THE VOLUNTARY BRAINWASHING OF HUMANITIES STUDENTS IN STANFORD'S MBA PROGRAM: STUDENT COMPLAINTS AND SOME RECOMMENDATIONS

Denis Collins

Introduction

Peter Robinson's Snapshots from Hell: The Making of an MBA provides a horror picture of the prestigious Stanford 1988-1990 MBA program from a humanities student's perspective. Although Stanford offers a two-year program, the book is limited to the author's first year's traumatic trimester experience with 333 incoming students from 21 countries — the year where most students either sink or swim. Robinson, a former White House speech writer for both Vice President George Bush and President Ronald Reagan, offers the book as a helpful "how-to-do-it" guide for current and future MBAs. He wants MBAs nationwide to know that the hell their professors put them through is not unique to any one MBA program. Indeed, the more prestigious the school, the greater the hell. The author also concludes that MBAs, particularly Stanford MBAs, deserve the high pay and respect they are granted in the world of business for surviving boot-camp.

This book offers a fascinating opportunity for discussing the ethics of any MBA program. Naturally, Stanford represents only one data point, and knowledge of that data point is based on only one key informant, the author. Nonetheless, despite these research methodology weaknesses, the book offers four research virtues. First, Stanford is consistently ranked among one of the best business schools in the country, thus it is a program that other business schools aspire to replicate. According to the 1995 Stanford MBA Program, the school is "proud of our position as the top academic school of management" (emphasis
Second, Stanford professors teach students using both the case method and the lecture-and-textbook method, thus the strengths and weaknesses of both are apparent. Third, the author has a humanities background, thus he has a broad knowledge base by which to evaluate the job training aspect of an MBA education. Fourth, the author is a proud conservative Republican and ardent defender of the free market system. There is significant ideological congruence between his socio-political beliefs and the end goal of MBA programs. Nonetheless, he still goes through mental and physical hell adjusting to the program.

As a result, although it is obviously not the author's intention, the book provides an interesting case study of how business school professors and curriculum play essential roles in the subtle and voluntary brainwashing of a humanities student. Importantly, Robinson is not a business ethics professor trained in the humanities struggling with business school culture; rather he's a conservative Republican trained in the humanities struggling with business school culture.

The Voluntary Brainwashing

Robinson enters the Stanford program with few reservations. Arrogantly, he notes that several of his friends in the White House viewed his entering an MBA program as a demotion. However, Robinson was envious of the large incomes earned by his peers working in the upper crusts of business — a result of the Reaganomic policies he had helped advertise but not benefitted from. He was ready to get a piece of the action. According to Robinson:

"Each year, tens of thousands of young Americans consider going to business school... All these thousands find themselves beset by an itch to make something of themselves. All want, to be crass, to make money." (p. 3)

Robinson observes, however, that in the name of a university education, the greed underlying the motivation of most MBA students is better left unstated or, better yet, presented in a more politically correct manner. Of course people who enter business school want to improve their income, but such blatant statements do not appear on the mission statements of business schools. Higher salaries are assumed, yet secondary, to the learning of a vital skill with high academic legitimacy — applied mathematics.

Below are several chronological snapshots of how the voluntary brainwashing from critical humanities student to business education worshipper evolves in the thoughts of the book's MBA hero, Peter Robinson. Robinson begins the book in hatred of the MBA curriculum but by its end he admires the educational process. Importantly, I am categorizing the evolution of Robinson's thought as a "voluntary brainwashing." Robinson is, for the most part, ecstatic about the voluntary brainwashing conversion process. He is a willing volunteer because the ultimate destination seems so comfortable — psychological acceptance of greed and affluence.
Beginning of the First Term

Who cares? I'd think when I read a (technical accounting) question like that. *I am here to absorb the grand concepts. I have no interest in mere pettifogging specifics.* Then I'd reflect that my instructors cared — a man like Yeager suggested by his very demeanor that he cared a great deal about pettifogging specifics. So with a miserable inward groan, I'd pull my calculator from its case to begin grappling with the numbers.

And the hours would tick past. (p. 65, author's emphasis)

After Failing a Mid-Term Exam, First Term

Now I got angry with myself. How could I have messed up so completely.... I would have to study even harder and sleep even less. But I figured I deserved it.

This is worth noting. By the third or fourth week of the term, business school had succeeded in afflicting me with a variation of the Stockholm Syndrome, named after the incident in which a hostage in a Stockholm bank robbery fell in love with one of her captors. I was not in love with business school by any means. But I had stopped holding Stanford responsible for what was happening to me. Even though I was only taking enough time off from my work to sleep five or six hours a night, when I failed to complete assignments or readings I blamed myself. Now that I had failed the ("Decision Making Under Uncertainty") midterm I decided it was my fault, and from midterms on it was difficult to say who was punishing me more, the business school or myself. (p. 94)

Last Class of the First Term

The scorn we heaped on (professor) Kemal, the ovation we awarded to (professor) Yeager — these say a lot about that fall term. Kemal was our age. He wanted to be our friend. But fall term was traumatic for many of us as a war zone, and we didn't want a pal for a professor, we wanted a field marshall, someone we could rely on to tell us where we were going and then march us there. Yeager was cold and merciless and lived by the clock. But we knew we could rely on him, and by the end of the term we felt toward Yeager the way GIs felt toward Patton. We loved the bastard. (p. 105)

Immediately After Taking a Final Exam, First Term

My behavior (another jargon dump) on the (Organization Behavior) final perhaps sounds cynical, an effort to get a passing grade without regard for genuine learning. *It was.* Yet afterward, as I climbed into bed for my afternoon nap, I found myself acknowledging that the OB material had made it possible for me, a young man who ten weeks before had known literally nothing about business, to take a tremendously complicated business situation and make at least rudimentary sense of it. (p. 108, emphasis mine.)

Break Between First and Second Semester

Were (business questions) the worthiest questions men could ponder? Clearly not. We were not talking about sin and redemption here. Yet I could see now that business school opened onto its own compelling, if narrower, field of fascination. It might not help you to dispose your soul or reach a conclusion about the meaning of existence, but business school would tell you quite a lot about what was going on in your workplace, your grocery store, or your shopping mall, helping you to understand the economic activities that take up the larger part of most people's waking lives. It seemed to me now that that was no small claim.

I recognized these changes in my thinking and outlook and took a measure of satisfaction in them — I'd earned them. (p. 112)
Beginning of the Second Term

My throat raw, my head throbbing, I was struggling with core courses that were continuing the work of replacing my old verbal and intuitive outlook with a set of rigorous, quantitative techniques, systematically building a new me.

By coming back for this term, I had committed myself to lying down on the table and letting professors stuff my insides with business school cases, mathematical formulas, and long, unreadable books while my classmates handed them scalpels and assisted with the sutures. I hoped that the surgery would transform me into a dynamic, businesslike new man, capable of earning big sums of money — a poet no more. (p. 119)

Midway through the Second Term, After Accepting Summer Internship

Yet none of this (overwork) bothered me much. Now I saw the business school curriculum as instrumental, not an end in itself but a means to an end. The end was getting a job. (p. 174)

Early Third Term

Every time (the professor) steered me to an important insight or a correct answer, the answer seemed so obvious that only an idiot could have failed to see it in the first place. So there it was: I felt like an idiot. Yet I felt something else, too, a sense of excitement, even exhilaration. (p. 212, emphasis mine)

Late Third Term

During spring term it was as though the surgery we had all come to business school to undergo was complete, and while we would still have to engage in a second year of therapy and adaptation, we already had our new identities. Now our bandages came off and we stepped before the mirror. For (my friend and I), as for many of our classmates, what we saw took some getting used to. (p. 242)

Three Years After Graduation

I am proud to be a graduate of Stanford business school. The faculty and administrators are men and women of unusual intelligence and ability, constantly striving to adapt and improve an already remarkable institution. If some of what follows sounds critical, it is based on notes that were written in extremis. Now that business school is well behind me, I find myself looking back to Stanford with a kind of awe at all that it taught me. (p. 6).

The chronologically last quote appears first in the book as an “Author’s Note.” Thus the first time I read the book I was not expecting the extreme critique that was to follow. After rereading the author’s note, I wondered if Robinson simply forgot what he had experienced and written. The conclusion I reached was no. Like most people, he is highly adaptable to his immediate environment. As demonstrated by the evolutionary quotes above, the voluntary brainwashing is complete. Stanford’s MBA program transformed another willing subject into a business mathematician posing as a businessperson, one among thousands of similar-type products sputtered out at the end of the business school job training production-line.

The dictionary defines “brainwashing” as “the systematic alteration of personal convictions, beliefs, habits, and attitudes by means of intensive, coercive indoctrination.” Like members of religious cults, Robinson has undergone a tremendous conversion experience during the course of the book, from a hu-
manities-based critique of a mathematical-based business education model, to uncrITICAL acceptance thereof. The qualifier "voluntary" is added because Robinson so willingly wanted others to coercively cleanse his brain of the negative thoughts about an MBA education.

How does this ideological transformation occur? As most cultists, or ex-cultists, can confirm: (1) find someone searching for a better life; (2) physically separate the person from former ideologically-corrupted friends; (3) minimize sleep; (4) increase interaction with other willing converts who are also sleep deprived; (5) require constant educational sessions taught by committed leaders who emphasize the new doctrine; and (6) reward those who accept the doctrine and punish those who do not. Though the nonconverted may consider the life of a cultist a bit weird, to the cultist everything makes rational sense (Collins, 1984; Melton & Moore, 1982).

How was Robinson voluntarily brainwashed from his "who cares" about mathematical models attitude at the beginning of his MBA career to the bows of uncritical reverence he takes at the end of the first term and three years later? Following the path of a cultist, Robinson wanted to improve his economic well-being, moved away from his humanities friends into an apartment with three other dedicated MBA students, subjected himself to the authoritarian whims of business professors by studying eighteen hours a day, seven days a week, for two years, with 300 other students, in the cloistered realms of Stanford University, and memorized the dominant doctrine (mathematics and business jargon). Why would Robinson do this? He wants the MBA degree, which he refers to as "the yuppie union card" because it will open the doors to heaven — a high-powered corporate job (p. 175). The average starting salary of a Stanford MBA graduate in 1990 was over $65,000 (p. 182).

Business Professors as Brainwashers

Who are the villainous gatekeepers in this scenario? Us, the professors and administrators. As should be expected, the subtle brainwashing begins prior to orientation. In order to be accepted into the Stanford program one has to be especially gifted, as the school only admits 10% of its applicants. Some of these acceptances are better prepared to become "financial wizards" or "captains of industry" than others (p. 20). In order to create a level playing field, those with a weak background in mathematics were strongly encouraged to attend a "math camp" — a ten-day quantitative skills class and a three day computer class — beginning three weeks prior to the start of the semester. Class distinctions were already clear. The mathematics and computer wizards stood at the top of the MBA student hierarchy and everyone else had to catch up. Those lacking math and computer skills, which accounted for one-quarter of Stanford's 1995 MBA students (Stanford MBA Program), were labelled "the poets" and were obviously at the bottom of the hierarchy. The race had begun. In the beginning, the race consisted of short sprints. The hoops set-up by business professors and administrators included surviving mid-terms, surviving the math-dominated
first semester, and accepting a summer internship midway through the second semester. After that last hoop was cleared, the willing brainwashed converts were ready to become missionaries to the new group of first year MBA students, or even write books about how all of this is for the good of individuals and society.

According to this book, it is obvious that most business school professors and administrators are sadistic people unaware of how they impact the lives of students. The business professors, having already jumped through these hoops and mastered the subject material, have little sympathy toward those who are just beginning this process. Robinson provides several major complaints about business professors that, by the end of the book, are drastically discounted. All names have been changed by Robinson to protect the guilty. The complaints include:

(1) **Most professors are not good teachers.** During orientation week an Associate Dean told the new students that the business school employs only those professors who are gifted as both researchers and teachers. It soon became apparent that the associate dean had lied about the teaching criteria. According to the author, “it was the method of (one) professor to take the essential simplicity of (decision) trees and obscure it” (p. 48). A new accounting professor, teaching his first class ever, “droned on” and made the students feel “ill at ease” because he would freeze-up in the middle of a lecture (p. 59). A strategic management professor “was so boring and ineffectual that you loathed him,” and he was “so pathetic, so clearly a well-intentioned, fundamentally decent person who had somehow or other ended up in a job that he just could not do, that you loathed yourself for loathing him” (p. 196). Lastly, Robinson compares the way the Dean, who taught Data Analysis, “took this difficult subject and made it impenetrable” with the way his gym teacher, a natural athlete, became tongue-tied and embarrassed when teaching school children the rules for playing “monkey-in-the-middle” (p. 122). Mastering a skill does not qualify one to communicate to others how to master the skill.

Who were the best teachers? For the most part, nontenured lecturers. These included former professors who were unable to obtain tenure due to research shortcomings, such as not enough articles published in high quality academic journals. Curriculum battles were being fought between “professional academics” (which included most tenured professors) interested in “abstruse” theory they found interesting to teach and “lecturers” (the untenurable professors) interested in “practical” applications. Students and alumni were on the side of the curriculum war losers — the untenurable lecturers. To make matters more perverse, the best researchers were being offered better wages from competing business schools, and were being replaced by younger, less-experienced researchers.

During the third term he had one of his favorite teachers, a lecturer who taught marketing. The lecturer would bring in the real CEO of a case study to say how he solved the problem. What did the lecturer teach that was so impressive? During the first class the author admirably notes that the lecturer had all of the students write the following fresh insight in their notebooks:
Good marketing is driven by value delivery. First you learn exactly what
customers value. Then you work to deliver just that. (p. 206)

(2) Curriculum and courses are over-dominated by mathematics. The only
justification I can offer for why the banal advice provided by the marketing
lecturer is considered a fresh insight is that eight of the author’s previous nine
core classes were dominated by mathematics. Stanford’s academic year consists
of three ten-week terms, five courses per term. The core curriculum consists of
thirteen courses, all taken during the first year. The first term consisted of four
mathematically-oriented core classes (Decision Making Under Uncertainty,
Computer Modeling, Microeconomics, and Financial Accounting), as did the
second term (Data Analysis, Cost Accounting, Operations and Finance).

The beauty of mathematics, for the students, was that there was one right
answer (unlike much of philosophy and political science), so it was easy to
benchmark each other. Mathematics eliminated the need for decisions to be
guided by passions, emotions, and intuition (subjective attributes) as well as by
rationality (an objective attribute). Got a business problem? Then treat it with
mathematics and get a specific answer. Unlike real academic mathematicians,
these business mathematicians appear ignorant of the limits of mathematics. As
the old anti-economist joke goes: Why are you looking by the street light for
your lost car keys when you lost them over there in the dark ditch? Because the
lighting is better! Thus when faced with a mid-term exam question about which
of four barns one should look in to save a prize racehorse from an oncoming
tornado — given that the tornado has a 50% chance of hitting Barn 3, a 20%
chance of hitting Barn 4, and a 30% chance of hitting Barn 2, with the under-
standing that whatever Barn the tornado hits first there are a variety of prob-
abilities as to which barn it will hit next —all of the assumptions underlying
each probability is ignored by the test-taker: instead, students’ grab their calcu-
lators to compute the expected answer.

The only nonmathematical core class offered during the first two terms was
Organization Behavior. But even here, when the professor grew frustrated be-
cause students were analyzing their own unique managerial experiences without
appeal to academic models, he scolded them by saying “that’s what we’re doing
in this course, building models” (p. 61, emphasis mine). The Organization
Behavior professor’s point, made the first day of class, solidified the primary
lesson learned by the author from his orientation-week instructor, namely: “rig-
orous, mathematical reasoning can lead to big profits” (p. 25). According to
Robinson, students do not necessarily learn what the mathematics mean, rather,
they simply go through the motions of plugging numbers into elaborately con-
structed mathematical formulas. Mathematics is a power tool, business manag-
ers are the mechanics, and business problems are the outlets. For instance,
students were taught the Black-Scholes Option Pricing Model prior to being
taught what options were.

Case studies and test questions are another way professors teach that the most
important thing is the mathematical calculation, not the product or the employ-
ees. For example, on the first day of another class students examined the case
A study of an electronics firm asked to supply 100 portasols to a contractor. After an extensive discussion of all the key decision tree paths, the author asked the professor what a "portasol" was. The professor, and none of the classmates, knew (apparently it's a nonsense word written by the case writer). Robinson offers the following irony as a sign that he is becoming successfully brainwashed into being the type of student and businessman his Stanford business professors wanted him to be:

It was all math. I understood nothing. But by now I knew I could pass business school exams even when I'd failed to grasp the material. Part of the technique was putting formulas on index cards, the other part, adrenaline. (p. 189)

Ironically, the one guest lecturer worshipped by the students relied upon intuition more than mathematics to solve his company's problems. When presented with the company founder's major business problem as a case study, the students learned directly from the founder that he "hadn't relied on some brilliant financial analysis or shaped his enterprise according to academic business theory" (p. 215). It became obvious to some students that the heroic businessperson lacked this ability. Instead, he relied upon "guts".

Lack of Business Ethics. Business professors purposely ignored the ethical dimensions of business problems presented in their core classes. When one of the students mentioned potential obligations to workers during a strategic management class discussion on reducing labor costs, the professor corrected the student by noting that "unless I'm mistaken, Melanie, you're basing your recommendation on ethical considerations rather than business strategy. Can you relate your view to (the company's) strategic needs" (p. 198)? Similarly, for an accounting mid-term examination, the primary business problem was whether a company should use LIFO or FIFO to account for inventory. The benefit of using LIFO was that it reduced the firm's tax bill. The benefit of using FIFO was that it increased the stock value. Thus, from an ethics perspective, the question is, should I not pay my fair share of taxes (and thus use LIFO), or should I exaggerate the stock value (and thus use FIFO). Naturally, this was not the exam question. Instead, the exam question asked students to calculate inventory if the firm had used FIFO rather than LIFO.

These professors, mistakenly, relied upon the professors who taught the core class "Business in the Changing Environment" course to raise ethical issues, which was added to the curriculum in 1985 as a response to the Wall Street greed of the 1980s. The class consisted of six weeks on the relationship between government and business, and four weeks on ethics. The professor, who is one of the few heroes of the book, is Machiavellian to the bone (thus he's not Kirk Hanson!). This is most evident when a student complained that the professor's description of interest group behaviors in a case involving business manipulation of politicians was "teaching a cynical view of government. I mean, what about ideals" (p. 219)? Naturally, the professor relied upon a mathematical model to defend himself: (p. 219)
"Two answers to that," Healy said. He began calmly. "The first is that you can define costs and benefits (of interest group behavior) to include high ideals."

..."So sure," Healy said, "Ideals can have a big place in this model, if you take psychological costs and benefits into account."

"And you're entitled to do that if you want. But what I'm trying to do in this class is teach you the way the system really works, without much comment on whether it's good or bad. And I've got to tell you, Everett, that there's a lot less idealism in government than you might think. That's the second answer."

As for the professor's attitude toward the four weeks of lectures on ethics, he tells Robinson: (p. 221-222)

"I hate this part ... This ethics stuff. Either the students at this school have learned right from wrong by this stage in their lives, which I tend to doubt, or they haven't learned right from wrong, and what the frig can I do to fix that?"

..."So anyway, in this ethics unit, I take a few philosophers, and in — what is it? — eight classes, I go over three basic ways of making value judgments. That's it. After that you all go off to Wall Street. It's like trying to give an intellectual life to baby wolverines."

How does this non-prescriptive treatment of ethics impact the Stanford business school culture? Despite attempts by administration to emphasize cooperation over competitiveness, many students complain that the school is too competitive. Like many employers and employees, students fulfill their moral urges by contributing to charities. There is some volunteer work during the spring semester, but even this over-dramatizes the importance of self-interested motives for corporate giving. Students organized it so that for every airplane ticket booked at a local travel agency, a homeless charity received five percent of the price. Similarly, a minor scandal that erupted when it was found that the student volunteer-operated newspaper paid its "volunteers" managerial salaries and advertising commissions, was resolved when the students returned some of the money and donated the rest to charity.

By the end of the book, even charity "do-gooding" greatly annoys the author because it seems to put down the "good" associated with profit making. For instance, as a sign of his conversion to the business school culture, Robinson proudly brags that during a boring strategic management class he bought a National Review magazine for 75 cents, read it during the lecture, and resold it for 80 cents, thus making a nickel profit (p. 200). He fulfilled his need to intellectually survive a boring class, he fulfilled the need of another classmate to do the same, plus made a nickel. Isn't this as important as the good associated with helping the poor?

(4) Exams and Grades. Stanford unsuccessfully tried to deemphasize the importance of exams by replacing the typical A, B, C, D and F grading system with a Pass/Fail system, banning corporate recruiters from inquiring about student grades, and reducing mid-term exams from four to three hours. The absurdity of the administration's Pass/Fail grading system solution deserves special note. The 1988-1990 grading system, which has since been abandoned, con-
sisted of the following five grade distinctions: High Pass, Pass Plus, Pass, Pass Minus, and Unsatisfactory. Though the administration did not want students to draw such parallels, a "Pass" on the new scale was equivalent to a "C" on the old scale. Thus exam anxieties were extremely high despite a public warning from an administrator that "on average, (there was) one student every second year who suffered a nervous breakdown" (p. 99) and a letter from second year MBA students sent to all first-year students just prior to mid-term exams warning that "if you work hard because you have to, because you are afraid of not passing, because an ugly monster in your nightmares keeps reminding you that the world will come to an end if you don’t pass, you can easily resent the experience and find it painful" (p. 85).

Why? First, according to the author, opportunity costs for attending Stanford were calculated to be approximately $160,000 and many were already in debt. Second, with ten week semesters, at least 33% (2 weeks) of the student’s first six weeks in the MBA program was focused primarily on mid-term exam anxieties. Students who were not math whizzes had a strong sense of potential failure. Third, MBA students were well known for being overachieving perfectionists. Fourth, because many students had already achieved professional success in business prior to entering the MBA program, they found it necessary to obtain the highest possible grade. After all, as Robinson too often reminds the reader, Stanford MBAs, who are often referred to as “gifted” and “hotshots,” think very highly of themselves. As noted by a fellow student, when Stanford dropped from the top to the ninth spot in Business Week's national ranking of MBA programs, “Out of the four billion people on earth, everyone in our class must be in at least the most fortunate two-tenths of one percent. But we figure if this school were ranked first or second instead of ninth, we’d be in the top one-tenth of one percent, so we’re all pissed off” (p. 189).

Networking and Jobs

Students do not enroll in the Stanford MBA program to enhance their intellectual abilities. They are willing to forego $160,000 over two years because it will get them a higher paying job. Thus, upon surviving the first semester, one of Robinson’s roommates, a math whiz, moved to a Lake Tahoe ski house, coming down from the mountain several times a week to attend classes. The other roommate stayed in order to network, strongly advising the author that “you’ve gotta remember that a big part of the value of this place is the people we’ll meet here” (p. 134).

Interviewing for a summer internship, a mere four months after arriving, changed a somewhat competitive environment into a very competitive environment. Initial job offers were given to those who mastered the foreign language of business mathematics. After looking down at classmates who were living only for a summer internship, Robinson became fearful and spent twelve hours in the computer lab fixing his resume. After several interview failures, he began to understand the rules of the game. Most importantly, it was not necessary to
offer a specific mathematical solution to hypothetical problems interviewers lobbed at interviewees, rather, interviewers wanted to see a mastery of how the market operated.

By the second semester, Robinson had been converted to the god of mathematics so he did what was expected: he obtained an internship with an investment banking firm to perform mathematical calculations. He summarizes his frustrating summer internship with the following description: (p. 268)

But it wasn't in contrast to politics alone that I found investment banking dull, it was in contrast to anything. I would sit at my computer screen from 7:00 in the morning until 11:00 or midnight, creating huge, complicated spreadsheets that told how a client could save an eighth of a cent per share when he launched his takeover bid for Amalgamated Acme.

By the time my ten-week summer job ended I knew (as did everyone at Dillon Read) that I could not turn myself into an I-banker no matter how hard I thought about money.

Ultimately a Stanford MBA served the following functions for students and businesses: (1) a credential certifying that the student was adequately prepared for the difficult life that would enable him or her to become rich and powerful, (2) a rich network of connections, and (3) a worshipful respect for the throne of business.

First, Stanford MBA students are simply products to be consumed by large business organizations. As Robinson notes, the MBA is a "yuppie union card," certifying that they passed the initiation ritual. The student survived mathematics, over-demanding professors, and long hours of school work. Over the course of two years, previously underpaid and overworked humanities students could now obtain jobs that overpaid and overworked them. The salary difference made the overwork worth it.

Second, one's rolodex was greatly expanded. The Stanford MBA experience reinforced something that Robinson should have known already — it's not only what you know, it's also who you know. In a television interview about this book on C-SPAN's "Booknotes" program, Robinson credited William F. Buckley and a host of other well-placed socio-political conservative connections for the path he has travelled from middle class roots to his current position at the Hoover Institute. Robinson is talented, but it is not talent alone that led him to Dartmouth, to Oxford, to the White House, to Stanford, to interviews with Robert Maxwell and Steve Jobs, to a job with Rupert Murdoch, to a book contract with Warner Books, and to his current position with the Hoover Institute. For instance, Robinson said that when he was at Oxford wondering what to do with his life, it was William Buckley who told him to meet with his son Christopher, who was just getting ready to leave his position as speech writer for Vice President George Bush. William F. Buckley, Jr. even wrote a jacket blurb for this book.

Third, by the end of the first year the former humanities student has been totally humbled at the altar of business. This is best said in Robinson's own words: "Selling soap, I concluded, was a worthy enterprise for bigger brains
than mine” (p. 254). What was it about selling soap that humbled such an intelligent person? Robinson was most impressed by the length of a case he had to read on launching a new soap product promotional scheme — thirty-four pages. Then, the guest speaker for that class, who was from P&G and involved in the case, told students that mathematics could not explain this particular new product innovation failure. According to the guest lecturer, an important lesson for him, though maybe banal to others, was that new products not only had to be better than the other product, they had to be a lot better. As for Robinson, the important lesson was that “even in business, people screwed things up. And, apparently, were permitted to live...The best of my classmates were themselves only human” (p. 257).

Was it all worth it for Robinson, even knowing after the fact that he would be laid-off from his prestigious job with Rupert Murdoch? The answer is a resounding yes. Robinson concludes:

Stanford heightened my appreciation of the brains and talent and sheer creativity required in business. It permitted me to mingle for two years with bright, business-minded classmates and to give serious thought to all kinds of business careers.” (p. 282)

Business School Reforms

Is this any way to run a business school? The finished products of a two-year Stanford MBA program are socially isolated, overworked and stressed out mathematicians who believe they are better than everyone else, deserving of high salaries, and ready to bully stakeholders to get what they want. What sorts of organizations should we expect these students to create and foster? Why is it still shocking when students report in class that their previous place of employment was governed by a managerial dictator who demanded total dedication to improving the company’s bottom line via seventy hour work weeks, made many decisions that had tremendous detrimental impacts on human well-being based primarily on spreadsheet manipulation of data, and justified their inhumane workplaces on the grounds that remarkable profit margins were generated? Obviously, many organizations not governed by MBAs exhibit these same unhealthy conditions, but if anyone should know better it is a university educated MBA.

Robinson enables us to see that the educational problems many Business Ethics professors diagnose in business schools and discuss amongst ourselves at conferences are not just a function of our jaundiced socio-political view of the world. Like many Business Ethics professors, Robinson shares a humanities-based educational foundation. Unlike many Business Ethics professors, Robinson is a conservative Republican. Although his political ideology should be in congruence with the mission of many business schools, he really struggles with the socialization process until he finally gives in to the culture. This suggests that the concerns expressed by many Business Ethics professors about the value of a business school education are not a function of our socio-political ideologies, but of our humanities-based educational leanings.
What is obvious to Robinson at the beginning of his MBA voluntary brain-washing experience, but which he denies by the end of the book, is that the Stanford business school has everything backwards. It emphasizes (1) research at the expense of teaching, (2) mathematics at the expense of social subjects, (3) amorality/separate ethics module at the expense of ethics integration, and (4) exams/grades/stress/isolation at the expense of an integrated balanced life. Importantly, many business schools are guilty of similar crimes. What they should be emphasizing are (1) teaching and research, (2) social subjects and mathematics, (3) ethics integration throughout the curriculum and separate ethics courses, and (4) an integrated balanced life and exams. Each of these factors, and appropriate recommendations for educational reforms, will be further elaborated based on this book, my own tenure-track experience at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business, and discussions with Business Ethics professors at other universities.

**Emphasizing Teaching and Research**

According to Robinson, the best teachers at Stanford are the nontenured lecturers. Students wanted to learn from the professor's knowledge of practical experiences rather than the professor's knowledge of the latest research studies published in academic journals. With the exception of the practitioner lecturers, professors emphasized research studies. Why? That is what they are most comfortable with, as it is the primary habit-forming activity of the tenure process.

Tenure is an extremely public professional accomplishment. Indeed, at least in Madison, Wisconsin, even townspeople not employed by the university ask whether you have tenure within the first few minutes of learning that you are a professor. As such, professors respond to the tenure incentives, which, for the most part, overemphasize research publications and underemphasize teaching qualifications. The question that gets right to the heart of the matter at gatherings of anxious tenure-track assistant professors is: how many “A” journal publications (peer reviewed journals that only accept about 5%-10% of all submissions) do you have? It is well known that at most research-oriented universities, tenure is a function of excellent research publications and adequate teaching evaluations. The rule of thumb is one “A” or “A-” journal publication a year, although research has shown that few faculty have ever met such a high standard (Englebrecht, Iyer & Patterson, 1994; Zivney & Bertin, 1992). As such, the best teachers at Stanford — who were well versed in the practitioner literature but not the academic research literature — did not meet Stanford’s tenure requirements and were assigned the second class status of “lecturer.”

What could be done? Several options, listed in order of easiest to most difficult to accomplish, include (1) developing holistic performance evaluations, (2) creating several tenure-track options, and (3) abolishing tenure.

First, the performance of professors should be based on three criteria — teaching, research and service (Mesak & Jauch, 1991). The University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Business, a research-oriented public university, has a
very enlightened yearly performance evaluation process. Every year all professors must report their student evaluations, research articles accepted for publication, and service activities. Each of these variables are then quantified, weighted based on scales related to one's hierarchical position, calculated for an overall score, and then compared with one's peers to provide an overall yearly assessment that is the basis of a merit raise. The weighted scale for assistant professors is: 40% teaching, 40% research and 20% service. For tenured associate professors it is: 35% teaching, 40% research and 25% service. Associate professors are expected to take on many committee burdens in the school of business, university and professional organizations. The weighted scale for full professors is: 35% teaching, 35% research and 30% service. Thus, full professors are expected to bear most of the committee burdens. Importantly, teaching and research count equally. The flaw in the current system is two-fold: assistant professors know that this is not the tenure standard and yearly merit raise pools are quite small (about 2% average). Thus, rational utility-maximizing assistant professors conclude that obtaining tenure is much more important than obtaining relatively small yearly merit raises. In addition, if one does not obtain tenure, yet wishes to be employed at a research university of slightly lower caliber, job recruiters foremost want to know the answer to one question — how many articles have you published? Quantifying research productivity serves as an essential performance measurement that is meaningful to outside observers. The inside joke among many faculty is that tenure is granted once it is established that a professor is a workaholic researcher. The solution is to apply the holistic yearly merit raise performance evaluation to tenure cases.

Second, a fundamental flaw in the entire educational process is the assumption that people who receive PhDs have been trained to teach. Many have not. A PhD is granted to students who have passed comprehensive exams and completed a dissertation. Some PhD programs may require teaching experience, some dissertation chairpeople may demand that their students receive teaching experience, and some conscientious PhDs may demand to receive teaching experience, but training doctoral students to be excellent teachers is at most a low priority in PhD programs (West, 1992).

For instance, tenure-track professors at the University of Wisconsin-Madison have a 2/2 yearly teaching load. Most non-research oriented universities require 4/4 yearly teaching load. The false assumption under the research-oriented university program is that professors desire to be both excellent teachers and excellent researchers. Some do, some don't. Some professors feel called to be excellent teachers and dislike research. Other professors feel called to be excellent researchers and dislike teaching. This latter group gives many professors a bad reputation.

Given this situation, business schools should offer three types of tenure tracks, each with equal value, made available to all professors. Professors at research-oriented universities could choose among three tenure tracks: 4 classes a year (the status quo), 8 classes a year, or 1 class a year. Each track would have
different performance measures. Those professors choosing the 4 class track would be expected to be "very good" teachers, as measured by teacher effectiveness measures, including student evaluations (Fay, Ferrara & Stryker, 1993), and "very good" researchers, as measured by academic journal publications (1 per year). Those professors choosing the 8 class track would be expected to be "excellent" teachers, as measured by teacher effectiveness measures, and "good" writers/researchers, with an occasionally published article in a practitioner-oriented outlet (1-2 per five years). Those professors choosing the 1 class track would be expected to be a "good" teachers, as measured by teacher effectiveness measures, and "excellent" researchers, as measured by academic journal publications (3 per year). This would allow research universities to have both excellent research reputations (the responsibility of professors on the 1 class and 4 class track) and excellent teaching reputations (the responsibility of professors on the 8 track and 4 class track). A two track system emphasizing scholarship and teaching is also possible (Van Fleet, 1994). An administrative key would be to minimize hierarchical schisms among these three types of tenure-track professors through comparable pay scales, support, etc.

Third, the purpose of tenure is to enhance freedom of thought, along with all of its corresponding societal benefits, by permitting professors to research and teach "the truth" without fear of being fired. Tenure permits professors to research and speak out on controversial public issues such as linkages between genes and behavioral outcomes. Tenured professors cannot be dismissed because such topics annoy wealthy alumni, a business school dean, the university president or members of the local community. Importantly, some professors remain excellent teachers and researchers upon receiving tenure, but some do not. It is the latter who give the former a bad public reputation, particularly since it is so difficult to fire a poorly performing tenured faculty member (Sowell, 1994). The poorly performing tenured professor can remain a very public sore point for decades.

Abolishing tenure sends shivers down the spines of university professors (Kaylin, 1994). A reasonable solution could entail granting faculty 5 year contracts linked with the enlightened holistic performance appraisals outlined above (Simon, 1991). This would help to objectify individual performance so that it is clear when a faculty member is being appropriately dismissed due to inadequate teaching, research and service and when an inappropriate dismissal based on political differences is occurring.

**Emphasizing Social Subjects and Mathematics**

Although mathematics can take you places where intuition and common sense cannot, just as importantly the reverse is true. The need to expand a student's intuition and common sense is dramatically overlooked in most MBA programs. Currently, Stanford MBA students are being taught to be excellent technicians, not excellent managers. The field of Business Ethics is overflowing with case studies wherein the application of the mathematical answer divorced from the
ethical answer resulted in significant bad press, which negatively impacted profitability. Managers who are the slaves of mathematical answers are not necessarily unethical individuals, they simply suffer from moral myopia. They are oblivious to how their firm’s activities impact stakeholders other than stockholders and themselves. Business students need to learn how to manage the social dimension as well as computer spreadsheets.

Robinson’s discussion of his interaction with Milton Friedman sheds some light on problems associated with emphasizing the mathematical over the social. Robinson refers to Friedman, whom Ronald Reagan told him to contact at Stanford’s Hoover Institute, as “probably the smartest man I’ll ever meet” (p. 249). Robinson asked Friedman, the favorite whipping boy of Business Ethicists, to explain why so many Stanford MBAs thought so favorably of Michael Dukakis, who had given an anti-Reagan/Bush speech to the students after losing the 1988 presidential election. Friedman’s response: “No... I can’t explain it.... But you’d think... that at a business school of all places students would understand the importance of low taxes and limited government” (p. 249). To which the author notes: “If a Nobel Prize winner couldn’t explain my classmates’ political views, I concluded, I might as well stop trying” (p. 249).

Assuming that Friedman is not just being flippant, this is unfortunate because the exchange between Robinson and Friedman demonstrates the great inability of neoclassical economics (strongly based on mathematical modelling, not ethics) to explain the obvious: values other than economics matter to people, even MBAs.

Organizations desperately need managers who can accumulate and distribute resources (power/income) in a fair and equitable manner. Excellent managers are those who can balance and/or integrate the sometimes conflicting interests of owners, employees, customers, suppliers, government officials and local communities. In this sense, a manager’s job is multi-dimensional, consisting of judge, politician, psychologist, social worker, and ethicist, as well as mathematical technician. These nonmathematical skills should be a central part of the MBA curriculum. Managers should be trained to make fair decisions, consider the impact of company decisions on the local community, counsel employees, aid employees with temporary troubles, and clearly differentiate good from bad.

Importantly, these two subject areas can also lead to a schism. For instance, during the late 1980s Yale University had a student/faculty war between those who favored subjects that took a clinical approach to management and those who favored mathematical courses, such as finance (Norman, 1988). Both subjects are essential. There has been significant public demand from both business educators and practitioners for the typically “technical” MBA education to be rounded-off with more “social” development with courses such as social responsibility, organizational reality, interpersonal skills, personal leadership, and team building (Foggin, 1992; McMillen, White & McKee, 1994; O’Reilly, 1994; Porter & McKibben, 1988; Williams, 1993). As noted by Aristotle over two thousand years ago, determining the right amount of social and technical knowledge is an art, not a science.
Emphasizing Curriculum Integration and Separate Ethics Courses

As noted earlier, Stanford business professors ignored the ethical dimensions of business problems. By not addressing the ethical dimensions, professors are teaching students by example that they are not relevant to the final decision. These issues should be addressed in all classes. For instance, Robinson’s accounting professor could have had students debate the ethics of choosing LIFO or FIFO as an accounting method. Similarly, Robinson’s micro-economics professor could have facilitated a class discussion on what Robinson realized was “the essentially tragic nature of the human condition” namely, “whether as consumers or producers, human beings always want more than they can get” (p. 85). Consumers, who desire products they can’t afford, have spending limits, and producers, who desire an infinite number of financially able customers, have market limits.

As exemplified by Healy and other Stanford professors and students, teaching ethical issues has minimal legitimacy (Collins & Wartick, 1995). In order to increase legitimacy, professors could also teach an ethical dilemma module in their functional courses (Collins & O’Rourke, 1994). For nonphilosophically-trained business professors to gain confidence, they must change their mental conceptions about addressing ethical issues from an Aristotle or Immanuel Kant teaching paradigm to a Ted Koppel teaching paradigm (Collins & Page, 1995). In this sense, the professor serves as a moderator of student debate, rather than the ultimate source of philosophical truth.

Emphasizing Integrated Balanced Life and Exams

New MBA students at Stanford are overcome with the following immediate goals: (a) survive mid-term exams, (b) survive the first semester, and (c) get a summer internship. These situations create highly stressful and isolating situations. Stanford administrators tried to overcome this unhealthy situation by instituting a Pass/Fail grading system and emphasizing cooperation rather than competition. Neither solution worked. According to Robinson, the problem seems to rest in the establishment of “Pass” gradations (high pass, pass plus, pass, and pass minus) that paralleled the old grade system. This is a childish form of evaluation, often rewarding memorization abilities rather than more advanced cognitive abilities — such as the development of a philosophy of life (Krathwohl, Bloom & Masia, 1964). MBA students are adults. Many have had several years of work experience, over a quarter century of life experiences, and had done well in undergraduate programs, thus already proving they have the ability to memorize data. At this stage of maturity they should begin reflecting on the experiences around them rather than simply be viewed as having minds like banks that need daily information deposits by professors (Freire, 1971).

At the graduate level of education, students should not be competing for incremental differences in grades. This only encourages students to constantly compare and judge each other (who’s doing better or worse than me?). They admire or envy those above them and gloat over those below. In describing how
he met his best MBA friend during the poet orientation program, Robinson
found him interesting in that “he was in even deeper trouble than I was” (p. 23)
in terms of surviving the MBA program. This made Robinson feel better about
himself.

It is essential that graduate students across a university develop a universal
perspective rather than a parochial one. According to the 1993 Statistical Ab-
stract of the United States, less than 8% of the adult population in the United
States has a Masters degree (4.8%) or higher. Graduate students, and professors
with PhDs (0.7%) represent a very elite, influential, and powerful group of
citizens. Currently, most academic disciplines become narrower instead of
broader as students move up the educational hierarchy. For instance, graduate
students in business learn how to maximize profits, graduate students in law
learn how to win cases, and graduate students in medicine learn how to save
patients. These students, and their professors, believe that by focusing so nar-
rowly on their professional goals they will be improving the general welfare, but
this is another false assumption. Sometimes earning profits, winning law cases,
and saving patients can benefit community well-being — and sometimes not.
Profits can be earned by exploiting people, guilty clients who will be repeat
offenders can be set free on legal technicalities, and excessive medical costs can
drain both the economy and family savings. It is absurd to have the best edu-
cated minds in the country ignore these issues.

What could be done as an alternative? MBA students need to receive a holistic
education. Studies show that students learn most from their experiences at
graduate school, not from data memorization. Students do need to learn some
basic general facts which will then be amended based on the specific company
that employs them. Each company has its own unique way of conducting mar-
keting research, personnel interviews, financial analysis, etc. beyond the general
basics. Thus business schools should put greater effort into increasing students’
knowledge of the surrounding social reality — interactions with the political
system, journalists, medical systems, people in poverty, etc. —which could then
be applied in their future managerial careers.

One fruitful possibility is service learning projects. As noted by Porter &
McKibbin (1988) “because of the increasingly complex environment in which
business operates, business schools must give more consideration to whether
they have an appropriate balance between an internal and an external focus” (p.
85). Service learning class projects aim at getting students and professors out of
the classroom to apply, and enhance, their knowledge while working on a social
or community need. This teaching experience is aimed at “the development of
skilled, socially aware, life-long learners” (Zlotkowski, 1996). According to
Morton & Troppe (1996), “service learning theory begins with the assumption
that experience is the foundation for learning; and various forms of community
service are employed as the experiential basis for learning.” Service learning
opportunities for business students include feeding the homeless (Collins, forth-
coming; Hogner, 1996), volunteering at social service agencies (Kenworthy,
1996; Kohls, 1996; Smith, 1996), serving as environmental advocates (Hogner, 1996), working with low-income community centers (Collins, 1996), lobbying on behalf of disenfranchised groups (Bies, 1996), and developing business plans for firms operating in inner-city neighborhoods (Graham, 1996). Methods other than exams are used to evaluate the student's learning process.

Lastly, it is essential not to overlook the time demands that professors place on students. Many of the MBAs I teach are highly motivated overachievers. They want to excel and, if possible, surpass professorial expectations. Both students and professor tend to treat "time" as an unlimited resource. As such, professors make outrageous demands and the students experience outrageous levels of stress. At Stanford, some students responded by using their free time to fulfill all of the personal pleasures they were sacrificing, such as the student who moved to a ski resort. Others simply have no free time outside of school work. Neither outcome is socially desirable because they lead to isolation from the every day affairs of regular people. As Robinson observed (p. 239):

But among my classmates romantic woes were commonplace. I knew of five classmates who had gotten engaged during Christmas vacation only to break off their engagements in the spring. Business school did that to people. It placed students' personalities in flux. It made them wonder how they could decide whom to marry when they could not decide who they were themselves.

Business schools need to consider placing limits on the number of hours students spend doing coursework. Students need to be taught that time is not an infinite resource, nor should they expect that their employees have an infinite amount of time to dedicate to the company. If both parents work sixty hour weeks, who's raising the nation's children during their most formative years? Underpaid and burned-out daycare workers? Television sets? Assuming a five course semester, each of the five professors should not assign work, including class time, that will take students more than 9 hours per week. Naturally, a 45 hour student work week would be extremely difficult to monitor. Nonetheless, the expectations should be set. Do the best that you can within a reasonable 45 hour work week. Then get on with other aspects of your life.

**Bibliography**


