

The Contribution of Business History to the Business School Curriculum

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Schools of business are experiencing tremendous enrollment increases. These enrollment increases place great pressure on business educators to provide curricula which meet student needs. While enrollment increases may begin to moderate, the pressure to address student needs will not. A major component of curricula attention must be directed toward the development of courses which challenge students to move beyond their specialized fields of study to consider the socioeconomic impact of management decisions. The comments which follow point out how the study of business and economic history can assist in the attainment of this goal and what factors should be considered in curriculum development.

HISTORY IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

A recent survey of American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) members provides insight into the extent to which history is included in business school curricula. David A. Van Fleet and Daniel A. Wren surveyed 563 AACSB institutions as well as 181 Business History Conference members. They received 313 responses. The survey results indicate that there is a widespread feeling that history, in one form or another, is part of business schools' curricula. (The authors included the following as types of history: accounting history, economic history, history of economic thought, and history of management thought.) History is usually taught as a part of a course or courses rather than as one or more separate courses. Furthermore, history in the business school is usually taught by nonhistorians. Based upon the results of the survey, one might tentatively conclude that undergraduate and graduate students in business schools are exposed to history in some fashion but not systematically and not by trained business or economic historians.

CONTRIBUTION OF HISTORY IN THE BUSINESS SCHOOL

Business and economic history can make a number of contributions to the intellectual and professional growth of business school students. The most significant contributions of business and economic history are in terms of (1) values formation and clarification, (2) an understanding of the impact of management decisions, and (3) a basis for communication across sectors of society.

Consideration of the contribution of business and economic history should be undertaken in the context of the comments made by Peter F. Drucker at the Wharton School Convocation. Drucker pointed out that business education must expand to include an alternative constituency. No longer can business education be directed exclusively at the traditional student. Professionals will increasingly turn to the university for "in-service" education to maintain themselves within a rapidly changing profession. Drucker commented further that business education needs to be altered and expanded to provide management training for decision-makers in the public as well as the private sector. The issues raised by Drucker make the contribution of business and economic history illustrated by the three factors already listed more obvious. Each of those factors is briefly discussed in what follows.

Values Clarification

The study of business and economic history provides the opportunity for students to clarify their values objectively by exploring in a historical context what might otherwise be an emotion-laden issue. By discussing historical issues rather than contemporary issues, anxiety can be reduced and productive discussion can be maximized. Instructors can choose various historical conflicts, elicit opinions, and then illuminate consistent or inconsistent viewpoints. The goal of such an activity is not the alteration of existing values but rather the clarification of individuals' values. Such clarification will allow prospective managers to approach management decisions with a clear understanding of their preconceived viewpoints and values.

Impact of Decision-Making

In an interview before he left the presidency of New York University, John Sawhill commented that what concerned him was "that to the extent businessmen don't consider some of the broader social ramifications of their decision-making, the government steps in and then... complex and unworkable regulatory systems [are] established." Sawhill's comment underscores the need for managers to develop an awareness of the interdependence of various

sectors of the socioeconomic system. In addition to awareness, managers need to develop the ability to anticipate the results of their decisions on the full spectrum of individuals and institutions.

Business and economic history can be used to illuminate problems. The business and economic history courses can serve as the laboratory where management decisions can be examined with known outcomes. Decisions can be evaluated in terms of the decision-making involved as well as in terms of the outcomes generated. American business history provides sufficient different management problems and decisions to allow for an evaluation of a full sequence of situations.

Communications Across Sectors

If managers are to deal with the "broader social ramifications of their decision-making," they need to be able to communicate across sectors of society. What today is often described as jammed communications between government, business, and society in general may in part have resulted from the overspecialization of college curricula. This situation of jammed communications creates a problem which must be addressed within business school curricula. If Drucker's recommendation to broaden management training is considered, the necessity of providing a vehicle to develop communication across sectors of society becomes even more immediate.

Business and economic history can, in part, serve to provide such a vehicle. A course which explores the impact of business decisions allows for managers from all sectors of society, business, government, education, and so on, to focus on the decision-making process and its applicability to their chosen field as well as the results of the decision and their impact on all sectors of society. This commonality of experience in the analysis of historical events provides a basis for intersectoral communication which can continue beyond the classroom experience.

MODEL FOR CURRICULUM FORMATION

There are a number of factors which must be taken into account as business educators make curricular decisions. Business educators must consider (1) student characteristics, (2) goals and objectives, (3) course content, and (4) methodology. What follows is a brief review of these characteristics. This model for curricular formation could be applied to virtually any aspect of higher education.

Student Characteristics

The students themselves must be considered when designing a business history course. Questions such as the following can

help in curriculum development. What kind of students will take the course? If undergraduates with no work experience, they will be looking for a course which creates experiences for them. Adult learners with practical experience will be looking to use their experiences as a context for learning. Where do the students go when they complete their business education? Or, where do they think they will go? The type of job placement should influence course design.

Goals and Objectives

Goals refer to the general goals of the business education program. A business history course should complement overall curricular goals. Objectives refer to the reasons for using business history as a component of the overall business education program. Specific course objectives should ensure that the business history course moves the students toward the program's goals.

Content

After considering student characteristics, program goals, and course objectives, curriculum developers need to address the issue of course content. Will the course or courses under consideration concentrate on business history? economic history? Will course content include the history of specific disciplines? the history of managerial or economic thought? Business educators need to consider whether the course will serve as an overview, whether there will be coordination with other courses and whether it will be organized thematically or chronologically.

Methodology

Once the foregoing issues are resolved, a decision needs to be made about who will teach the course, a trained historian or a business historian. Perhaps the course should be team-taught; and business educators will need to consider the level at which the course will be offered, its sequence and scope, whether it will be taught using case methods or with a strong theoretical orientation. These are but a few of the methodological factors which merit attention.

CONCLUSION

In a period of general reassessment of the purposes and conduct of higher education, business educators cannot escape the need to reexamine business school curricula. Such reexamination must include an evaluation of the purposes and processes of business school training.

When Joseph Wharton made a gift to the University of Pennsylvania which was used to start the School of Finance and Economy, the donor felt that "practical instruction should be solidly grounded in a classical education." The business school curriculum of today is distinctly different from that which originated from Wharton's gift. Nonetheless, if spokesmen like Drucker and Sawhill are any indication, there is increasing pressure for the business school curriculum to address the broader social ramifications of management decisions.

Especially considering this concern, business history can provide a framework for course development designed to meet contemporary needs. The foregoing comments were intended to demonstrate how business history can be used and what factors need to be considered in curriculum development.

NOTE

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