutions, so that that part of the original purpose which was practical in conception, began to dominate the whole, and the majority of people that talk about education today talk about that aspect of it. Those who add to that recognition of liberal education as a preparation for life, as a way of improving your mind and your soul, making a better individual of yourself are in the minority."⁶

The above discussion does have clear implications regarding current attitudes, or if you will, the mind sets of the academic world and of business. I suggest consideration of the following ideas strongly implied by my views:

1. The undergraduate degree in business should be eliminated. It is not necessary and has little relevance to the individual's

intellectual and spiritual development, let alone what he or she will encounter in the business world. This does not mean that individual courses in finance, accounting, marketing and distribution should not be retained for individuals to take as electives, although my personal predilection is to avoid such courses in undergraduate years. This kind of material is easily assimilated later by a well-trained mind.

2. More extensive use should be made of cooperative programs which enable the student to leave the academic world for specific activities, work or research in the "real world." There need not always be a specific relationship between a student's academic program and his "co-op project."
3. The principal form of academic training for business should be the graduate M.B.A. programs offered by many institutions. I would submit that more relevant use of M.B.A. programs would be made by individuals who have had at least two year's experience in the business world. In other words, I am suggesting that no one be admitted to business school fresh out of college.
4. Greater use should be made by the world of business and industry of graduate business schools by allowing managers to take sabbaticals of one month to a year for attending graduate business courses.
5. Business and industry should not require that an individual have a degree in a specific skill in order to gain entry into a position. It should be a relatively simple matter, through testing and interviewing, to ascertain an individual's capabilities to adequately perform job entry positions. Adequate provision should be made by business to enable individuals to supplement their on-the-job training with specific courses in specific disciplines.
6. Business and industry is missing a valuable resource by requiring that all people have college degrees before being given consideration for management positions. There was a time when a college degree was not a requisite. Now, it has become tantamount to working papers. This is unfortunate. Individuals with energy, ambition and intellectual capabilities can and should be given all possible opportunities.

I realize the above suggestions may be greeted with a great deal of justifiable skepticism. I wish to emphasize that I am quite seri-

ous about the first three suggestions. The latter three carry with them many practical problems, not the least of which revolve around the resources of smaller companies, many of which do not have the managerial depth and financial capabilities to support the kind of programs suggested.

There has been a marked tendency among our brightest students to pursue careers in law, government and scientific research in preference to business management. In many cases, they do so with a mistaken view that business does not serve the noble purposes embodied in other callings. It is not the purpose of this paper to refute such a contention—except to suggest that well-managed business enterprises are crucial to the nation's and indeed the world's social, economic and political viability, and I say this in terms of the quality of human existence.

In today's world of international trade and the growing activities of the multinational enterprise, talented and committed business leaders are in increasing demand. How best to develop them? Robert Goheen, former president of Princeton University, remarked several years ago, "The true basis of a liberal education is its power to nourish a mind—its ability both to enliven and enlarge a man's conscious jurisdiction. It seems to draw out our potential for awareness, for rational understanding, and thus to extend our capacities for beneficent service, for responsible action, wherever we happen to find our chosen work."⁷

¹A. Whitney Griswold, "The University," Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, 1961, p. 21

²Milton Schwebel, "Pluralism and Diversity in American Higher Education," *The Annals*, November 1972, p. 93

³"The Management and Financing of Colleges," Research and Policy Committee, Committee for Economic Development, October 1973, p. 19

⁴G. John Roush, "What Will Become of the Past," *Daedalus*, Summer 1969, p. 647

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 652

⁶A. Whitney Griswold, *op. cit.*, p. 3

⁷Robert Goheen, "Why Teacher-Scholars?" (Unpublished talk presented in April 1960, in Chicago and New York.)

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