



What You Should Expect From B-Schools

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B-Schools today offer 21st-century versions of the liberal arts degrees of the last century. What should we realistically expect of them? Are there implications for other programs, like engineering and computer science?

Steve Andriole's article "What C-Suites Should Expect From B-Schools," published in the October 2023 issue of *Computer*,¹ generated a lot of memories from my 15-year career in industry and subsequent 30+ years as a B-School professor. The article elicited so many "yes, that's right" and "yes, but" reactions from me that I felt compelled to step outside an editor's usual confines and write an addendum.

INTRODUCTION

In general, Steve writes about the nature of B-School faculty and their inadequate performance in preparing

students for matters related to honesty and ethics in business, with other issues implied or which I inferred. And while I mostly agree with Steve's thesis, I think some more nuanced matters are specifically worthy of consideration. While Steve addresses several matters, either directly or indirectly, I think it's important

to have a better understanding of B-School operating parameters by delving a little deeper into 1) the profiles of B-School students, 2) the nature of the professoriate, 3) the constraints of curricula, and 4) the irrelevancy of B-School research.

WHO ARE B-SCHOOL STUDENTS?

First, some statistics: In 2022, total U.S. college enrollment (graduate and undergraduate) was 20+ million. About 4 million enrolled in bachelor's degree business programs—the largest of all programs, followed by health at about 12%.² Of the 4 million, only about 150,000–160,000 were studying for MBAs,³ notably with U.S. applications in 2023 declining.⁴ So, in 2022, undergraduate business enrollees outnumbered MBA enrollees by approximately 2,500%.

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Aside from that staggering ratio, who are all these students, what is different about them, what are their aspirations when they enter B-Schools, and what can we expect B-Schools to do about these aspirations? Most of the undergraduates I taught as a professor of information systems (IS) in my B-School were full-time recent high school or community college graduates or older part-time enrollees working (usually part time but sometimes full time) toward their undergraduate degree, majoring in IS. Most of them had little idea of what to expect following graduation with their undergraduate degree. Some majored in

whose previous academic background was relatively homogeneous, with higher education academic creds yet to be proven.

WHO ARE B-SCHOOL PROFESSORS?

Steve cites Shinn,⁵ who states that students "... frequently complain about the corporate inexperience of B-School faculty and the irrelevance of what qualifies as 'research' in B-Schools." My experience and that of many colleagues has been that Steve's (and Shinn's) criticism understates these matters. It's not just corporate experience that many lack, but it's business experience at all.

and many colleagues' experience has been otherwise. Faculty life comes with pressures from the universities' retention, tenure, and promotion practices, often instituted by the founding faculty who faced those challenges earlier in their academic careers. It's often a case of, "If I had to go through it, so do you."

But there is hope. Some B-Schools are beginning to understand that their students, particularly MBA students, want to learn from practicing business professionals. Accordingly, those who can afford it can recruit such faculty from the "real" business world. But a more common approach, and one that I endorse, is for B-Schools to hire part-time adjunct instructors. This practice, already common in other undergraduate programs, saves universities significant salary costs and provides flexibility when enrollments rise or fall. Many disparage the practice because adjuncts have an (undeserved) reputation for being not quite as "good" as full-timers. However, I'd argue that adjuncts in B-Schools can be better teachers than full-timers. Many (most?) indeed seek to supplement their regular income through part-time teaching, but many really do want to "give back" to society by teaching part time. Whatever their motivation, these people have valuable real business experiences to share with their students, bringing a sense of reality to academic-only course content. In fact, I believe that students enrolled in most professional programs could benefit from instruction delivered by practicing professionals.

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management, fantasizing about the CEO position they would secure immediately upon graduation; some majored in marketing, confident that Apple or Meta would recruit them to lead those companies' next leading-edge product. Fewer majored in economics or decision sciences because math is too hard. And some transferred to IS as their major because they found computer science (CS) too demanding. For most undergraduates today, a business degree seems to have become the 21st-century version of the last century's bachelor of arts degree.

On the other hand, most enrollees in master of business administration programs tended to be part-time students with full-time jobs. They saw the MBA as a key to their career advancement and a road to riches, either in the C-Suite or through building their own businesses. All, of course, had secured at least one undergraduate degree, sometimes even a graduate degree or two, from disciplines ranging from religious studies to data science. Their backgrounds differed from undergraduate students

Few readers of this article would claim that proceeding from a Ph.D. into an academic career in a B-School with the occasional consulting gig constitutes business experience.

But why does this situation exist? It may be that while some B-Schools have existed for more than a century, many are relatively recent additions to traditional universities. And as a department within a university, newer B-Schools adopted and adapted governing policies and practices typical of the other departments in those universities. This is especially true if the new B-School has problems recruiting founding faculty members and must solicit them from related traditional disciplines, such as economics, accounting, etc.

Recruiting experienced business professionals for faculty positions was and continues to be difficult. One thing, maybe even the main thing, is that salaries are significantly lower in universities. At the same time, some might argue that reduced wages are offset by faculty life, which is less stressful than business life. But my

CURRICULAR CONSTRAINTS

Steve states that business education focuses "on tools and techniques with what appears in every way as 'training,' not "education." At first glance, this may be true—but mainly at the undergraduate level. Let's consider what we mean by "business education," bearing in mind that undergraduate and graduate students and their business education needs and

expectations are quite different. Consider, too, that B-Schools strive for Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) accreditation, and there are many conditions that AACSB stipulates for the school to achieve that status.⁶

The Department of Education's Classification of Instructional Programs Code (52.0101) for Business/Commerce defines 22 general business categories with almost 80 topic areas, each of those spawning dozens more.⁷ Fortunately, different organizations, such as the National Business Education Association, define "areas of competency that the organization believes are crucial to the success of any student as an employer, employee, and citizen." These standards cover 10 subject areas: accounting, business law, career development, communication, economics and personal finance, entrepreneurship, information technology, international business, management, and marketing.⁸ Generally, most business programs offer majors in similar areas.

My university's College of Business (with dual accreditation in business administration and accounting from AACSB International) offers B.A. and MBA IS majors in my home department, Information Systems and Decision Sciences. (A complete list of business majors is available.⁹) All but accounting require 120 units for the bachelor's degree. The B.A. in IS consists of 27 units: six mandatory "real" IS courses (18 units) and one "real" IS elective (three units). The remaining six units are selectable from a menu of other non-IS-specific courses. Thus, an IS business major has taken seven "real" IS courses for their undergraduate degree. (Note that CS students must have 16 "real" CS courses to graduate.) However, as part of their other required major credits, graduating IS majors must take a course in each of every other major in the undergraduate B-School.

Insofar as MBA students majoring in IS, that program largely mirrors the

philosophy of the undergraduate program. There are required core courses (18 units) and a selection of graduate-level electives selectable from all the other majors. Hence, in addition to their major, all undergrad and grad students are introduced to a broad range of topics related to the operation of businesses in the real world.

But with all that, there is increased economic pressure for students to complete their studies as expeditiously as possible—four years for undergrads and two for full-time MBAs. Consequently, there are few degrees of freedom to expand curricula to include deep coverage of emerging business and/or technology trends and their societal effects. Examples

degree in a science, technology, engineering, or medicine area.

B-SCHOOL RESEARCH

Much published B-School research can seem irrelevant to what's happening in the real world. There are several reasons why this might be. Perhaps the so-called research truly is irrelevant. Faculty write papers to grow their publications lists when applying for tenure or promotion. "Publish or perish" is a significant source of anxiety in academia, and that's no less so in B-Schools. It doesn't matter if what you write about is "on the ground" useful. What matters is that your writing be published in a peer-reviewed journal that "counts."

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include ethics and business, the impact of social networks, aspects of artificial intelligence, etc. One way most B-Schools deal with this challenge is to require a capstone course in every major wherein students must work with an operating business on an issue important to the company. Another way is to require students, particularly undergrads, to serve as business interns before graduation. And of course, another way is for the school to invite speakers to talk about advances and trends in their industries or even in their own companies. Aside from possible honoraria, a benefit to speakers is the opportunity to recruit interns and even full-time employees.

At the end of the day, most students in B-Schools, undergraduates, and MBAs, because of curricula constraints related to accreditation pressures, do not have much opportunity to "take deep dives" in any aspect of their major, including IS. Exceptions are those, mainly MBAs, who enter the program with a prior undergraduate

There always seems to be a "peer-reviewed" journal somewhere eager to publish anything with a title or abstract appearing to be relevant to the journal's publishing objectives. Also, if an article is rejected by a journal that "counts," it's inevitable that it can be accepted for publication elsewhere in a journal that may almost count!

Who are the peer reviewers of these journals? They are other faculty who are also unlikely to have been recruited from business. What kind of journal "counts"? Those that publish articles by other faculty who are also unlikely to have been recruited from business. And so it goes, in an unending cycle of practices that seem to feed upon themselves for their continued existence.

Regarding relevant research, who's to say whether the content is relevant or not? It's typically those same traditional faculty members who serve as editors and peer reviewers of the journals that count (or don't). Often, the criteria for content acceptability

are a function of traditional *quantitative* research review criteria. For example, quantitative engineering research should be supported by analyses of data—test data collected in labs or the field or survey data collected from technology users. But in business environments, one of the more valuable kinds of data can derive from *qualitative* research, for example, lessons learned, particularly when documented in case studies. More traditional publications, even those purporting to be business journals, often prioritize articles describing quantitative research, even if the submitted content is irrelevant to the real business world. As well, most of those journals, whether they publish qualitative or quantitative research, are of little interest to real business practitioners who have little time to scour libraries (digital or otherwise) for articles that at best have a peripheral relationship to their professional objectives.


Undoubtedly, B-Schools are not preparing their students for all the business challenges they will face upon graduation. But that's not a realistic expectation, especially in today's dynamic technology-driven business environment. We need to recognize that B-Schools compete in an "industry" where their competitors are rooted in and limited by a culture replete with decades, even centuries, of academic baggage. Fortunately, the "managements" of most B-Schools seem to recognize the landscapes in which they operate, and many have become creative in addressing some of the challenges.

I believe that the most significant solution to many of those challenges has been the establishment, by most B-Schools, of "institutes" or "centers of excellence"—variously labeled entities that exist as part of the university. These entities maintain a loose but still formal relationship to the B-School itself, outside the traditional

constraints of academic departments. (This usually means funded separately and independently.) A noteworthy example of such entities are the 15 diverse institutes at Stanford University.¹⁰

These entities, staffed by both B-School faculty and (invited) business leaders in management, technology, etc., can provide B-Schools with opportunities to explore new and innovative topics, usually beyond the constraints of their academic partners. Some of these are as follows:

- › They can secure and manage grants independently of their university's policies and procedures.
- › Their staff can work directly with "real" businesses on matters that matter, for example, in consultative roles.
- › They can provide opportunities for innovative research in emerging technologies and contemporary societal and ethical issues in business.
- › They can provide students with internships and employment opportunities.
- › They can provide extensions to curricula beyond those limited by traditional restrictions.

The greatest opportunity, however, is that they can bring dimensions of reality and practicality to the traditional B-School! Other professional programs must also consider programs that address the needs of their students, who eventually will enter the real world with real expectations that their education has been relevant to the challenges they will face. 

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