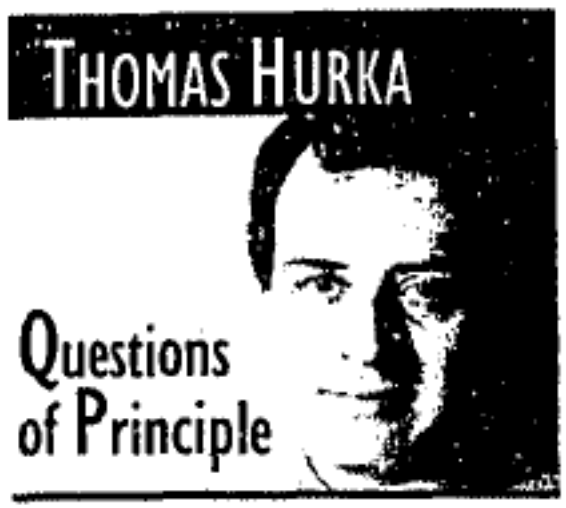
How to get to the top — study philosophy

CALGARY



HOW SHOULD Canada educate students to compete successfully in the business world? Some provincial governments think it is by teaching them business.

The Alberta government has announced plans for an "unprecedented" expansion of business education at its three universities. Already, 120 extra students are studying management at the University of Calgary.

Recent evidence suggests this approach is mistaken. We will produce better managers if we educate them first in traditional subjects in the arts and sciences. We may do best of all if we educate them in philosophy.

Each year, thousands of undergraduates write admissions tests for the prestigious graduate programs. There's the Law School Admissions Test (LSAT), the Graduate Management Admission Test (GMAT) for business study, and the Graduate Record Examination (GRE) for other fields. A 1985 study for the U.S. Department of Education compared tests of students from different disciplines, with surprising results.

Consider the GMAT, used for admission to MBA programs and, ultimately, to the highest levels of management. Undergraduate business students, whom you would think would be especially well prepared for this test, do badly on it, scoring below average for all test takers. The best results are by math students, followed by philosophy students and engineers.

This is typical. Business students score below average on almost all the tests, as do, excepting engineers, all other students in applied or occupational fields. The best results come from students in the natural sciences and humanities. The study concludes that, on tests measuring aptitude for advanced professional study, "undergraduates who major in professional and occupational fields consistently underperform those who major in traditional arts and science fields."

The most consistent performers are philosophy students. They are first out of 28 disciplines on one test, second on another, and third on a third. On their weakest test they are still 4.6 per cent above the average, the best performance on a weakest test of any group.

Although data here are less consistent, the superior performance of arts and science students continues after university. According to a book by sociologist Michael Useem, they have more difficulty finding beginning managerial jobs than those with business or professional degrees because they lack specific skills in finance or engineering. When they are hired, it is usually lower in the company hierarchy. Once hired, however, they advance more rapidly than their colleagues.

On average, arts and science graduates end their careers level with business and engineering graduates, having closed the gap. In some companies with less of an engineering or MBA "culture," they pass them. An AT&T study showed that, after 20 years with the company, 43 per cent of liberal-arts graduates had reached upper-middle management, compared with 32 per cent of business majors and 23 per cent of engineers. The Chase Manhattan Bank found that 60 per cent of its worst managers had MBAs while 60 per cent of its best managers had BAs. At IBM, nine of the company's top 13 executives had liberal-arts degrees.

What explains the success of arts and science students? Many arguments for liberal education cite a contemporary cliché — that we live in a time of unprecedented change. If the world is in flux, an applied education will soon be out of date. Better the breadth and flexibility given by general studies.

A better explanation points to what cannot change: the basic elements of reasoning and problem-solving. The study of admissions tests found that students do best "who major in a field characterized by formal thought, structural relationships, abstract models, symbolic languages, and deductive reasoning." The more abstract a subject, the more it develops pure reasoning skills; and the stronger a person's reasoning skills, the better he or she will do in any applied field.

This fits the data from business. Corporations report that, though technical skills are most important in low-level managerial jobs, they become less so in middle and top jobs, where the key traits include communications skills, the ability to formulate problems, and reasoning. Liberal-arts education may be weak in the prerequisites for beginning managerial jobs, but provides just what's needed for success at the top.

This doesn't mean there's no place for business education. Canadian industry needs specialized business skills, and our universities should supply them. But in the increasingly competitive world economy there will be a premium on vision, creativity and analytical power, traits better fostered by liberal education.

This points to the recommendation now heard most from chief executive officers: first an arts and science degree in a field like English, physics, or philosophy, then an MBA. First some general intellectual skills, then the specific knowledge needed to apply them in business.

So to train successful business leaders, Canada should strengthen education in the arts and sciences. And this will have another effect. Students educated in the liberal arts will be better rounded individuals, knowing more of the natural world or the history of their culture, and better at reasoning about morality and politics. At the very least, a nice side-effect.

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