

**BUSINESS HISTORY AND
THE BUSINESS SCHOOL CURRICULUM
DEVELOPMENTAL ISSUES AND PROBLEMS**

Barry E.C. Boothman
University of New Brunswick

Most management educators have supported the proposition that students should be aware of the processes of change, an issue which can be addressed by different courses — competitive strategy, marketing, organizational behaviour. Since the 1950s business schools have also addressed this theme through a “liberalization” of curricula by importing faculty from the humanities or social sciences. This phenomenon created unintended, but well-documented, issues such as a proliferation of mandatory courses which reduced the degrees of freedom in curriculum design. Business programmes have increasingly permitted students to specialize in functional areas, creating what has been labelled as a ‘New Vocationalism’ (see Hugstad, 1983; Porter and McKibben, 1988). Unfortunately, most textbooks extol different analytical models without explaining the context of development or the significance of historical phenomena for contemporary affairs. Although business schools like to portray themselves as forward-thinking institutions, programme design typically has been moulded by a belief that “If it’s history, you can forget it.”

For those who wish to counter this problem by adding business history to the curriculum, the potential difficulties can be gauged by those associated with the internationalization of educational offerings. Since the publication of the Ford and Carnegie Foundation reports, business schools have been regularly criticized for ethnocentric bias and a failure to survey the nature of international business. For nearly thirty years the AACSB has tried to ameliorate these problems by requiring the equivalent of two single-term international business courses at the baccalaureate level. In a similar vein, numerous scholars have appealed for the internationalization of programmes in order to prepare students for modern global competition. The topic also received extensive publicity in business periodicals and other media, along with public or private sector support for the creation of international business centres. Although most schools have given lip service to internationalizing the curriculum, surveys have shown that few have realized that goal. Nehrt (1987) found that less than twenty percent of 548 business schools had made some efforts, another 20 percent had done nothing, and the balance agreed that some action eventually should be taken. Approximately two-thirds of schools surveyed by Thanopoulos and Vernon (1987), thought they had realized the AACSB objective by including international material in functional courses, an interpretation which the Assembly has not shared. As of the early 1990’s one-third of AACSB schools in the southern United States had required courses in international business and another third supplied electives. In Canada, as of the spring of 1997, out of thirty M.B.A. programmes only nine had mandatory offerings, while six of sixty-two B.B.A. programmes had core courses in international business (Boothman, 1998). If there has been reluctance to add international business to the curricula, the prospects for adding business history as a subject are best characterized as limited.

The issue, therefore, is how to achieve obtainable and sustainable levels of business history within the offerings supplied by business faculties. Not only is the subject inter-disciplinary in nature, it has a limited number of outlets for dissemination and a research orientation which does not fit well with norms for functional specialization. Because rank and reputation are tied to research publications, members of business schools who work in the subject can feel torn between their labour in the functional discipline which is the primary area for promotional assessments and the historical questions which they wish to examine. Few young or non-established faculty can be expected to risk their careers by studying the development of business in ‘emergent’ or ‘unusual’ ways without explicit institutional endorsement. It also is clear that faculty who are interested in business history, but have not received professional training, cannot impart insights if they do not receive resources for knowledge acquisition and course preparation. Developing support for the subject hence requires initiatives across three dimensions: the design of academic programmes, organizational administration, and student activities. For the sake of simplicity, as shown in Table 1, three levels of commitment can be identified: awareness, understanding, and competence. Each entails greater resource allocations, teaching and research requirements, and explicit institutional recognition. Few faculties can aspire to anything like the breadth of staff or resources garnered by the business history group at the Harvard Business School. For most programmes, the first level represents a minimal (but attainable) goal and further initiatives may result from resource availability or the efforts of individual faculty.

Table 1
Curriculum Goals and Business History Activities

	Awareness	Understanding	Competence
Academic Programmes	Integration of business history issues or topics within existing courses	Adding a business history course to the undergraduate core curriculum	Introduction of elective courses for a concentration or minor in business/economic history
	Appraisal of the historical context of theories during functional courses	Creation sessions or modules on business history in functional courses	Integration of business history into the core obligations for M.B.A. programmes
Administration	Support for background learning or history department or course development	Hiring faculty who are actively engaged in business history research	Formation of a business interest group
	Gain formal recognition from dean for value of inter-disciplinary teaching	Institutionalize the reward processes for faculty who conduct inter-disciplinary research	Systemic funding support for business history research by faculty or graduate students
Students	Mandatory courses in English, second languages and arts during the first half of studies	Mandatory courses at an advanced level in the arts and social sciences	Mandatory courses at advanced levels in the arts and social sciences

'Awareness' refers to a pedagogical approach which tries to sensitize students or colleagues to historical phenomena and thus eliminate stereotypes that business history lacks practical relevance. It is possible to achieve this stage with a few core faculty working in coalition, or even a single person, if they are prepared to serve as product champions. They can raise the visibility of the historical perspective by: actively promoting cross-disciplinary dialogue; lobbying for experimentation in courses either as electives or during summer sessions; and backing rewards for course development during assessment processes. Nonetheless, if the research on internationalization is accurate, garnering support for history will be problematic without some involvement from department heads. The "infusion technique" can prove a relatively non-expensive method since it incorporates historical topics into existing core courses. Since key models must be reviewed during lectures, it is quite easy to add short discussions about the context of their development in order to illustrate strengths or weaknesses. For more sustained presentations, the central issue for faculty tends to be a lack of time or expertise. Thus, it is often necessary to identify courses like consumer behaviour where there are good materials such as Marchand (1985) and Carson et al. (1994). A session then can be organized around standard themes such as a discussion of selling techniques and comparing those to contemporary practices. The uniqueness of this approach often captures student interest and raises their understanding of how business affairs have changed or not. Some learning will occur via lectures, films or readings but these tend to be passive media and non-motivational for many students. Student learning usually is most effective if an empirical project compels them actually to carry out historical research. For instance, they might be asked to carry out a content analysis on the works of a pioneer of marketing (which also ties in the content of organizational theory courses) or a type of advertising published in popular journals during an earlier decade. Longer-term issues require faculty to push for strengthened curriculum guidelines for non-business courses in areas like history, English or relevant humanities which will reinforce educational breadth. With these types of measures it is possible for us, like Candide, to till the garden of business history productively and reap a modest but useful harvest.

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