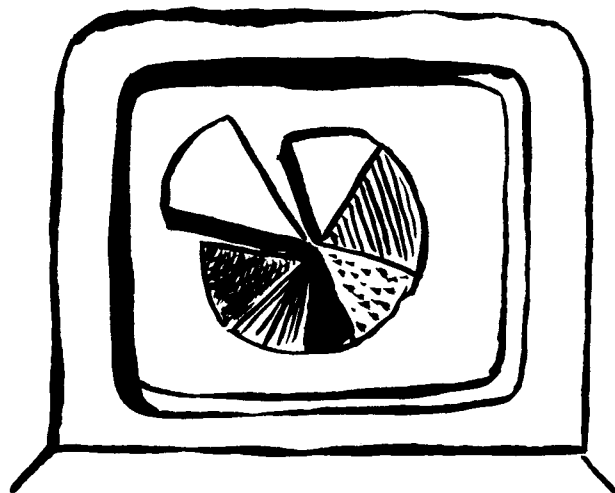


## Professional Education in Business from the Jesuit Perspective



### *Mainstream, Distinctive and Even Counter-Cultural?*

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Steven Barkan's thoughtful and challenging essay on Jesuit legal education readily motivates similar inquiry about other arenas of Jesuit professional education. After all, American Jesuit colleges and universities maintain an educational presence in more than twenty different professions, including law, business, nursing, engineering, education, medicine, architecture, social work, journalism and public health. Does our work in these myriad fields exhibit a distinctive value base and character? Does it challenge the mainstream in any noticeable fashion or is it completely embedded and essentially lost in that mainstream?

Nowhere is this question more germane than in the context of Jesuit professional education in management and business administration.

Most American Jesuit colleges and universities have some presence in professional business education. In fact, twenty-two of the twenty-eight include a formal school or college of business administration or some allied designation. As is the case with Jesuit law schools, these business education units are not heavily populated by Jesuit faculty members and superficially may seem to be "virtually indistinguishable from their secular counterparts." (Barkan, p. 9) We seek here to begin a conversation as to whether this initial perception is an accurate reflection of the deeper reality.

One dimension of an answer may come from seeking evidence of the same powerful values which Dean Barkan identifies for Jesuit law schools. Respect for the dignity of the individual, fidelity to an underlying commitment to justice, and awareness of the distinctive needs of the poor and disadvantaged can stand as beacons not only for business education but also for commerce itself. If those values are absent, professional business education

risks — and probably deserves — consignment to a status as simply advanced training in the pursuit of the "almighty dollar." Regard for these principles is, of course, not without its own attendant tensions. These ideas cannot be allowed to devolve into excuses for mediocrity or softness in teaching and learning. They must be put forward not as substitutes for other intellectual and skill components of the curriculum but rather as guidelines by which the entire work will ultimately be judged. It is not a matter of more justice and less accounting. It is that accounting has no real meaning without being set in the context of justice.

In its attempts to advance these values, Jesuit business education is not at all insulated from a continuing dilemma which may also be an opportunity. Stated simply, there is considerable debate as to the essence of the profession of business and hence some strongly held positions as to the critical elements of professional business education. Some would even question whether

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business — or more generally, management — is truly a profession as opposed to simply a collection of disciplines or specialties. When tensions between the “theoretical” and the “applied” and between the “academic” and the “behavioral” are added to that dilemma, the inherent uncertainties of business education become evident. Any attempt to identify religious (in Barkan’s sense), Catholic, and Jesuit business education necessarily exists within this arena.

This polite turmoil may actually provide fertile ground for influence from the Jesuit perspective. Clear orientations and value positions become all the more powerful in an atmosphere of uncertainty and ambiguity. While not quite a vacuum to be abhorred, professional business education may well be a setting in which clarity can translate into real influence.

Witness, for example, the evolution of attitudes and practice around addressing ethical concerns in Master of Business Administration curricula and similar programs. My own university — not at all atypically among our Jesuit partners — has highlighted the ethical perspective within the MBA program since its inception. Relatively recently — and with some apparent reluctance — issues of ethical practice and behavior have been integrated into MBA curricular architecture on a widespread basis among other American schools of business. The issue here is not pride in being de facto educational leaders but rather the hopeful sign that the inherently Jesuit point-of-view on such matters can become a much larger influence over time.

Ethical content is only one example and an instrumental one at that. In a more general vein, Jesuit business education may aspire to the fullness of the role Derek Bok envisioned for professional schools

as the “conscience of their professions.” Without being strident or self-righteous, centers of professional business education in Jesuit colleges and universities could feel both equipped and entitled to make a significant and ongoing contribution here. Equipped by virtue of a long tradition of excellence and a formidable array of talent. Entitled — indeed, obligated — by virtue of commitment to the Jesuit perspective and rich understanding of the need for it to flourish.

On a more individual level, Jesuit business education may be uniquely positioned by discipline and disposition to contribute to the deeply personal issue of the nature of work itself. Much of our human work is carried out in corporate, industrial, and organizational, i.e., “business” settings. Our contribution of effort toward the common good as well as important components of our own satisfaction and self-worth come in the context of business and are shaped by its filters. Understanding the nature of business and the nature of work are increasingly critical as we seek to prosper in the fullest sense.

As Bellah and his colleagues posited in *Habits of the Heart*:

In the mid nineteenth century small town, it was obvious that the work of each contributed to the good of all, that work is a moral relationship between people, not just a source of material or psychic rewards. But with the coming of large-scale industrial society, it became more difficult to see work as a contribution to the whole and easier to view it as a segmental, self-interested activity.

Combining Jesuit perspective and values with excellence in business education would seem to provide an ideal setting for just such exploration and growth. One can easily envision this type of understanding as one of the personal hall-

marks attendant upon a learner’s progress through Jesuit professional business education. And with that thought we return to our original and essential question. Is Jesuit professional education in business essentially a mainstream enterprise or is it a distinctive and even counter-cultural endeavor?

Potential for the latter is large with both risk and reward as attendant possibilities. Some evidence of our striving toward that potential is evident but we must also acknowledge a sense of unrealized opportunity. In the end, it is the individual members of the Jesuit business education community who can provide the most compelling answers here. What say ye?

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### References

- Robert N. Bellah et al, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985, p. 66.
- Derek Bok, *Higher Learning*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986, p. 111.

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