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Clifford J. Elliott

James C. Goodwin Jr.
University of Richmond

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THE CASE AGAINST RETOOLING

Clifford J. Elliott, Ph.D.

James C. Goodwin, Ph.D.

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**INSTANT BUSINESS PROFESSORS:
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**Clifford J. Elliott, Ph.D.
Professor of Marketing
Virginia Commonwealth University**

**James C. Goodwin, Ph.D.
Professor of Management Systems
University of Richmond**

INSTANT BUSINESS PROFESSORS:

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After a period of exploding growth, business schools are now experiencing a slowdown in the pace of enrollment. This may be the "pause that refreshes" for many schools that have been coping with crowded classes, insufficient equipment and reliance on part-time faculty. It is generally accepted that any school is only as strong as its faculty, and this key requirement is the subject of this article. In recent years, in attempts to remedy an alleged shortage of faculty, we have experienced the phenomenon of "retooling," a process whereby faculty are recruited from the liberal arts and sciences, or education, and given accelerated courses so that they can function in business schools. It is a development which appears to have the blessing of administrators and is actively promoted by some spokespersons of the accrediting body, the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). It seems strange that the body charged with the job of setting and maintaining standards should appear to be weakening them. But the AACSB apparently wants more doctorates (Ph.D.s) in business schools and retooling is a short-run method of getting them. The authors contend that the real issue is the shortage of resources available for business schools and that retooling is a way to avoid tackling the real problem.

Retooling: Fact versus Fiction

Retooling is a buzzword which has crept into the literature concerning use of unqualified faculty in business schools. It is what George Orwell would have termed a "weasel word"; it suggests something which does not actually occur.

Recent business journals give several examples of retooling. At one university liberal arts and sciences professors are given six-week crash courses in business which supposedly "cover" all the major areas of business.¹ In another example, a transferring liberal arts professor was given a one-year fellowship with opportunity to work on business course material and do independent research.² Other methods of retooling include auditing business courses while teaching as faculty member on the arts and sciences faculty.

These different approaches give nonbusiness faculty some limited exposure to business subjects, but is this what is implied in the term "retooling"? When we insist on undergraduate business students spending two years on the business curriculum, is it appropriate to "retool" nonbusiness faculty into business faculty in six weeks?

It would be utterly absurd to reason that one could, for instance, study operations management for six weeks and be academically qualified to assume professional status. However, the retooling presently being done does not allow for even six weeks concentration in one discipline but rather spreads the study among various business areas (i.e., marketing, accounting, finance, management, et al).

While the one-year, post-doctoral fellowship is a more respectable attempt at learning another field, it still pales in comparison to the four-to-five years which is required to earn a doctorate from a recognized, "bona fide," business program. Qualified business professors may have undergraduate degrees in various disciplines such as engineering, economics or psychology combined with years of experience in the business world prior to a teaching career. Subsequently, it is necessary for a prospective business professor to spend years in graduate study in business administration at a major university securing the proper

credentials and training to teach in business schools. In light of the rigorous preparation that is necessary to properly qualify as a business professor, it borders on "academic fraud" to suggest that six weeks or even six months of business study would qualify a nonbusiness Ph.D. for teaching in a business school.

A liberal arts professor entering a business school after a six-week crash course is clearly at a great disadvantage vis-a-vis colleagues who have the appropriate background. Would it be long before properly qualified colleagues find the nonbusiness professor lacking in expertise? And how well would such a faculty member match up to students who have taken a wide variety of business courses? The answers to these questions are self-evident. It is simply not fair to the "six-week wonders" to place them in an environment in which their colleagues and students are so much more qualified.

To Think Is To Be

One way out of the dilemma facing the retooled business teacher according to one authority, the director of AACSB accreditation, is to think like a business professor even if you are not one, a sort of intellectual Indian-rope trick:

If psychologists want to move into marketing they should think of themselves as marketers who have a psychological background and not think of themselves as psychologists who may one day return to that field.³

The fact is that thinking of yourself as qualified in a field in which you are not, will not bring about the desired change. As Shakespeare put it: "If to think were as easy as to know what were good to do, chapels would be churches and poor men's cottages princes' palaces."⁴ Many of us would like to be what we're not, astronauts, ballplayers or nuclear physicists; but wishing won't make it so.

Bogus Shortage of Business Faculty

One reason given to justify this "retooling" is the shortage of business professors. This shortage is somewhat bogus since it is only a shortage of "beginners." A genuine shortage of business faculty should lead to hiring at all ranks and should generate the funds necessary to support the positions. The overwhelming majority of positions advertised by schools of business are for assistant professors. There is an obvious lack of senior-level positions in the job market. Business schools either cannot obtain the resources or do not wish to spend the money required to hire senior-level professors who are more likely to be experienced both in business and academics and who are properly qualified. Consequently we have retooling, a backdoor method of getting university faculty without the proper pedagogical backgrounds into business faculty positions. It is a poorly-thought-out solution to alleviate a bogus shortage.

A short run solution to the problem of faculty shortages would be to staff their positions with MBAs who have some business experience. Of course, university administrators would not be able to claim that 75 or 90 percent (or whatever) of the faculty is doctorally qualified. But the question we should be asking is "doctorally qualified in what?" A school of architecture that is 75 or 90 percent doctorally qualified with sociologists would not seem to be very "qualified"!

Controlling Enrollments

James Viehland of the AACSB has stated that, "Business schools really can't limit enrollments..."⁵ Why not? Many of the better business programs have limited enrollments. In other words just because a student enters university X, that student does not necessarily have an open door into its business school.

The student must first show competence in general arts and sciences courses and later show competence in introductory business courses (economics and accounting, for example) before they are accepted into the business school.

As we experience increased business interest and increased business school enrollments in the 1980's, why not use this blessing serendipitously to raise the standards in business schools? It is not uncommon for other university faculty to criticize the lack of scholarship of business school faculty. We do not help our case by admitting "ersatz" faculty with credentials acquired in six weeks.

Increased enrollments have been shared across the board by both quality and marginal business schools. Quality business schools, having a better choice of faculty, are more able to afford nonorthodox specialists. Therefore, it is recognized that some specialists (for example, a social psychologist) might find a niche at an elite, research-oriented school with a large business faculty (e.g., Harvard, Columbia, Wharton or comparable schools). There, due to the plethora of courses offered, one could concentrate in a highly-refined area. In that environment the weaknesses of not being properly trained in all aspects of business would not show. However, the authors feel that applied technical expertise within itself is not enough to properly educate the more sophisticated students of the 80's and 90's. Since the "retooled" pseudoprofessors are much more likely to end up at smaller or marginal business schools and will not be able to "specialize," it makes their unsuitability glaringly obvious.

The Question of Resources

Business schools have long been used as "cash cows" in universities and have been operated in a least cost manner relative to many other schools, colleges,

and departments. The popularity of part-time MBA and executive MBA programs with university administrators is due to their success in generating funds for the university.⁶ They provide a welcome contrast to other departments/schools, such as medicine, dentistry, physics or engineering which inescapably demand high resource inputs.

In business schools many administrators have not made the case for new facilities, labs, "hands-on" equipment, or the latest technological innovation. As enrollments have grown class sizes have grown, checked only by the physical limitations of classroom space. When limits were approached in class size, business schools turned to part-time faculty and adjunct faculty. Now the solution seems to be "retooled" faculty.

Traditionally, in most disciplines when students enter graduate school, the most promising do not stop with their master's degree but continue on to the doctorate. Thereafter many of these terminally-qualified individuals seek out jobs in academe. The reason for not having greater output from quality, recognizable Ph.D. programs in business is because many of the most talented graduate students at the master's level leave academics for the more lucrative fields of commerce and industry. Currently, approximately 40 percent of new entrants to doctoral programs are not U.S. citizens.⁷ Obviously, there are too few resources in business schools to attract the more promising U.S.-born graduate students. For instance, the experience of the authors at several major state supported universities shows that student-teacher ratios in business schools are significantly higher than those found in other areas of the university.

Another example of the lack of resources is the preoccupation with recruitment of assistant professors. A few years ago with reference to salaries the popular catch phrase was "compression." "Compression" refers to the fact

that only a few thousand dollars separate the salaries of assistant professors (beginners) and full professors (senior faculty). At some business schools we have now moved into the realm of salary "inversion" whereby newcomers are paid more than experienced professors. The catch here is that these newcomers are not tenured and therefore the university can use them for five or six years with no commitment and then turn them over for other new assistant professors.

A blatant example of lack of resources is found both in the production/operations management (POM) and management information systems (MIS) areas. Few MIS labs exist, and even textbooks that address current POM issues such as robotics and flexible manufacturing systems were woefully scarce. Is it any wonder that in the productivity race we have fallen critically behind the Japanese and other advanced industrial nations?

Without the proper resources to operate business schools, there is increasingly little incentive for promising graduate students to continue in academe. Therefore, administrators have turned to unqualified personnel to man the classrooms.

By pushing too far with unqualified faculty, university administrators could kill the "cash cow." It will become apparent to students (and firms that hire graduates) that they are receiving inadequate preparation, resulting in declines in enrollment in marginal business schools. Students will seek out schools with properly-qualified faculty and bypass those without.

Confusion in Curricula

Inevitably questions arise concerning what is being taught by "retooled" professors. It is obvious that faculty teach from their background. (One of the authors with a background in the oil industry tends to use a considerable portion of his classroom examples from that background.) Business students

taught by former demographers and historians will undoubtedly have classes unduly slanted with a demographer's or a historian's viewpoint rather than being presented material from a business viewpoint.

In at least one instance in recent years, a well-known, quality university abandoned a business program due to the confusion in the curricula brought on by a diverse faculty, many of whom lacked proper qualifications in business!

Consequences of Retooling

Discussion to this point leads us to advance the following three propositions:

1. Less successful business schools will be more attracted to "retooling."
2. Less successful nonbusiness faculty will enroll for "retooling."
3. Where the needs of the faculty-deficient schools and the less-employable, nonbusiness faculty converge (i.e., they are hired by B-schools), the quality of business instruction will deteriorate.

The truth of these propositions could only be tested by (a) monitoring/measuring the quality of instruction by outside "auditors," (b) testing the quality of their (the prospective graduates) output as measured by an acceptable national, regional, or professional norm (unfortunately, apart from a few areas, such as the accounting CPA examination, few such standards exist), (c) the nature of employment and the average salaries of graduates, (d) the intensity of interest shown by corporate recruiters for the prospective graduates. The absence of accepted standards for graduates in finance, management and marketing (the troika of any sound business program) means that schools set whatever standards they deem appropriate.

This inevitably results in wide disparities in acceptable performance. An "A" student in one school may be a marginal "C" student in another. The heavy, if unacknowledged, reliance on GMAT scores for admission to graduate programs

reflects lack of confidence in credentials earned in undergraduate programs. This lack of confidence will continue as long as administrators and the AACSB allow standards to decline by supporting such programs as "retooling." If they are sincere about retooling doctoral faculty from other disciplines, we would recommend that they assist them in the following ways:

- a) Direct them to sound, well-recognized schools of business for graduate study in legitimate business programs.
- b) Assist them financially during their several years of study.
- c) Guarantee them positions upon the completion of their graduate work.

Until formal or informal programs of this nature are instituted, we recommend that unfilled business faculty positions be filled with MBAs, preferably those with some business experience. It is also recommended that the AACSB set some clear standards for terminal qualification within our profession. A recently announced AACSB program funding national scholarships⁸ more closely adheres to the constructive criticisms expressed herein. This program will finance doctoral studies at selected doctoral granting institutions. This appears to be a first step towards alleviating the problems outlined in this article.

FOOTNOTES

¹Bernie Whalen, "Retooling: Can a history professor teach marketing?" Marketing News, August 5, 1983, p. 3.

²"Attracting in the Doctorates," AACSB Newslines, Vol. 14, No. 6, August, 1984, p. 3.

³"Attracting in the Doctorates," op. cit., p. 4.

⁴William Shakespeare, The Merchant of Venice, Act 1, Scene 2.

⁵Whalen, op. cit.

⁶"Classes for execs: A quick buck for B-schools?," Business Week, February 11, 1985.

⁷AACSB Newslines, April 1985. The article states that 60 percent of the applicants for doctoral studies are not U.S. citizens.

⁸"New National Doctoral Fellowship Program arrives to combat faculty shortage," AACSB Newslines, Vol. 16, No. 4, April 1986, p. 1.