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# The Default Major: Skating Through B-School

By DAVID GLENN

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PAUL M. MASON does not give his business students the same exams he gave 10 or 15 years ago. "Not many of them would pass," he says.

Dr. Mason, who teaches economics at the University of North Florida, believes his students are just as intelligent as they've always been. But many of them don't read their textbooks, or do much of anything else that their parents would have called studying. "We used to complain that K-12 schools didn't hold students to high standards," he says with a sigh. "And here we are doing the same thing ourselves."

That might sound like a kids-these-days lament, but all evidence suggests that student disengagement is at its worst in Dr. Mason's domain: undergraduate business education.

Business majors spend less time preparing for class than do students in any other broad field, according to the most recent National Survey of Student Engagement: nearly half of seniors majoring in business say they spend fewer than 11 hours a week studying outside class. In their new book "Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses," the sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa report that business majors had the weakest gains during the first two years of college on a national test of writing and reasoning skills. And when business students take the GMAT, the entry examination for M.B.A. programs, they score lower than students in every other major.

This is not a small corner of academe. The family of majors under the business umbrella — including finance, accounting, marketing, management and "general business" — accounts for just over 20 percent, or more than 325,000, of all bachelor's degrees awarded annually in the United States, making it the most popular field of study.

Brand-name programs — the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania, the [University of Notre Dame](#) Mendoza College of Business, and a few dozen others — are full of students pulling 70-hour weeks, if only to impress the elite finance and consulting firms they aspire to join. But get much below BusinessWeek's top 50, and you'll hear pervasive anxiety about

student apathy, especially in “soft” fields like management and marketing, which account for the majority of business majors.

Scholars in the field point to three sources of trouble. First, as long ago as 1959, a [Ford Foundation](#) report warned that too many undergraduate business students chose their majors “by default.” Business programs also attract more than their share of students who approach college in purely instrumental terms, as a plausible path to a job, not out of curiosity about, say, Ronald Coase’s theory of the firm.

“Business education has come to be defined in the minds of students as a place for developing elite social networks and getting access to corporate recruiters,” says Rakesh Khurana, a professor at Harvard Business School who is a prominent critic of the field. It’s an attitude that Dr. Khurana first saw in M.B.A. programs but has migrated, he says, to the undergraduate level.

Second, in management and marketing, no strong consensus has emerged about what students ought to learn or how they ought to learn it. And finally, with large student-faculty ratios and no lab equipment, business has historically been cheaper to operate than most departments. Cynics say many colleges are content.

“At the big public universities, the administrations need us to be credible, but I’m not sure that they need us to be very good,” says J. David Hunger, a scholar-in-residence in the management program at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University, in Collegeville, Minn. “They need us to be cash cows.”

IN “Academically Adrift,” Dr. Arum and Dr. Roksa looked at the performance of students at 24 colleges and universities. At the beginning of freshman year and end of sophomore year, students in the study took the Collegiate Learning Assessment, a national essay test that assesses students’ writing and reasoning skills. During those first two years of college, business students’ scores improved less than any other group’s. Communication, education and social-work majors had slightly better gains; humanities, social science, and science and engineering students saw much stronger improvement.

What accounts for those gaps? Dr. Arum and Dr. Roksa point to sheer time on task. Gains on the C.L.A. closely parallel the amount of time students reported spending on homework. Another explanation is the heavy prevalence of group assignments in business courses: the more time students spent studying in groups, the weaker their gains in the kinds of skills the C.L.A. measures.

Group assignments are a staple of management and marketing education. In dorm lounges and library basements around the country, small cells of 20-year-olds are analyzing why a company has succeeded or failed (Drexel University); team-writing 15-page digital marketing plans (James Madison University); or preparing 45-minute PowerPoint presentations on one of the three primary functions of management ([Tulane University](#)).

You can see the typical model in Angela D. Stanton's marketing research course at Radford University, a small public institution in southwestern Virginia. Radford students' SAT scores are close to the national median, and its proportion of business majors (19 percent) is also close to the national average. For the most part, the business program does not aspire to send anyone to Wall Street. Its graduates tend to find jobs at banks, insurance companies and government agencies in Virginia.

The charismatic Dr. Stanton peppers her lectures with anecdotes about her past work in the corporate world. In her marketing research class, she has parceled her students into teams of four or five, and over the semester those teams are expected to write a series of reports on college students' perceptions of online marketing. Students don't compose a complete paper of their own.

The project's first "deliverable" is to conduct and analyze a survey of nonbusiness students on campus, asking them questions like this: "What does it say about a company or brand if they are not involved with social networking sites like [Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#)?"

The pedagogical theory is that managers need to function in groups, so a management education without such experiences would be like medical training without a residency. While some group projects are genuinely challenging, the consensus among students and professors is that they are one of the elements of business that make it easy to skate through college.

Donald R. Bacon, a business professor at the University of Denver, studied group projects at his institution and found a perverse dynamic: the groups that functioned most smoothly were often the ones where the least learning occurred. That's because students divided up the tasks in ways they felt comfortable with. The math whiz would do the statistical work, the English minor drafted the analysis. And then there's the most common complaint about groups: some shoulder all the work, the rest do nothing.

"I understand that teamwork is important, but in my opinion they need to do more to deal with the problem of slackers," says Justin Triplett, a 2010 Radford graduate who is completing his first year in Radford's M.B.A. program. From his perch as a teaching assistant, he estimates that a third of students in the business school don't engage with their schoolwork. At Radford, seniors in business invest on average 3.64 hours a week preparing for class, according to the National Survey of Student Engagement.

Jerry M. Kopf, a management professor at Radford, was a first-generation college student like many of his students. He grew up poor in Arkansas and dropped out of college before returning and completing school at age 30. So he has a tolerance, even an affinity, for students who have trouble finding their way.

And yet, when he talks about students who don't invest energy in his classes — not a majority, he stresses, but a persistent minority — Dr. Kopf's eyes go distant. "We've got students who don't read, and grow up not reading," he says. "There are too many other things competing for their time. The frequency and quantity of drinking keeps getting higher. We have issues with

depression. Getting students alert and motivated — even getting them to class, to be honest with you — it's a challenge.”

One senior accounting major at Radford, who asked not to be named so as not to damage his job prospects, says he goes to class only to take tests or give presentations. “A lot of classes I've been exposed to, you just go to class and they do the PowerPoint from the book,” he says. “It just seems kind of pointless to go when (a) you're probably not going to be paying much attention anyway and (b) it would probably be worth more of your time just to sit with your book and read it.”

How much time does he spend reading textbooks?

“Well, this week I don't have any tests, so probably zero,” he says. “Next week I'll have a test, so maybe 10 hours then.”

He adds: “It seems like now, every take-home test you get, you can just go and [Google](#). If the question is from a test bank, you can just type the text in, and somebody out there will have it and you can just use that.”

This is not senioritis, he says: this is the way all four years have been. In a typical day, “I just play sports, maybe go to the gym. Eat. Probably drink a little bit. Just kind of goof around all day.” He says his grade-point average is 3.3.

Faye Gilbert, dean of Radford's College of Business and Economics, has no doubt that most students in her program work hard, but she acknowledges that professors are concerned. A faculty committee recently established several dozen learning goals in each major — and if classes need to be made tougher to make sure students meet those goals, that is what will happen, Dr. Gilbert says. “Can they use a financial statement to make a decision? Can they use statistics to inform a decision? Can they — which sounds deceptively simple — define a problem? Can they look at an ethical dilemma from many perspectives and define the ethical and legal components of that problem? It's not easy to measure these things, but we're going to try.”

If one measures success by income, Radford's graduates fare decently. In a typical year, 65 percent had jobs three months after graduation, with a mean starting salary just above \$40,000. On average nationally, business students enter the work force with higher starting salaries than humanities and social science majors. By mid-career, however, some of those liberal arts majors, including political science and philosophy majors, have closed the gap.

IN a dimly lighted classroom at Ohio University, a public institution of 17,245 undergraduates, 20 students are spending a long evening preparing for final exams. They've gravitated to this room because this is where they've spent the entire winter quarter, in what Ohio calls its “cluster” program — one term of integrated courses that give fledgling business students an

introduction to accounting, finance, management and marketing.

Tomorrow's final is in finance, and the students, mostly sophomores, are sweating over practice questions. ("If you invested some money in a fund seven years ago that offered a fixed 5.99 percent nominal interest rate with quarterly compounding . . .")

"I know this is going to be tricky, but I think I've learned from the mistakes I made on the last finance test," says Adrianna Berry, a junior who started out in marketing but added a second, more challenging major — management information systems — after an injury forced her from the swim team. In contrast to finance, she says, the marketing final she took earlier in the week consisted mostly of multiple-choice questions that had already appeared on previous tests this quarter. For the management final, students could bring a cheat sheet. Ms. Berry's sheet, in tiny multicolored script, is a thing of beauty: the five-factor model of personality. Bounded rationality. Anchoring bias. Distributive versus procedural theories of fairness.

It is near-universal student folklore that accounting and finance are where the hard work happens. Accounting majors write cash-flow statements and conduct audits. Finance majors learn how to design investment portfolios and (one hopes) how not to destroy the global economy with [collateralized debt obligations](#).

For a career-oriented major, management strikes many business educators as too theoretical and amorphous — a potpourri of psychology, economics, game theory, ethics and international relations.

Walk down the hall from Ms. Berry's classroom to Ohio's equity-management club, which is dominated by finance majors, and you'll hear complaints that management courses are irrelevant to the real world. One recent class asked groups to write short papers on the theories of leadership exemplified in the movie "Apollo 13."

Ohio's business dean, Hugh Sherman, says that some of the most important learning in his program happens outside the classroom. The equity-management club oversees more than a million dollars of university investments. The business school's best marketing students are invited to join a sales team that competes nationally. Both clubs engage students for many hours each week, with no course credit involved. Dr. Sherman concedes, however, that some students go through his business school without such experiences. In particular, it has been hard to devise projects for management majors. Partly for that reason, Ohio's business school has begun to strongly encourage management students to double-major in a field with more currency in the job market, like finance or information systems.

Some believe it is a mistake to fetishize job preparation and the "rigor" of fields like accounting and finance. Those departments might demand more hours from their students, but they don't necessarily provide well-rounded educations, says Henry Mintzberg, a professor at [McGill University](#) in Montreal who is a dogged critic of traditional business programs. He says it is a "travesty" to offer vocational fields like finance or marketing to 18-year-olds. Instead, he supports a humanistic, multidisciplinary model of management education. The diversity of

topics reflected on Adrianna Berry's cheat sheet is a feature, not a bug, he says.

"The object of undergraduate business education is to educate people, not to give them a lot of functional business stuff."

A coming report from the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching praises 10 American colleges of business as models for integrating the liberal arts and practical training.

One of the institutions praised is Babson College, a business school in Massachusetts. Its president, Leonard A. Schlesinger, says that concrete business skills tend to expire in five years or so as technology and organizations change. History and philosophy, on the other hand, provide the kind of contextual knowledge and reasoning skills that are indispensable for business students.

"If we didn't provide that kind of timeless knowledge to our students, we would be providing a seriously inadequate education," Dr. Schlesinger says. At the same time, Babson requires an ambitious practicum experience. In groups of 30, first-year Babson students plan and create actual small businesses, with real money at stake. Last spring's businesses sold flip-flops, speakers and chocolates. Any profits at the end of the year are donated to charity.

"We take student teams through the entire cycle from idea creation to business creation to business dissolution," Dr. Schlesinger says. "For some students, they confront all sorts of things about their interactions with others and about themselves. They learn things that shape the way they attack the world when they get out of here."

In the [University of Virginia's](#) business school, which is often ranked in the top five, students spend the entire junior year in integrated, team-taught courses with as many as three instructors in the classroom at once.

On a recent morning, a strategy professor led 40 students through a case study of the missteps that led to Arthur Andersen's debacles a decade ago with [Enron](#) and WorldCom. When it came time to discuss the details of the accounting fraud, she handed the baton to a colleague who is an accounting professor.

The students in the room know they'll be grilled on each day's case study. And when they hand in papers, they're marked up twice: once for content by a professor with specialized expertise, and once for writing quality by a business-communication professor.

Most business schools can only look on with envy. Virginia's integrated course system is possible because the business school is swimming in money, thanks in part to a series of corporate sponsorships (the first page of this course's syllabus carries a Rolls-Royce logo). But even with abundant resources, it was a challenge to persuade faculty members to do team teaching, according to the dean, Carl P. Zeithaml. Few instructors wanted to lose control of their syllabuses or lectures. Only after a trial period did the full faculty approve the design.

Many schools are groping their way toward experiments like those at Virginia and Babson,

prodded in part by new accreditation requirements. Since 2003, the more prestigious business accreditor, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, has expected departments to set learning objectives and to adjust their curriculums to help students reach them. But the association has given colleges broad latitude to define and measure objectives, which are often vague (Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, for one, has chosen this management-concept goal: “Students will be able to understand the complexities of decision making”).

To Dr. Mason of North Florida, such efforts are also fighting upstream against the tendency to dumb down courses. Along with two colleagues, he developed a game-theory model of the “market” for courses. The model predicts that, over time, courses will inexorably become easier as students (even the conscientious ones) choose courses where they can expect higher grades, and professors (even the most dedicated) turn to strategies that they expect will improve their student evaluations.

It’s a simplified model — it assumes students are motivated only by grades and instructors by evaluations. But Dr. Mason believes it offers a fair approximation of reality. In a 2003 paper in the *Economics of Education Review*, he buttressed that model with a national survey of 259 business professors who had been teaching for at least 10 years. On average, respondents said they had reduced the math and analytic-thinking requirements in their courses. In exchange, they had increased the number of requirements related to computer skills and group presentations.

Dr. Mason says that without some kind of hard constraint — like the licensure tests that accounting and finance students must face — courses inexorably become less rigorous.

And what about employers? What do they want?

According to national surveys, they want to hire 22-year-olds who can write coherently, think creatively and analyze quantitative data, and they’re perfectly happy to hire English or biology majors. Most [Ivy League](#) universities and elite liberal arts colleges, in fact, don’t even offer undergraduate business majors.

J. David Hunger, the St. John’s fellow, wrote a monograph about the travails of undergraduate business education back in 1978. He has never quite resolved his ambivalent feelings about the field. “At some times in my life, I’ve argued that we don’t really need a business major,” he says.

That’s not to suggest that Dr. Hunger isn’t gung-ho about business education. “We should have a business minor that would be offered to everybody, or even required,” he says. “But I realize now that that’s not going to happen. Students are demanding these majors, and we have to learn how to do them right.”