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Comparing Admonitions to Business Schools in Two Different Centuries: Action Versus Inaction

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Abstract

In recent decades, multiple observers have suggested that university-based business schools are not serving society well and that significant change is warranted. However, some of these same observers also lament that their concerns are falling on deaf ears and are generating no action. This lack of response on the part of university-based business schools stands in stark contrast to another strong voice appearing in the 1950s about the trajectory of business schools. The purpose of this essay is to explain why one set of warnings was quite deliberately acted upon in the 20th century while the more recent set from the 21st century has generated little action. Current-day advocates for business schools to change could benefit from the lessons of history if they wish to catalyze the change they desire.

We will begin with a brief quiz. Answer this question:

Scenario: A party with name recognition asserts that a segment of higher education has lost its way. Instead of simply being innocuous, this path being followed by higher education is detrimental to the greater community.

The observer is:

a. *Boniface VIII, Pope of the Catholic Church, referring to the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris in 1290.*
b. *Edward Gibson, English historian, writing about Oxford University and Cambridge University in the 18th century.*
c. *The Carnegie Foundation, writing about US and Canadian medical schools in 1910.*
d. *The Carnegie Foundation, writing about US business schools in 1959.*
e. *Jeffrey Pfeffer and Christina Fong of Stanford University, writing about US business schools in 2002.*
f. *Warren Bennis and James O'Toole, of University of Southern California, writing about US business schools in 2005.*
g. *Martin Parker of the University of Bristol, wring about university-based business schools in 2018.*

Readers with test anxiety may relax. All seven possible answers are correct (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Flexner, 1910; Lucas, 1994; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Parker, 2018; Pierson, 1959).

As evidenced by our quiz, we recognize that saying higher education has egregiously derailed is not new in history. On some occasions in history, voicing these concerns has been followed by dramatic changes. On other occasions, they have been followed by no change. As phrased by Tourish (2017, p. 391), "Rome may burn, but we proceed with business as usual." For example, as stated by Pfeffer and Fong (2002, p. 89), "Although much of the foregoing argument may at first glance appear to be controversial or provocative, it is neither—the problems are at once well recognized and simply not frequently acknowledged or discussed."

This quote from Pfeffer and Fong about US business schools could be repeated verbatim 22 years later. Very little has changed in 22 years except that perhaps the problems have become more acute.

However, there are lessons from history to provide insight regarding the potential for such concerns to have impact or to be ignored. In our quiz's list of examples, we want to call attention to two: US business schools as discussed by the Carnegie Foundation in 1959 and by multiple authors in the first decade of the 21st century (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Pfeffer and Fong, 2002). The former was followed by dramatic change; the latter was not. What was different between these two situations, and what implications can be learned for the sake of admonitions coming from concerned parties of the 21st century? Answering these two questions is the primary purpose of this essay. We will examine the most recent of these two situations first.

LATE 20TH CENTURY AND EARLY 21ST CENTURY

In recent decades, there have been a number of voices questioning the trajectory of the university-based business school. Allegations stated in these concerns include the following (though not an exhaustive list). The training students receive in business schools does not adequately prepare them to be effective in the practice of business (e.g., Grey, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004). A high priority is placed on research that does not influence the practice of business (e.g., Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Skapinker, 2008). Business school faculty members are not interested in understanding or solving the key problems facing business today (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Podolny, 2009; Thomas & Wilson, 2011). The primary criterion for hiring business school faculty is the ability to publish refereed research; any experience as a business practitioner is far secondary and optional (e.g., Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007). Therefore, many business school students are receiving "training" in a profession (i.e., business) from people who have never practiced as members of that profession. Parker (2018, p. *viii*) goes as far as to muse about the merits of shutting down business schools, characterizing them as "being implicated in producing the culture of short-termism and greed which has led to numerous business scandals." Podolny (2009, p. 63), a former dean of the Yale University business school, characterizes the current-day US business school as "harmful to society…part of the problem rather than the solution."

Recognizable voices in the business school (e.g., Grey, 2004; Spender, 2007) are concerned that such a trajectory is unsustainable. Grey (p. 184) asserts "It cannot be assumed that we will forever be able to sell a product that so manifestly fails to do what it says it will do." Spender (p. 39) warns "Just how and why and for how long this is a sustainable strategy is a matter of speculation."

If we are to believe these concerned colleagues, the university-based business school is an unsustainable "house of cards" that is on the precipice of toppling in a like manner to the banking and real estate industries in 2009. And this is the point in the "story line" where Pfeffer, Bennis, and Podolny lament that scholars and business schools administrators readily acknowledge the problem and continue with "business as usual" while Rome burns.

FOUNDATION REPORTS IN 1959

Sixty-five years ago, another alarm was sounded regarding the trajectory of the US university-based business school, and this alarm was not ignored. The reasons why this chain of events ***was acted upon*** should give today's scholars insight.

In the early 20th century, the Humboldtian model of the university's mission was widely accepted in the US. Humboldt (c. 1809) was adamant that the university was a center of scholarship; the primary purpose was the discovery of knowledge. In the long shadow of the Humboldtian model, the US university-based business school was often viewed as an illegitimate interloper in the university. Critics (e.g., Ayres, 1925; Flexner, 1930/1967; Veblen, 1918) saw it as a trade school that was not built upon the base of academic disciplines. (For example, the profession of medicine builds on organic chemistry, anatomy, and other disciplines; engineering, upon mathematics, physics, and chemistry.)

In the 1940s, business schools began a process of "soul searching" regarding their role in the university (cf., Cheit, 1985; Daniel, 1998). This soul searching process culminated in two unflattering high profile reports being released. One was sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation (Pierson, 1959); the other by the Ford Foundation (Gordon & Howell, 1959). Although prepared independently, the two reports reached quite similar conclusions. Two conclusions were particularly relevant for this discussion. First, the proportion of business school faculty with terminal degrees was less than the university proportion. There was over-dependence on adjunct and part-time faculty. Second, the intellectual atmosphere of business schools compared unfavorably to other academic units of the university. In part, the dependence on part-time instructors resulted in a faculty that was not trained in, had little interest in, and did not energetically pursue research.

Again, the 1959 foundations reports did not occur in isolation (Augier & March, 2011; Daniel, 1998; Khurana, 2007). They were part of a discussion that had been occurring for over 15 years. However, they were a catalyst in bringing about changes that still influence business schools today. Additionally, the Ford Foundation provided financial support to facilitate changes that it advocated. Khurana (2007, p. 238) estimates that amount at over $35 million (over $360 million in 2024 dollars).

The response of business schools—certainly followed more vigorously by some than by others—was multi-faceted, but one key element was to move toward a full-time faculty of Ph.D.-qualified scholars who did embrace the value of research and were able to conduct rigorous research (Porter & McKibbin, 1988). As admonished by Gordon and Howell (1959, p. 377), "if the business school belongs in the university, then research belongs in the business school." Business schools that wanted to make this shift in faculty had a fortuitous windfall opportunity caused partially by the influx of the baby boom generation into the university student ranks. Between 1959 and 1979, the United States saw an unprecedented threefold growth in university enrollments—from 3.6 million in 1959 to 11.6 million in 1979 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2012, Table 220). This three-fold increase occurred in the UK during that same time window as well (Bolton, 2012). Because growth in student body necessitates growth in faculty, many universities used this growth as an opportunity to recruit a different profile of business school faculty that embraced the values of a research culture more than the previous generation. Within a "faculty generation," many business schools achieved faculties that were serious and enthusiastic about conducting research and had the training to do so in a manner the university generally viewed as sufficiently rigorous.

WHAT WAS THE DIFFERENCE?

Why were US university-based business schools responding very strongly and deliberately to the concerns catalyzed by the 1959 foundation reports compared to their ignoring of concerns raised by many 21st century writers, including Pfeffer and Fong (2002)? To answer this question, we first need a discussion of a key motivator of the modern-day university.

Prestige as a Central Currency in Academia

"Prestige is the coin of the realm among the leading research universities and liberal arts colleges" (Kirp, 2003, p. 4). Additionally, it is the "Holy Grail" for an even greater number of schools that aspire to be among those leaders. More precisely, prestige is linked to reputation, defined as "stakeholder perceptions with regard to an organization's ability to deliver valued outcomes" (Rindova, Williamson, & Petkova, 2010, p. 610). Rindova and Fombrun (1999) distinguish reputation from material assets that an organization may hold by describing it as an asset that is based in human interpretation. Although both terms—prestige and reputation—have been used in the literature (sometimes even inter-changeably, as in Volkwein & Sweitzer, 2006), the term prestige will be used here.

Prestige is central to higher education for two key reasons. First, universities and colleges compete. They compete for the most talented students, the best faculty members, the most research grant funding, and the most funding for their academic programs. Unfortunately, higher education is a venue where the quality of competition criteria cannot be observed directly; "higher education is an industry in which consumers are often underinformed in the sense that they cannot objectively evaluate the quality of the service before they actually purchase it" (Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002, p. 19). This disadvantage applies to potential undergraduate students, but also to parties "purchasing" other "services" such as government agencies funding sponsored research or benefactors supporting a particular university initiative (Breault and Callejo Pérez, 2012; Garvin, 1980).

Second, to fill this void, prestige becomes a proxy for objectively observed quality (Clotfelter, 1999; Lovett, 2005; Sweitzer & Volkwein, 2009). University X cannot unequivocally promise that students will receive a better education than University Y would provide; University A cannot promise the NSF that its researchers will provide better execution of a research project than University B researchers would accomplish. University X can point to faculty members with terminal degrees from Ivy League schools and numerous teaching awards. University A can point to the publication records of its faculty members, their accumulated previous grant totals, and high profile accolades. “Since much sponsored research is awarded on the basis of peer review, scholars who are widely known and respected in their fields are likely to attract a large volume of grants and contracts” (Garvin, 1980, p. 24).

Because quality cannot be directly observed, prestige becomes the currency of competition among higher education institutions that desire to demonstrate an upward trajectory and attract resources (Breault and Callejo Pérez, 2012; Garvin, 1980; Melguizo & Strober, 2007). All university presidents—either explicitly or implicitly—want to point to improvements (i.e., increases in quality) their administrations have provided. Yet higher education is a venue where only proxies are the available indicators of quality. Therefore “universities respond to considerations of institutional prestige, weighing them heavily in organizational decision making” (Garvin, p. 22). This centrality of prestige helps to explain why universities—although they challenge the validity of rankings by external parties such as *Financial Times* or *U.S. News & World Report*—proudly advertise their schools’ rankings from those same evaluators when the rankings are positive. Those results are one of the limited sources of alleged information regarding increases in quality, and university administrators covet the opportunity to trumpet such increases (Melguizo & Strober, 2007; Sweitzer & Volkwein, 2009).

One of the most critical domains of prestige (Breault & Callejo Pérez, 2012; Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; Melguizo & Strober, 2007) is the quality of faculty credentials and accomplishments. In research universities, this is primarily measured by quantity and perceived quality of refereed research. How did attention to prestige in this domain influence the response to the 1959 foundation reports?

Implications of 1959 Foundation Reports

The Carnegie Foundation and Ford Foundation reports of 1959 were authored primarily by academics, not by constituents external to the university. In effect, these reports were academic colleagues addressing the business school saying:

You are an embarrassment to us. The fuel we operate on is prestige, and you are dragging us down as a black eye on our accepted methods of asserting prestige. Therefore, it is really questionable whether you belong in the university or not. If you want to be welcome (or at least tolerated) here, you need to get in line and value what we value. Otherwise, you are really a trade school, and should be banished from the university as an illegitimate interloper.

University-based business schools did not want to lose the prestige and legitimacy derived from their association with the university (i.e., as opposed to being an independent trade school). Therefore, with the 1960s and 1970s hiring of a different profile of faculty, they “got in line” with the university’s values. In effect, they were able to reply with

Look! We do rigorous research that is empirically based. We have rigorous academic journals. They insist on insightful theoretical reasoning and sophisticated research methods. They are sufficiently rigorous that they reject many journal submissions as unworthy.

In many ways, it is the same plot line as Dr. Seuss’s classic treatise on status, *The Sneetches* (1961). (A sneetch was a flightless bird that looked strikingly like a pot-bellied human.) As this story unfolds, there are two types of beach-dwelling sneetches—those with stars on their bellies and those without stars. The ones with stars fancy themselves to be much higher in status. They engage in typical higher status behaviors such as puffing out their chests and ignoring the non-star sneetches should they encounter them in daily activities. Of course, when they entertained on social occasions such as frankfurter roasts on the beach, the sneetches with stars only invited their high status peers with stars. The sneetches with no stars were left out of these events and appeared quite forlorn and dejected.

It was not until an entrepreneur arrived who could place stars on the bellies of the sneetches who originally had no stars that they achieved an element of status on the beaches. With new stars stamped upon their bellies, these *nouveau riche* sneetches proclaimed that they now had equal status. Unfortunately for supporters of the *status quo*, these upstarts indeed were now indistinguishable from the original sneetches whose status derived from having a belly star. Being indistinguishable, they could now attend the frankfurter roasts because there was no identifying mechanism to keep them excluded.

After changes catalyzed by the 1959 reports, business schools were saying to their university counterparts, “Now we are just like you. Therefore, we are legitimate attendees at your frankfurter parties!”

These changes were self-perpetuating. Business schools hired faculty who were inclined to accept the university’s values. These scholars conducted their research activities consistent with the university’s agenda. They trained successive generations of business school scholars to accept the values of the university. The die was cast. Over time, this acceptance of the university’s agenda, by default, dictated that the university-based business school did not value the agenda of the business community as highly as it did previous to 1959 (Augier & March, 2011; Daniel, 1998; Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; Khurana, 2007; Porter & McKibbin, 1988).

The Difference

Any university-based professional school (e.g., medical school, law school, journalism school) serves two masters—the profession and the university. However, the agendas of these two masters do not necessarily converge (Augier & March, 2011; Bok, 2015; Simon, 1997). The profession believes that a professional school should prepare new entrants to the profession (e.g., Joy, 2014; Katz, 2012; Newton, 2010). The university—fully in the shadow of Humboldt (c. 1809)—has an agenda that includes basic research and discovery of knowledge. To stay in the good graces of the university and to be welcome at its frankfurter parties, the business school was compelled to place the university’s values ahead of the business profession’s values and preferences.

The 21st century critics of business school research (e.g., Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Grey, 2004; Mintzberg, 2004; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Podolny, 2009; Spender, 2007) are essentially accusing the business school of valuing the university’s preferences and agenda over the preferences and agenda of the practice of business. Unfortunately for those critics, the consequences of choosing one set of preferences over the other is rather lopsided. An individual faculty member who chooses the university’s agenda and thrives is welcome at the university’s frankfurter roasts. S/he is rewarded with tenure and is welcome to remain indefinitely. In a research university, an individual tenure-track faculty member who chooses the preferences of the business community over the preferences of the university is quickly banished from the university.

Criticisms from the 1950s resonated ***within the university*** because they accused the business school of not embracing the preferences of the university. In an institution that cherishes prestige, the business school was viewed as an illegitimate interloper. Criticisms of the 21st century do not resonate strongly ***within the university*** because these voices are saying that business schools have chosen the preferences of the university over the preferences of business. In the mindset of the university, this choice is not problematic.

IMPLICATIONS FOR ADVOCATING CHANGE

Critics of the 21st century university-based business school (e.g., Bennis & O’Toole, 2005; Parker, 2018; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Podolny, 2009) are accusing it of aligning itself with the values of the university as opposed to investing effort in an agenda that might more centrally benefit the practice of business within society. The reason for this problem is that the individual consequences for adhering to the university’s preferences are between nil and modest while the individual consequences for adhering to society’s preferences are potentially quite severe and career-ending.

The key lesson is that change in the way business schools balance the preferences of the university with the preferences of business cannot be initiated in a “bottom-up” manner by individual faculty members. There simply are not enough of them who are willing to accept a certain career suicide. Rather, the change must come "top-down." How could such a change gain momentum?

Fortunately, history also provides a lesson in this regard. Similar to the situation of business schools in 1959, an uncannily similar event happened in the history of North American medical schools in 1910. The medical profession had been in a conversation about the abysmal condition of medical schools. An internal report by the American Medical Association (AMA) concluded that many schools were "absolutely worthless" with many being "no better equipped to teach medicine that is a Turkish-bath establishment or a barbershop" (cited in Kaufman, 1980, p. 19). However, for political reasons, the AMA did not believe it was capable of bringing to bear sufficient pressure to change the schools. Instead, they enlisted the assistance of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (i.e., the same party that issued the 1959 Pierson report 49 years later); their hope was that a credible third party would reach similar conclusions that could bring public pressure to force a change.

In 1910, the Carnegie report (Flexner, 1910) was released. It was a scathing analysis of medical schools in the US and Canada that identified individual schools by name. Within 10 years, 45% of medical schools that existed in 1910 had disappeared. The ones that remained made significant changes (Kaufman, 1980; Vevier, 1987). As with the 1959 foundation reports, the 1910 report did not occur in isolation, but was a culminating catalyst of existing conversations.

The approach that brought about sweeping change to medical schools was top-down. Drawing upon the high value the 21st century university places upon prestige, one seemingly effective top-down approach is to enlist a sufficiently credible outside party to put pressure on university presidents collectively to change or to be thoroughly embarrassed. This role was played by the Carnegie Foundation in 1910 and in 1959. Higher education has a reputation of moving at a "snail's pace" when making strategic change. For example, Woodrow Wilson, as the 13th President of Princeton University lamented, "It is easier to change the location of a cemetery than to change the school curriculum." It would seem that the threat of public humiliation by a credible outside party has a precedent of trumping that reputation. This trumping effect occurs, in part, because universities operate on the currency of prestige. Events that compromise the prestige and reputation of the university often result in swift and sweeping change (e.g., university presidents losing their jobs when embarrassing athletic scandals come to light). Scholars who agree with Pfeffer, Bennis, and Podolny should be looking to enlist that high profile credible outside party. It would seem that the corporate world has many individuals who would fit that description, especially if operating in a coordinated, collective effort.

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