

Academia and Education of Business: Two Case Studies

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The scholarship of Michael Sedlak and Steven Sass, put before us in this session, seems to me to reflect nicely the efforts under way in recent years among historians who deal with education, the professions, the academic disciplines -- the whole cultural complex of knowledge production and distribution in American society -- to inject what one might call a new realism into their work, and to employ broader perspectives that promise some understanding of the concrete linkages among central institutions in American life. Sedlak sensitizes us to the responsiveness of educational programs to shifts in larger economic and occupational contexts beyond the college or university. Sass provides us with a case study which (with some modification) fits the general model constructed by Sedlak. In the Wharton case, we see the institutional response of one university to the new demands on higher education generated by structural and organizational changes in the American business system.

Those of us who work in some aspect of educational history and do so from a background in intellectual history (as so many do) are well warned here of the limitations inherent in our approach which is too frequently focused narrowly on the ideas articulated by the leaders of new institutions or disciplines without much serious reference to the environment in which these individuals operate and to which they respond. In short, we are well advised here to pay attention to context and to construe context broadly.

However, therein lies my quarrel (inasmuch as I have a quarrel) with these two excellent pieces. Neither author chooses to explore explicitly the impact on the development of business curricula of a process that each in his analysis suggests occurred. That process is the professionalization of the business professoriat itself. To be sure, my point here may be directed at a question of emphasis rather than an issue of substance; but I am impressed with the fact that in both analyses one can see the process of professionalization take hold in the faculties of the new business schools, yet neither author seeks to sort out the

relative weights of the external context (the corporate labor market) and the internal process (professionalization) in determining the shape and content of business education programs.

Sedlak's thesis is that business education was shaped (as Professor White said of higher education generally) "not by the college but by the employer of the college graduate," that student decisions to subscribe to specialized technical courses were based on their own perceptions of the demands of the marketplace. He argues further that once the defensiveness characteristic of the first generation of faculty had been reduced by the growing enrollments in and increasing respectability of business schools and programs, the second generation of business faculty was free to respond to market demands for a specialized curriculum and to do so unimpeded by an allegiance to a liberal managerial ideal irrelevant to the marketplace.

Yet in presenting his analysis of the shift from the broad managerial orientation of Phase I of the history of collegiate business education to the functional specialization of Phase II, Sedlak describes a set of developments which, while certainly made possible by the external factors he addressed, also seem to have a life of their own. The classically trained economists on the business faculties were replaced by younger men (and I quote him selectively here) who possessed training in "one of the business functions," who were "educated in an operational field," who "conducted extensive research in that field," who served "as consultants to businessmen in that field," and who "authored the first texts in that field." I would suggest that these are the signs and portents of professionalization setting in, a process to which Sedlak gives further testimony when he reports that the classically trained economists who remained on the faculties in the 1920s were disturbed by what they perceived to be the tactics of ambitious department chairmen determined to expand their academic domains by increasing the number of specialized electives in their programs and by the actions of eager young faculty members who wrote the texts to serve the needs of the new electives.

My point is that there may be more taking place in this process than a stimulus/response exchange between developments in the corporate labor market, on the one hand, and changes in business curricula, on the other. There appears to be this related but nonetheless distinct process involving efforts by members of the new business professoriat to map out and mine intensively their own areas of expertise and to expand their own career opportunities, a process which would, of course, encourage further specialization in the curriculum. I think it might be valuable to lift out the professionalization process and explore it as a variable of some independent influence on the direction and content of collegiate business curricula. The professionalization of the faculty may be a significant factor mediating the

exchange between external market forces and the evolution of business education in America.

Sass explores the growth of differentiation and specialization in the Wharton curriculum in some detail; and while he does not frame his analysis in terms of professionalization, his work does, I think, illustrate my point. The development of the Wharton curriculum exemplifies the general thrust of Sedlak's thesis with respect to the importance of the external environment in stimulating specialization. The specialized program initiated by Edmund James in the early 1890s stalled until the first decade of the 20th century when enrollments grew rapidly. Clearly, at the Wharton School expanding enrollments were the sine qua non of institutional development. But here again the direction of curriculum development was not entirely dependent on employment markets and specific student demands on the system. Once the process of specialization was set in motion, it appears to have been firmly in the hands of the new generation of Ph.D.s, most of whom came from the Wharton School itself. Differentiation and specialization in the Wharton program proceeded rapidly as the ambitious, career-conscious professionals (the Edward Meads, the J. Paul Goodes, the J. Russell Smiths) divided and subdivided the curriculum among themselves. These men conducted the research, wrote the texts, and became the renowned experts in their specialized fields of inquiry. The fact that they replaced their preprofessional predecessors, the business journalists, as the authoritative source of knowledge in the business functions is perhaps the best evidence of the kind of process under way here.

Sass's analysis of the fate of management courses at the Wharton School demonstrates the difficulty of distinguishing between employment market forces manifested in student pressures on the curriculum and faculty professionalization as factors influencing curriculum development. He argues that management as a field of study stagnated at the Wharton School because, in contrast to other fields, management courses fed into no clear career line for students. The thesis that the market played the primary role in the evolution of business school programs is nicely supported. Sass's own narrative, however, reveals an alternative explanation, or at least a second factor at work. The development of management courses faltered at the Wharton School because such courses became severed from the crucial pattern of faculty professionalization. When Edward Mead concentrated on finance after the departure of Frederick Cleveland, Mead's management courses fell first to a graduate student who did not persevere and then to J. Russell Smith, a Wharton Ph.D. already well-committed to a professional career in geography. The school continued to offer courses in general management but put them under the direction of a man committed to another discipline. It would appear that the continued immature status of management in the Wharton curriculum can be blamed in part on the failed linkage between the field and faculty professionalization.

While the focus on the relationship between employment markets and curriculum development in the evolution of collegiate business education broadens our understanding of the network of socioeconomic relations in which the university is enmeshed, and while it is an indispensable corrective to the penchant for writing educational history as if it were a matter entirely in the hands of educators operating in contexts no larger than their own institutions and disciplines, it does nevertheless come perilously close to precluding the possibility of dealing with the business academicians as self-conscious, reflexive, goal-forming individuals -- as men of ideas. I fear that too single-minded a focus on the external stimuli to the development of management education allows too easy a dismissal of the perceptions, intellectual convictions, and ideological concerns of the faculty members who implemented disciplinary specialization, who developed vested interests in particular approaches to management, and who used the resources at their disposal to institutionalize their perspectives in curricula, courses, and texts.

Perhaps keeping an eye on the professoriat's own growth and development would provide an opportunity to examine both the subjective motivations and the objective consequences of developments in educational history; and in this case we might gain some access to the interior history of management education without forgoing crucial contextual factors. Such an approach might allow a clearer look at the ideological sources of management theory, for example, or at the part played by the business school as an agency of socialization which not only introduced students to business roles but also contributed to the definition of those roles. In short, the limitations of intellectual history notwithstanding, there is an intellectual content to management education which I think is only partly explained by references to the influences of the corporate labor market on educational institutions and programs.

Indeed, I think we see something of the limits of the market focus at the end of Sedlak's paper when he deals with the transition from Phase II to Phase III of the history of management education. His position is that changes in occupational structure and economic conditions in the post-World War II era caused a shift in business curricula back to a broad managerial orientation akin to the one articulated by the economists of Phase I. Yet his analysis of the nature of the shift relies heavily on evidence of the power of a group of critics of both business management and business education who established the parameters of the debate over reform of business school curricula. Changes in external contexts provided the stimulus and opportunity for change in business education, but they do not appear to have mandated the shape of the change. In this instance, it was not the corporate labor market which transmitted pressures for change to educational institutions. It was a community of commentators,

consultants, and academic critics reacting to their own definitions of what had become problematic in the management of American business enterprise. Again, intellectual and ideological concerns seem to have played something less than a dependent role in the evolution of business education programs.

With the reservations I have noted here, I am generally persuaded that the external context represented by the corporate labor market was a crucial factor in shaping collegiate business education, indeed education in general. I would, however, like to see the thesis tested more thoroughly on two levels. First, there might be some effort to measure the degree of real correspondence between the types of lower- and middle-level positions that proliferated in the new corporate bureaucracies and the types of specialized courses appearing in the business curricula which matched that development. Second, I would like to see more data on corporate recruiting policies, entry-level jobs, early career patterns of business school graduates, and any other factors which might demonstrate the mechanism by which employment market pressures were brought to bear on curriculum decisions. This kind of evidence would help resolve the problems I see concerning the relative weights of external and internal factors in shaping curriculum structure and content.

Finally, I think we find confirmed in these papers and in other similar research something which those of us who work in educational institutions know to be true but often fail to appreciate fully, and that is that our institutions are not "worlds unto themselves," somehow magically independent of the wider society which they serve. Institution and environment merge, fuse, and flow into one another. In that sense, the study of educational history, becomes in a very real way a study of part of the core of modern society. Sedlak and Sass help us to see how that is so.

Manufacturing History

