

Executive Strategy: Thinking broadly about business education

by Kevin Sweeney - 8.30.06

Professional schools teach their students how to do things: Heal the sick, defend the accused, design homes or build bridges. Business schools fit this category, teaching their students how to run successful companies.

The underlying assumption of a professional degree is that it represents a specific and highly valued skill, gained only through a rigorous formal education. The period of education is presumed to be intense and narrow, to ensure that the basics are embedded. New diseases may surprise those with medical degrees, but the fundamentals remain the same: The human body hasn't changed much since Hippocrates. An aorta is still an aorta. Shifting client needs may challenge those with engineering degrees, but again, the fundamentals remain. The laws of physics don't change.



Kevin Sweeney

A generation ago, at least in the developed world, many people assumed there was a reasonable balance between government and business. They argued about the extent to which government exerted its authority, but the relative responsibilities of government and business were understood. A path of study was clear: Learn the fundamentals of business, and let business do what it does.

Today, the balance is far less certain. Many governments no longer provide some of the basic services once assumed to be their purview. With globalization, nations have ceded much of their authority to international trade regimes, allowing multinational rules to trump national laws. There are places where corporate shareholders (often from foreign countries) may have greater say over a nation's destiny than its citizen voters.

This shift angers many. It leads some to demand more of business, so that business assumes a larger share of responsibility for worker and environmental protection. Some choose to use business as proxy. Don't like U.S. foreign policy, and don't happen to be a citizen of the United States? Take it out on Brand USA.



How does this relate to today's MBA candidate, or to their potential employers? The context of business is changing, rapidly and in ways that affect the fundamental tenets for success. This has implications for business schools and for executives looking for new hires. The best course of study may no longer be a narrow one. It may be exceedingly broad.

The context of a business matters every bit as much as its internal operations. And that context is often what is missing from MBA curricula. There is value in the typical core courses for MBAs — finance, marketing, accounting, strategy, macro-economics — and I'm not suggesting these courses be dropped. But a wider survey of contextual matter may, in the long term, offer more help to

business leaders.

There is every reason to believe we are entering, or have entered, a period of prolonged global turmoil. Climate change, the rise of fundamentalism on several continents, the expanding gap between rich and poor — these are breeding grounds for insecurity and confusion on a massive scale. And they also help define the context for tomorrow's businesses. Starting off a semester with discussions of climate change scenarios would be considered a distraction in many business schools, but why not focus on issues that will have major impacts on businesses, consumers, governments and voters everywhere?

The most interesting classroom sessions I've had in a business school involved students from other disciplines, with a few law and public policy students mixed in among the MBA candidates. These outsiders offered a very different perspective — and even some antagonism toward business. The creative tension enriched our down-to-brass-tacks business discussion. We had more thoughtful discussions of business administration when they were grounded in discussions of society.

The trend toward consideration of corporate social responsibility tactics in mainstream business schools is encouraging. I see it as very different from traditional courses on business ethics. It doesn't really involve questions of right or wrong, ethical or unethical. Rather, it is an exploration of balance, of roles, and of how society's major institutions can offer opportunity, stability and safety. It is a mechanism that pushes business students and leaders to think more broadly. It can start on campus with courses that cross disciplines and involve students seeking other degrees. Mix it up a bit. Looking outside the business world, engaging with nontraditional stakeholders, understanding political and social trends — this is how one surfs the contextual waves of business. And as any surfer knows, you reach a point on a wave where you either ride it or get hammered by it. In surfing, and in business, it's a lot better to ride the wave.

An old friend who is active in many NGOs said recently that every organization and issue he is associated with is in a state of flux. When he hires staff or considers alliances, he looks for people who can deal with this flux, who can sense how institutions and relationships are changing, and who may help change them for the better. That's a skill that would help many businesses — and it's something to look for on campuses when interview season comes around.

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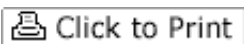
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