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A Refutation to the Objections of Business and Vocational Subjects in the Secondary School Curriculum

By

Mildred W. Glover

Business educators have been under pressure to validate the need for business education in our schools for some time. The launching of Sputnik I in 1957 has given impetus to the critics and all evidence points to the fact that today, more than ever before, the business teacher must be prepared to defend his point of view. At the present time the majority of secondary schools accept shorthand and vocational subjects as part of their curriculum. The question is to what degree they will continue to be part of the curriculum. This will depend largely upon the business educators' awareness of the objections raised against vocational subjects and their ability to refute them.

S. J. Wanous, in an article, "Let's Break the 'Egghead' Stranglehold on Business Education," outlines many of the criticisms of business education and reminds the reader of the basic issues. He indicates that one of the more commonly raised criticisms against vocational courses is that they "rob students of the chance to take academic courses."¹ Business courses are labeled as easy and are criticized for training students for specific jobs rather than providing a wealth of experiences that result in a general education. Wanous also mentioned Vice-Admiral Rickover's charge that "European education is superior to ours." Rickover implies that our inferiority results primarily because American secondary schools provide vocational education while European schools do not.²

The charges that Wanous mentions are few when viewed in terms of the total number of criticisms which have been directed towards the business curriculum. The question is also issued—why continue to teach shorthand when dictating machines are taking the place of stenographers? Business students are labeled as incompetent in their subject matter fields. Business education teachers are criticized because they often lack business experience. The business education programs has even been questioned as to whether or not it lives up to the seven cardinal principles.³

There are many reasons why business education is being criticized. One reason is, undoubtedly, fear. Louis A. Leslie commented re-

¹S. J. Wanous, "Let's Break the 'Egghead' Stranglehold on Business Education," *The Balance Sheet*, November, 1960. p. 286.

²*Ibid.*

³Arthelia V. Alexander, "Business Education and the Seven Cardinal Principles," *The Balance Sheet*, January, 1961, p. 335.

cently that "People in the academic studies are afraid of business education's current popularity and therefore make charges against it." In any event, regardless of what the motives may be, the critics are not only doing a fine job of forcing business educators to defend their position but they are rapidly spreading the news that the best preparation for college entrance or for a career is an academic education. Articles in newspapers and the more popular periodicals have given many parents the impression that if their children specialize in business courses they will not gain admission into college. As a result, many students taking college entrance courses are doing so as an insurance policy in the event they wish to attend a college.

Lloyd V. Douglas has remarked:

Pressures of today's college entrance exams are causing parents to insist that their sons and daughters load up with the academic subjects in hopes they may thereby be enabled to gain admission to college at a later date.⁴

It is important to note that many guidance directors and administrators in the high schools are unaware of the importance of vocational education and consequently channel students into the academic courses. Douglas further reports:

Many business teachers have reported that their classes were officially closed after one section was filled. Why? In order to force students to fill up newly added science, math, and foreign language classes.⁵

Not to be overlooked is the increase in the selectivity of the admissions policies and procedures of the colleges as a result of the increase in population. Many colleges are leaning in favor of such academic requirements an English 4 units, social studies 4 units, science 3 units, mathematics 3 units, foreign language 3 units. Tonne points out that:

With the increase in enrollment in colleges in the 1960's it is likely that most, if not almost all, colleges will increase the number of academic units required for entrance to such an extent that at best 3 or 4 units, and in many cases not more than 1 or 2 units of business subjects and other courses labeled as nonacademic can be offered.⁶

It is evident that the criticisms, claims, opinions and objections of the critics as well as the upgrading of college admission requirements can not be ignored. Business educators must recognize the objections to business and vocational education and analyze them in an attempt to sell their program if they are to maintain their place in the curriculum.

It is with the spirit of supporting the program of business education that this report is compiled which attempts to analyze and to

⁴Lloyd V. Douglas, "Today's Educational Tragedy," *The Balance Sheet*, May, 1962, p. 463.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Herbert A. Tonne, *Principles of Business Education*, 3rd Edition, p. 43.

answer the objections to business and vocational education subjects in the curriculum of the secondary school.

Objections and Refutations

European Education is Superior to Ours. This Difference can be Laid to the Fact that We Provide Opportunities in Vocational Education for Our Youth, European Schools Do Not.

Wanous visited schools in seven European countries and found that meager programs were offered. Textbooks were out of date and poorly written. Arthur W. Foshay of Teachers College, Columbia University reported that he found that French schools have degenerated into institutions of memory and that facts are not related to French national life.⁷

According to Douglas, approximately one-fifth of all men graduating from college have a major emphasis in some phase of business. Should colleges be forced to lower their standards in business courses since more students come with less background in their major field of business? If the high schools do not provide opportunities in vocational education, they will deprive college bound students of needed background in American business and doom large numbers of students to certain educational death in a narrow-track academic bias gorge—a gorge based on an out-moded concept of mental discipline and a disproven assumption that there is only one kind of intelligence.

Since Krushchev and his minions fired their first Sputnik into the wide open spaces, American educators and the general public have been agog to find out what is wrong with the American educational system. With the increased emphasis on science, mathematics and engineering, more and more high school students have been guided into those fields, and the high school business educators are complaining of poor quality of students who are left to take business courses.

Scientists, mathematicians, and engineers could not function if they did not have skilled technicians to assist them—including the stenographer, the secretary, and the typist. It is certain, too, that the scientist must have his work recorded and duplicated, therefore, without an efficient person to perform these duties for him, he could not complete his work quickly and efficiently.

Forkner points out that the attack in deficiency is made on the United States secondary schools, but no one took the trouble to point out that graduate education in the European countries is very different from graduate education in the United States. Nor did anyone take the trouble to point out that whenever the European countries get into difficulties, whether it be economic, need of war materials, need of manpower, they usually call on men who have been educated in American schools.⁸

⁷Wanous, *op. cit.*, p. 298.

⁸Hamden L. Forkner, "Sanity and Balance in Business Education," *The Balance Sheet*, December, 1959, p. 171.

Forkner further states that anyone who has made a study of business operations and procedures in Western Europe or in Latin America knows that the rate of production in these offices and industrial plants is far below that of the United States. The European or Latin American young person does not have an opportunity to explore his interests or abilities in the field of business because he is forced to follow the curriculum our critics would have us adopt.⁹

Every thinking person knows that the discoveries of the scientist and the mathematician are of little use unless such discoveries are backed up by able business and industry, and know-how.

If the struggle in the world today were only a military one, business educators might have more sympathy for the kind of program of education that would be devoted entirely to scientific and mathematical skills. It is concerned also with economic factors.

Best Preparation for a Career is Liberal Education —

The Basic Intellectual Discipline.

Wanous refers to C. Easton Rothwell, President of Mills College, who states that liberal education, as opposed to technical and business degrees, lays the basis for sound judgments about the affairs of industry and that business prefers the liberal arts graduate. Wanous emphasizes that a businessman will not employ as a secretary someone who has had a course in Ancient Aramaic in preference to someone who has had a course in typewriting or shorthand. A liberal arts course does not prepare a student for a career in business.¹⁰

Refuting the statement that the best preparation for a career is a liberal education, reference may be made to Alexander's article to show that the Seven Cardinal Principles of Education are involved in the business education program. The Seven Cardinal Principles are: 1) health; 2) command of fundamental processes; 3) worthy home membership; 4) vocation; 5) civic education; 6) worthy use of leisure; and 7) ethical character.

Physical and mental health are both necessary in business education because a person cannot maintain his emphases upon dependability, punctuality, and alertness if he is ill. A major contribution of business education to the physical health of its devotees is its emphasis upon good posture, good grooming and personal appearance. Since these characteristics give one a feeling of security and of personal worth, they also contribute to mental health.

The second greatest service rendered by business education is in the home. By creating an appreciation of the bases of our economy in the minds of citizens, it is possible for them to enjoy a better standard of living through budgeting, bargain spending, and profitable investments.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 173.

¹⁰Wanous, *op. cit.*, p. 300.

Reading, speaking and writing, and arithmetic have long been recognized as the basic tools of learning. Reading, for example, may be defined as the consumption and correct interpretation of the material at hand. Business educators say that the individual must be able to read, and think intelligently, to follow directions, and to express ideas accurately in written or oral English. Through writing and speaking, we communicate to sell our products and maintain goodwill. Business education emphasizes diction, spelling, and power of expression in such courses as business English and expository writing.

Because figures are an integral part of our economy, business education has contributed by offering basic courses in mathematics, accounting, and statistics.

Business education helps a student find himself. It enables a worker to recognize opportunities, thus aiding his advancement. If one can recognize his abilities and establish goal on the basis of these abilities, he is likely to succeed. Because business education offers a wide variety of careers, it can reach and serve more students despite varied backgrounds.

Through such courses as business law, economics, and business organizations, business education contributes to civic education. Business education attempts to help the citizen understand the social and economic structure of his society.

A method of utilizing leisure time presents itself in the opportunity to attend business meetings and conferences. Leisure time may be spent in self-improvement which may consist of formal study, inspecting new equipment or visiting institutions for observation.

Business education advocates development of the whole individual. Within the business organization ethical character promotes pleasant and productive work relations among the employees. Thoughtfulness and consideration for the interests and likes of others are very fundamental in business as well as in social life.¹¹

After reviewing these Seven Cardinal Principles, no thinking critic could challenge or deny the fact that vocational or business education is a thorough preparation for a career.

Business and Vocational Courses are too Easy; They Lack Challenge.

Do business courses lack intellectual challenge? Are they easy? Do students take them primarily to avoid the tougher basic intellectual disciplines? Wanous feels that the liberal arts courses are the softest. He states that in many liberal arts courses, learning standards are low. Students listen to dull lectures on topics that have little or no pertinence. They memorize specific information which they are eager to forget upon completion of the course. Vocational subjects require

¹¹Alexander, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

day-to-day learning and mastery. Students must learn, retain, and use.¹²

It is often said that business courses attract inferior students. The deciding factor many times is an economic one. The student, regardless of his intellectual ability, enrolls in the business course for "bread-and-butter reasons." Where only an academic and a commercial program are offered, the former usually attracts the superior students. In some cases, students faced with academic and commercial programs choose the commercial program, not so much for its job training value as for its close relationship to contemporary life. But, where academic, business, industrial arts, and general curricula are offered, the business students are, as a rule, superior to the general students. A specialized program usually has specific requirements; hence, its attractiveness to the better students. The poorer students choose the general courses which thus become a catchall.¹³

Office Automation May Eventually Take the Place of Stenographers and Other Office Workers.

Widdoes states that automation will not replace office workers. From studies on organizations using automation, machines do not put people out of work, on the contrary, they put more people to work by creating more jobs.

For example, 60 years ago, few offices were equipped with the typewriter, a new invention at that time. Today, the smallest office has at least one typewriter, usually electric. Other machines such as the adding machine, desk calculator, and accounting machine were not invented 60 years ago. Now, this equipment is considered basic in offices. Invention of these machines made jobs for more office workers.¹⁴

Office workers today comprise about one out of every seven workers of the total labor force of this nation. This is a marked change from 1940 when the proportion was one out of every ten workers. Although this rate of increase is slowing down, clerical employment is still increasing faster than the work force as a whole.

In a study of 545 stenographers in 397 offices in Decatur, Illinois, Robinson found that 80.9 per cent of them took dictation in shorthand and that dictating machines were used in 6.9 per cent of the offices. The larger organizations using the dictating machines employed 18.5 per cent of the stenographers included in the study.¹⁵

Automation has been slowly appearing in business offices ever since 1931, but it was not realized until the production boom of World War II. Shortage of clerical workers, the need for increased

¹²Wanous, *op. cit.*, p. 301.

¹³Tonne, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

¹⁴H. V. Widdoes, "The Significance of Automation," *Business Education World*, September, 1965, Vol. 36, No. 1.

¹⁵Tonne, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

office efficiency, and the demand for up-to-the minute financial information caused businessmen to explore the possibilities offered by automation.¹⁶

The amount of labor displacement in office work is lessened by the high rate of turnover among clerical workers, many of whom drop out of their jobs after a short spell of employment to get married or to concentrate on their domestic obligations.

Vocational Courses Rob Students of the Chance to Take Academic Courses.

Business subjects are not required in secondary schools; students take them because they want to learn something useful. Even those who major in business do not take more than 25 to 30 per cent of their course work in this field. The rest is taken in basic intellectual disciplines. All students must take four years of English and at least one course in United States history. Most students take two years of mathematics.

Business education need not, and must not interfere with basic education, nor does it need to act as a deterrent to those desiring advanced education. With a slight modification of present offerings, it is possible for enrollees in business education to secure academic requirements without greatly hampering the development of occupational proficiencies in either stenographic, bookkeeping, or clerical areas.¹⁷

The false emphasis placed on continued formal schooling have two unfortunate consequences. It exerts pressure on the student to continue his schooling whether or not he has any taste or aptitude for it. It is harmful to him; it is always costly to society; and it leads to make-believe education.

The right of America's academically talented youth to choose vocational interests is inherent in a democracy. There is a tendency for the over zealous to use grave indiscretion in directing students regardless of interest, financial status or vocational goals. A bright girl may not want to go to college, but rather into a business office. Should she be denied this privilege? An able young man may not have the money to go to college. Should he be denied the chance to prepare for a business career? Just as the professions need bright and ambitious people, so does the business office.¹⁸

Vocational Education Trains Students for Specific Jobs. It Does Not Educate Them to Use Their Minds.

Competencies developed in business courses are basic to dozens of occupations and career goals. These courses do not prepare students

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁷Wanous, *op. cit.*, p. 302.

¹⁸*Ibid.*

for Job A in Company B and that if they do not get Job A in Company B, the schooling they received would be lost. Business educators cannot afford to send students into business employment with the meager backgrounds in their subject fields that they often get in liberal arts subjects. Along with skills and understandings, students of business must develop strong work habits. Students must be able to comprehend the nature of a wide variety and complexity of business problems. They must also be educated to apply skills and understandings to the solutions of these problems.¹⁹

Conclusion

Students today are practical about their future. The desire for family life and adjustment to it is even more predominant than it was years ago. A liberal education is only liberal if it includes provision for earning a living. At the present time and for the last two decades, it has been rather easy for graduates to get some kind of job without preparation of any kind. However, those who have supplemented liberal education with job training usually have secured better jobs, and as a consequence, have been able to make better use of their liberal education.

Competent job skill learning is the other side of the coin of liberal arts education. Both sides are needed to make the currency of education useful.²⁰

To the business educator, there is more to business education than the teaching of shorthand, typewriting, and bookkeeping. This field of study is concerned first with the over-all improvement of men and women and then with preparing them for jobs in the business world. The following statement places even more emphasis on this responsibility.

The challenge facing every teacher of business is to impart specialized knowledge, and to train students in particular skills. This should be done while developing mature intelligence, directing judgment, exercising the memory, and training the student in the arts of observation, reflection, and reasoning. As business teachers, we undertake a responsibility to teach many students how to make a living, but we must teach all students how to live.²¹

¹⁹*Ibid.*

²⁰Herbert A. Tonne, "How Liberal is "Liberal" If You Can't Earn a Living," *The Balance Sheet*, December, 1960. p. 173.

²¹Leo V. Ryan, "Business Teachers Must Be Dedicated," *The Balance Sheet*, May, 1961. pp. 383, 388.