

## Special Millenium Section

### Proclaimers in the Mist: The Christian Business School in the 21st Century<sup>1</sup>

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As the world approaches the millennium, it seems natural to try to pierce the mist of the future, to assess what we might become. Appropriately, this **JBIB** issue asks a simple question, “What is the future of Christian business education?” The response, like the response to many simple questions, is complex and multifaceted.

To explore the future of Christian business education is beyond the scope of this paper. The Christian college movement in the United States was raised up by God as an alternative to the secularization of the major institutions of higher learning (Noll, 1994). As a relatively recent part of that movement, the Christian business school has been seen as a partner in mission by some and as a cash cow by others (Smith, 1998).

The assumption made in this paper is that Christian business education contributes to and enhances the mission of the

Christian university and of the church of Jesus Christ and will continue to do so.

Refined, the question becomes “What will the future Christian business school or department look like?” Again the response is complex. One of the things we teach students, of course, is that the first question to ask is “What are the desired outcomes?” Therefore, when discussing the future of Christian business education, the first question should not be “What is the shape of the Christian business school in the next century?” but rather “What are the realities of the world? What are the abilities, skills, and character traits needed by students who graduate from the school?” Once we have answered this question, we can move to the other.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the outcome question in some detail and suggest responses that Christian business

schools might make. Given the complexity of the issue, I make no claims to be exhaustive or definitive. Rather, the goal here is to start a discussion—to evaluate some of the skill sets, competencies, and values that our graduates need in order to be successful in the next century and to consider how we might help them achieve them.

To limit the scope of the paper further, I will focus primarily on entry-level skills and competencies, rather than skills necessary later in a career. The following two sections outline some of the characteristics and skills needed for entry-level success in the next millennium. The next section focuses on abilities that most competent business schools could teach. The third section deals with values and values that can be a distinctive competency of the Christian business school. The fourth section discusses possible responses and proposals for future directions.

#### Vital Skills in the 21st Century

The form of the organization is changing rapidly. In the past 20 years, the twin forces of global competition and advanced technology have forced the traditional hierarchical structure

to give way to a whole zoo of organizational forms: flat, matrix, network, cellular (Miles & Snow, 1996), adhocracy, and transnational (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992). In the 1980s, intense global competition found many traditional U.S. organizations ponderous and slow to respond to threats and opportunities. To become more competitive, they downsized, de-layered, and outsourced many functions, becoming leaner and more productive in the process. In the new structural forms (loosely called network structures), referral, partnering, and relationship skills have become more important. The technical, control, and political competencies necessary for managerial success in the traditional form have given way to the need for flexible, multiskilled individuals with multicultural and teamwork abilities (Nicholson, 1996). This trend is accelerating.

Under these conditions, what qualities and skills will the Christian business school graduate need in the 21st century? The International Association of Corporate and Professional Resources is a professional association of corporate executives, human resource professionals, and consultants.

As quoted in Allred, Snow, and Miles (1996), they say that success in the next century will be based on:

- Knowledge-based technical specialties
- Integrative cross-functional expertise
- Multicultural and international expertise
- Collaborative leadership skills
- Ability to self-manage
- Integrity and trustworthiness

The first three of these five foundations for success are cognitive- and competency-based. They can be taught by any business school willing to take the time and trouble. The last two qualities are value- and character-based. I argue that because Christian business schools are value-driven, they are the best places to learn and strengthen these qualities. Let us examine each of the foundations in turn.

### ***Knowledge-Based Technical Specialties***

A new career in the future, as in the past, will initially be built on skill in a technical specialty. For some time to come, an individual will enter the marketplace as an auditor, an MIS

coordinator, or a market researcher. Therefore, these skills must be taught in the business school. Furthermore, even at entry level it is assumed the new hire has some experience in their specialty. This concept is not new and has traditionally been responded to by requiring or encouraging students to do part-time work or internships in the area of their expertise. The need for the business school to help the student gain skills and experience in their specialty will not change.

In addition, most employers now assume that new employees have strong computer skills. Information is the chief mechanism by which contemporary organizations survive and thrive; therefore, ability to process information and knowledge is key in the new competitive landscape (Hitt, Keats, & DeMarie, 1998).

In other words, critical thinking skills are as basic as ever for the student. So is ability to use the important computer programs in the specialty field. In addition, however, employers now assume that new hires can use the better-known presentation programs, decision programs, spreadsheet programs, and so forth. These programs are basic for communication and efficient

decision-making and necessary for advancement. They also help create efficiencies that Christian employees need in order to have time to minister to others, to nurture their families, and to meditate upon and communicate with God (Smith, 1997). The business school, Christian or not, that does not teach its students these now basic tools is shortchanging them.

In this area, the Christian business school has a disadvantage. Technology is resource-intensive, and many Christian colleges do not have large resources. Furthermore, it is difficult and expensive to find people qualified to maintain and teach the technology. In addition, the question persists: "What should we take out of the curriculum in order to create room for technology classes?" None of these questions have easy answers. However, here are some possibilities to think about.

High risk and limited resources have forced many firms into joint ventures. Christian business schools might consider the same approach. Just as with ILL and the Internet, libraries are no longer dependent on vast caves of books, so too the business school pursuing a joint venture with a compatible school

might share technological support and professors. Furthermore, technical skills can often be taught by distance learning methods, creating efficiencies. As to space in the curriculum, there are ways to cope. For example, a marketing professor I know requires that his students learn one major program in each of his classes. In that way, his students have learned DecideRight, NegotiatorPro, SurveyPro, and so forth. These programs are specifically used in other classes by other professors so that at the end, the student has a good working knowledge of basic tools. Another approach is to cluster the business curriculum into skills and allow students to take different modules, including technological models. Several universities have tried this method with varying degrees of success.

### ***Cross-Functional Expertise***

Overlapping the need for functional skills is the need for students to understand all the functions of the organization. The use of work teams (groups who work interdependently to solve problems) is accelerating, requiring, among other things, the ability of members to think multidimensionally and

systemically about the organization (Manz & Sims, 1993). Furthermore, the increasing focus on innovation requires that organizations employ people who are able to think across boundaries and see the total picture (Hitt, et al., 1998).

The message seems clear. For our graduates to succeed in the 21st century, they must understand the complete nature of the organization, not just a specialized section of it.

And yet, many business programs still function in silos. A student takes some general education classes, possibly some religion classes, and spends the bulk of his or her time taking functional classes. Strategic management, the capstone class, is traditionally where connections between functions are made. This, however, is much too late.


Starting with their freshmen year, marketing majors need to know why they must understand financial documents and vice versa. Accounting students must understand management techniques. The more the different functions of the organization are taught in tandem,

the easier it is for the students to understand the connections. Simulations, cross-functional co-teaching, textbooks, and reading packs that encourage functional integration are all important for our graduates.

To understand integration more thoroughly, professors might find it

necessary to take graduate classes in another function. A restructuring of the traditional curriculum may be necessary. If our graduates are to be successes in the next century, they must learn to think in terms of the entire system. How better can they learn than if we model it?

Some of this may be threatening to professors who have built a career around a certain function or who do not wish to make the necessary effort to integrate. However, Christian business schools may have an advantage. Because they are often smaller, there are fewer barriers between disciplines. Management, economic, finance, and marketing professors have offices side by side and eat lunch together. Integrating the functions is more likely under such conditions. Furthermore, the



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probability is that the Christian professor would be more willing than his non-Christian colleague to obey the words of the Master: “Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others” (Phil. 2:4). Many Christian professors focus on the best for their students and are willing to change if necessary. The ability to integrate meaningfully might be a value the Christian business school can add to its graduates.

***Multicultural and International Expertise***

As even the smallest organizations extend their reach into the international business arena, multicultural and international experience is becoming critical. The volume of international trade has been growing more rapidly than many economies (Amstutz, Charalambakis, & Ewert, 1998). Significant trends include the growing influence of multinational corporation, newly industrialized countries’ entry into global manufacturing, and the tremendous growth in international trade and investment. To function in such a world, it is necessary for a business student to have a basic understanding of the paradigms of

other cultures. There are many ways to accomplish this. For example, students could be encouraged to take classes in cross-cultural communication. They could routinely work in teams with people from other cultures. They should travel as much as possible. Sometimes several goals can be combined. For example, at one Christian college, marketing students did a market research project for Overseas Crusade in the Philippines, and accounting students regularly practice their auditing skills for Wycliffe Bible Translators in South America. This type of project is win-win. The organization gets expertise and help in their mission, the student gets direct experience in their field, and the student also gets international experience.

The demand for multicultural skills is particularly pertinent for the Christian student. Christians are commanded to take the gospel to all the world (Matt 28:19). Learning a little about the culture of the Korean or Hispanic sitting at the next desk is a small step towards fulfilling our God-given task of being proclaimers.

***Collaborative Leadership Skills***

To be successful in the hierarchical structure, an

individual needed skills in upward influence and downward management. To be successful in the more flexible contemporary structures, he or she needs strong collaborative skills. In a recent article, Allred and his colleagues (1996) discuss three types of collaborative leadership skills which they call referral, partnering, and relationship management.

*Referral skills* have to do with the ability to analyze a problem, know who can best deal with it, and call them in. The idea is to bring the best resources possible to solving the problem. This type of skill presupposes several things. First, the manager must be able to analyze problems accurately. This critical thinking skill is discussed at length in academic settings and is vital to the success of our graduates. Next, the manager must be aware of the expertise of others in the organization. Who should he or she call in? Third, the manager must have the humility to refer the problem to others, rather than try to solve it his or her self. This may be the most difficult step. It takes balanced judgment, understanding of human nature, and willingness to not get the credit to call others in. People with large egos or strong power

hungers will not easily develop this kind of skill. It is people who are genuinely seeking to manage as Christ would have them manage who will develop referral skills most readily.

*Partnering skills* refer to the ability to negotiate and implement mutually-beneficial outcomes. In the 21st century, collaboration will be a major source of competitive advantage (Liedtka, 1996), a critical skill. Foundational to this skill is the ability to be a good team member and negotiate win-win situations. Obviously, any business school can teach the basics of successful negotiation and good teamwork. However, past a point these skills cannot be taught, but must be observed and imitated or learned by trial and error. Many business schools have responded by creating numerous opportunities for students to work in teams. However, they should take the further step and place professors in teams to implement cross-functional outcomes. Students observing how their professors work together can imitate good practices.

*Relationship management* involves giving high priority and attention to key stakeholders, particularly customers and partners. The issue is that the

leader needs to focus on the proper people. Again, it helps students learn this skill if the business school is modeling it. Do the professors see their role as doing a job (focus on self) or fulfilling a mission (focus on students)? Is the dean focused on helping the professors do their work (focus on faculty) or is he or she engaged in keeping life calm (focus on self)? To give high priority to others requires the heart of a servant, the courage of an eagle, and great wisdom. A Christian, walking with God, should find both the humility and the courage available. As for wisdom, all he or she need do is ask, and it will be given freely, without reproach (James 1:5).

### **Vital Character Qualities in the 21st Century**

The competencies discussed in the former section are important to success in the next century. However, to some degree they can be taught by business schools that are not necessarily Christian. In contrast, the next two foundations for success are where the Christian business school can add value a secular university cannot. While it is possible to have self-control, integrity, and trustworthiness apart from Christ, these fruits of

the Spirit (Gal. 5:22) are difficult to teach and are foundational to the Christian.

### ***Ability to Self-Manage***

While technical skills will still be necessary in the next century, new organizational forms have changed the setting the skills are used in. The person who will be successful in the more collaborative and non-rule-oriented atmosphere of the 21st century organization will be the person who can manage his or herself. Self-governance and self-control will become a vital ingredient in career success in the 21st century. There are many reasons for this.

The older hierarchical form, based on the military, was a master work of command and control. With the current fluid structural forms, organizational governance is more difficult and costly, and self-governance becomes paramount (Morgan, 1997). This includes the willingness to act ethically in situations and the ability to forgo short-term objectives that damage the long run collective good (Allred, et al., 1996). Those that abuse the looser control will be noted and their career plateaued.

Self-control is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. It is also the key to

the proper use of power (Chewning, Eby, & Roels, 1990). Power is necessary; nothing happens without someone exercising a degree of power. However, it can be wielded for good or ill. In the organizational literature, power is often seen as having its origin in the dependency of B upon the resources controlled by A and vice versa (Emerson, 1962). This formulation of power depends upon long-term mutual reciprocity; power between individuals is bounded by time, situation, and purpose (French & Raven, 1959). Therefore, it is possible to understand power as potential for influence rather than probability of coercion as in so many other formulations. The difference is that influence leaves room for legitimate choice by the less powerful party. Such a formulation requires self-control on the part of both parties or influence becomes coercion or politics.

McClelland (1985) notes that the worst manager is the person who uses power for his or her own ends. The person who can govern him or herself, under the love of Christ, is set free from self-will to follow His will. The chances are much better that they will wield power to benefit

others. Using power to look after the interests of others as well as oneself is the key to successful collaboration.

A related issue in self-management is the ability to create balance between work and family life. As believers, we understand that it is important to take the time to properly nurture loving relationships. Overworked Christians have more difficulty in maintaining a relationship with the Lord, in having strong marriages, and in raising godly children. Taking time to know God leads to self-control, self-control leads to endurance, and endurance leads to godliness (II Pet. 1:6). A person who can govern his or her self properly has a clear advantage.

Another dimension to self-management is managing one's own career. Career paths are no longer clear and set; the managerial career is becoming increasingly a do-it-yourself project. This particularly includes the need to keep learning and growing. Those that lack the ability to self-manage or lack the self-discipline for lifelong education will often find their careers sidelined (London, 1996). On the other hand, students who understand their own values and what is important to them will

often find a job they can enjoy and be satisfied in.

The Christian business professor, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, needs to be a model of self-control. "Let not many of you become teachers, my brothers," says James, "knowing that such as we will incur a stricter judgment. For we all stumble in many ways" (James 3:1). Knowing this, we as professors need to turn to Christ so that His control can replace and create our self-control.

### ***Integrity and Trustworthiness***

The new competitive landscape is moving towards hypercompetition—an extreme focus on customers and an increasing focus on innovation (Henriques & Sadorsky, 1999). Furthermore, speed is driving many industries. The requirements for speed of action and innovation have weakened the couplings of the vertical organization (Hitt, et al., 1998), leaving the employee free to act in entrepreneurial ways. As autonomy replaces control, as technical and market information moves freely among networked firms, and as

customers demand more and more from firms, there is an increasing need for integrity and trustworthiness among workers. At the same time, the lower morals in U.S. society indicate a decrease in the trustworthiness of workers. The person who, as a disciple of

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Jesus Christ, does what he says he will do (Matt. 5:37), keeps promises even to his own detriment, and acts in God's will—not his own—will stand out in the modern corporation. However, many of our students have not seen integrity to the point of discomfort modeled in their homes or churches. If the Christian business schools want this outcome, the professors and administration must teach and practice it.

### **The Bottom Line**

What does this mean for Christian business education? Like our students, some of our professional paradigms and assumptions may need to change in the new millennium. Pasternack and Viscio (1998) say that the model corporation of tomorrow will be built along three axes: people, knowledge,

and coherence. These three allow the organization to function.

If we consider our business departments to be organizations, these dimensions can be instructive. The first dimension is people. Business professors in Christian universities tend to be committed to their job as a ministry to Jesus Christ. Most could easily make more money elsewhere; they are where they are because they want to be there and because they want to minister to students. The message of the Christian business school is therefore consistent. The professors, in main, seek to teach and model commitment to their students.

In addition, many professors at Christian schools have entrepreneurial and innovation strengths. Smaller size allows flexibility; where a state school might take years to implement a program or class, we can develop and implement it in a semester. Working in a small department means that one sometimes teaches classes out of one's field of expertise, allowing for more integration between functions and more creativity. Furthermore, we have more immediate say in the governance of the school and university. Therefore, Christian business schools tend to attract

professors who wish to minister to students, who are entrepreneurial, flexible, and who think somewhat cross-functionally. All these competencies are part of the skills necessary in the next millennium.

Knowledge, the second dimension, is critical; the management of knowledge is one of the highest priorities for an organization (Henriques & Sadorsky, 1999). Knowledge is the set of understandings used by people to make decisions and is amassed from experience (Pasternack & Viscio, 1998). This may be a weakness for the Christian business school. For example, two pieces of knowledge that are critical in presenting the best Christian business program possible are intelligence about our customers and best practices to benchmark against. With limited time and funds, many Christian business schools are not systematic in gathering this kind of knowledge. How many Christian business schools have conducted a recent and systematic market research product to find out what their students want? How many have identified their distinctive competencies and found other business schools to benchmark against? Organizations like the

CBFA might be vehicles to assist in the gathering and dispersal of such needed information.

Coherence is the third critical dimension identified by Pasternack and Viscio. Coherence of values and vision connects the disparate pieces of the organization and allows it to function smoothly. Christian business schools should be strong in this dimension as they model the body of Christ. The eye and the ear and the foot must work together—marketing, economics, and finance professors each contribute to the whole. Coherence of values and vision is a great strength of Christian business education.

What is the future for the Christian business school? Our goal will remain the same—to raise up godly men and women of competence and character. The form of the school might change, the structure of our department might change, even the content of our classes might change. But our heart and core values will not change. Our purpose is to teach students to influence the world of the next century for Jesus Christ. Teaching technical, cross-functional, and multicultural skills to our students and modeling self-control and trustworthiness is the way to

reach our goal. As students gain competence, they will grow in character. As Christ is formed in ourselves and our students (Gal. 4:19), we will go forth together as proclaimers in the mist of the new millennium.

## ENDNOTES

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