What We Can Learn from Each Other, Part 2:
Education, Business, and Business Education

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In part 1, I wrote about how teachers in colleges and universities and teachers in K-12 education can learn from each other. Among other things, I suggested that we who teach in college and universities can learn from the sense of responsibility that K-12 faculty feel for student learning, and that we who teach in K-12 education can learn from the sense of responsibility that college and university faculty feel for self-governance. Although my focus was on those of us who teach, I suggested that learning from each other can and should also include people who manage and govern in the two systems, such as K-12 principals and school board members, and college and university deans and boards of governors.

In this sequel, I'll start with the idea that the great expansion of undergraduate business education over the last decades offers a promising path forward for American high schools, such as Columbia High School in the South Orange-Maplewood School District in suburban New Jersey, where I serve on the school board. I'll draw on my experience as a Rutgers Business School faculty member who started teaching in the early 1990s in a school that was only for graduate students, but that is now predominantly made up of undergraduates. I've come to believe that the change that I have seen come to Rutgers, with a large-scale upgrading and expansion of undergraduate business education on both our Newark and New Brunswick campuses, is a change that can come to Columbia High School and other American high schools.

We can, I believe, create a new culture for American high schools that is different from, and better than, either the old-style “college prep on top, secretarial and vocational below” American high school model or the current “academic skill is all there is” high school that the end of the old-style model has left us with, but that does not work well for many of our students. Just as my undergraduate business students take a mix of liberal arts courses and business courses, with some of the business courses taught by academic faculty like me and some taught by industry faculty, we can
envision a future in which a substantial number of students in American high schools do something similar. In contrast to the old-style idea of a business track for non-college students, many and likely most of the students in new-era high school business education would be going on to college, and some of them might be among the academic stars of the school, just as some of my undergraduate business students are at Rutgers. In the new era, a ninth grade Steve Jobs of 2020 with strong artistic and leadership skills as well as good academic skills might well want to concentrate in what we could call Business Prep, even as a ninth grade Bill Gates of 2020 with his more reserved personality and narrower excellence in logical reasoning would likely prefer what might be called Professional Prep.

My belief that business education in American high schools can enjoy a much higher role and status than it now does is based centrally on what I've seen happen at Rutgers over the last twenty years. The world of paid work, of which business is the central though not the only component, has always been at the heart of what my MBA students care about. With the expansion of undergraduate business education and the role of clinical or industry faculty in both our graduate and undergraduate programs, I believe that Rutgers is doing a much better job than we used to do in giving a good proportion of our undergraduate student body a keen sense of the world of work. The combination of avidity for learning and avidity for the working world that I see in a good number of my undergraduate business students is one that I find very appealing. I think it can be brought to life for many American high school students with a broad portfolio of courses that includes the traditional liberal arts subjects, with more on psychology and economics as the foundational disciplines of business, and with practical courses covering both the psychological, human relations skills and the getting the job done, operational skills that are central to business.

It may well be that some of what I see as needing to happen is already happening in some, or for that matter many, high schools. My wife, who teaches high school English in Passaic County, tells me that some of the strong students as well as the less strong ones in her district are very oriented toward their business courses. In our district, we already have a practical arts requirement, under which students take subjects like computer assisted design and programming. What I believe we have not done, and what I believe we can do, involves foregrounding and lifting up business education as a highly valued path for American high school students to take. If leading-edge American school districts like South Orange-Maplewood and our neighbors Montclair, West Orange, Livingston, and Millburn create a major focus on business education as a valued path in our high schools, I'm optimistic that many of our students will come to what we build.

A big part of what I do as a part-time administrator in the Supply Chain Management and Marketing Sciences Department is to work with our industry faculty, who play a central role in giving
our students the hands-on connections to the world of work and jobs that are much more difficult for us academic faculty to accomplish. My sense is that new-era business education in American high schools would benefit strongly from having such industry faculty in our schools.

Integrating industry faculty successfully into K-12 and college and university education alike involves some tricky and interesting administrative and governance issues, some of which I touched on in my earlier piece. At the broadest level, I believe that such integration involves issues of mutual respect. Do people in education respect business, and want to prepare their students for it? Do people in business respect education, and want to have their employees engaged in lifelong learning—in some instances, by spending some of their time as teachers? I do not think these issues are easy. But I also believe that my school district and my university, and American education and American business in general, are good—and yes, great—institutions that can take on the challenge of working to create new-era business education in our high schools and succeed.

*This piece reflects my own views; it does not reflect a position of the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education or Rutgers Business School-Newark and New Brunswick.