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## A subjective personal introspective essay on the evolution of business schools, the fate of marketing education, and aspirations toward a great society

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### ABSTRACT

This essay pursues an approach that I call Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI) to comment on my own impressions concerning my experiences over the past fifty-plus years at one of our leading graduate schools of business. Herein, I trace my progress from MBA candidate to doctoral student to faculty member to retiree by suggesting ways in which – from my admittedly idiosyncratic perspective – business education has devolved toward a lower level of academic excellence, an abandonment of scholarly values, an unfortunate anti-intellectualism, a neglect of its commitment to the advancement of business- or marketing-related knowledge for its own sake, and a betrayal of its responsibility to work toward the protection of social welfare. Though the situation seems a bit hopeless, I offer a few modest suggestions for possible improvement.

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I am pleased and honored to receive an invitation to contribute my comments to this special issue of the *Australasian Marketing Journal (AMJ)* on marketing education. Using an approach that I refer to as Subjective Personal Introspection (SPI), I plan to report my private impressions concerning the ways in which the practice, habits, values, and goals of marketing-related MBA education have changed and, in my opinion, declined. I have noticed this over the past half-century during which I have participated in the business-school scene. I hope that my long involvement in the world of business teaching and marketing instruction qualifies me to offer my reflections in ways that might be of interest to readers of *AMJ*.

Before continuing, I should point out that I love my school – Columbia University in general and its Graduate School of Business in particular. For over fifty years, I have been fortunate, privileged, and indeed blessed to attend and serve this great institution – as an MBA candidate, a doctoral student, a junior faculty member, a senior professor, and an emeritus retiree. Throughout, the school

has treated me with a kindness and generosity for which I am truly grateful. But, despite or even because of this, Columbia is the school I know best and, therefore, the one I must often use as an example to illustrate what I perceive as difficulties in our educational system. I mean no disrespect to the fine institution where I have studied and taught for most of my life. Rather, I see it as my duty to share my observations in ways that might conceivably encourage others to make much-needed improvements to benefit us all.

When I completed my undergraduate years as an English major at Harvard in 1965, I realized that I would need to find some profession more lucrative than writing poetry in order to support myself in the manner to which I hoped to become accustomed. This implied an imperative for me to seek some sort of career-enhancing program of graduate study. I thought about continuing in English Literature or switching to my other avocation, music. But the courses I had taken in these subjects during my crushingly difficult college years had seized upon things that I had once loved – books and musical performances – and, through an excess of mind-numbing pedantry, had spoiled them for me. Fortunately, my love of books and music eventually reawakened in the fullness of time. But meanwhile, to prevent such spoilage in the future, I decided to find an area of study devoted to a topic that could not be ruined for me because I already hated it. This quest led me straight to the field of business.

Despite my inveterate distaste for the capitalist ethos, I understood that I needed to work at something; that the reason they

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call it work is that you don't enjoy it; and that business was far from something I might enjoy as I could imagine. So I applied to the Harvard Business School (HBS) (located right across the Charles River and visible from my window in Dunster House), Columbia University's Graduate School of Business (CUGSB), and another couple of schools, just for the fun of it. My beloved bride-to-be Sally had already spent one year in Columbia's Master of Social Work program. We were scheduled to be married on August 14, 1965, one week before the fateful deadline that Lynden Johnson later set for marriage-related exemptions. So we made a deal that in retrospect, from a feminist viewpoint, seems rather preposterous. Specifically, we agreed that if I was accepted at HBS, Sally would move with me to Boston; whereas if I was accepted at CUGSB but not HBS, I would move to New York City to be with Sally at Columbia.

Foolishly, I felt fairly confident of acceptance at HBS because my grades at Harvard College had been pretty good. But my alma mater quickly disabused me of any such unwarranted optimism by rejecting my application on the grounds that I lacked real-world experience. They recommended that I could gain the required maturity by joining the US Army. This helpful advice descended upon me in the spring of 1965 at the time of the military buildup in Vietnam, and I greeted it with a lack of appreciation that I still feel to the present day. Suffice it to say that this episode left me with a hearty dislike for real-world experience and, I must confess, a deep-seated hatred of the Harvard Business School. I shall pursue this theme again later when I discuss my opinions concerning the deficiencies of the much-touted but woefully over-rated Harvard Case Method.

So I entered the MBA program at what we then called Columbia University's Graduate School of Business (CUGSB) and, somewhat to my surprise, found it to be a warm and caring place. The administrators were nurturing; the professors were accessible and supportive; and my fellow MBA candidates were friendly, thoughtful, and intellectually curious. We wore coats and ties to class, and we treated our professors with the respect they deserved. I could not have imagined calling a professor by his first name. Nor could I have imagined coming to class in a tank top, blue jeans, and sandals. And, yes, the clearly masculine references in the last couple of sentences are intentional and even politically correct because in those days, not counting secretaries and a few administrative staff members, there was not one single woman to be found within the walls of Uris Hall where CUGSB had its home. There were also no people of color, no Latinos, and no international students to speak of. In short, the place – like many or most other American business schools at the time – was as homogeneous in terms of gender and ethnicity as you might imagine. (I do not have statistics to support this assertion, but that's how I remember it from the vantage point of SPI, and I do not fear that the detailed data would contradict me.)

All this changed, of course, over time. Soon after I arrived, the school hired its first female professor: Margaret Chandler, a distinguished sociologist with a specialty in union-related issues. Today the school prides itself on its inclusiveness in recruiting and admitting women, members of all ethnic groups, and a huge diversity of students from all around the world. But, in 1965, it was just us white guys.

To my delight, the courses I encountered when I arrived at Columbia – when compared to my ordeal as an undergraduate in English at Harvard – seemed interesting, full of new information, and (surprisingly) not too difficult. Our professors showed concerns with issues of real intellectual import, and I was constantly challenged to think about questions and problems that had never crossed my mind. Indeed, I found myself in a climate of real scholarly excitement about the study of business, and I began to regard this study as an academic endeavor worth pursuing for its own

sake. In that light, I found a special resonance in a passage from Alfred North Whitehead that was engraved on the wall of Uris Hall just outside its main entrance: "A great society is a society in which its men of business think greatly of their functions." This slogan implied a vision of CUGSB's purpose as one of contributing to social welfare in ways that would benefit a wide variety of stakeholders – owners, managers, employees, suppliers, customers, other members of the surrounding community, and the environment at large. I eagerly bought into that kind of idealism in ways that, to my dismay, would be challenged in the years to come.

I decided to concentrate in the area of marketing, and very quickly encountered some marvelous teachers in that field of study: Al Oxenfeldt, a well-trained economist with a delightfully acerbic sense of humor; Abe Shuchman, a master of statistical analysis with a deep irreverence toward excessive pedantry; Charles Ramond, a psychologist who served with distinction as Editor of the *Journal of Advertising Research*; and especially John A. Howard. Working with his former doctoral student at the University of Pittsburgh, Jagdish Sheth (then a young faculty member at Columbia), Professor Howard taught the course on Buyer Behavior while he and Sheth worked feverishly to complete the creation of their masterpiece on that topic: *The Theory of Buyer Behavior* (1969). John (whom I did not call by his first name for another twenty-five years or so) would walk into every class meeting with his arms full of mimeographed copies of their latest chapter (this being before the days of Xerox machines). We the students would devour these stimulating documents and would then participate in rivetingly intense discussions about various subtleties of interest. For example, does confidence mediate the effect of affect on purchase intention, or does confidence moderate the relationship between affect and purchase intention? John believed the former, I the latter. And we never could agree – as late as 1994, when I helped with revisions to John's textbook, we were still debating this point. As a teacher, no one could have been more open to the ideas of others than John. Indeed, in my own case, he generously went far beyond the call of duty – hiring me as a research assistant for two summers; after I received my MBA, shepherding me into the Ph.D. program where I studied with him for another eight years; and, ultimately, giving me a job on the CUGSB faculty in 1975, where I remained until I retired in 2009, almost thirty-five years later. (I indelibly remember the phone call I got from John right after my first year in the MBA program at CUGSB. I was indolently lounging on the beach at a lake near Charlottesville, Virginia. John somehow got wind of the sad fact that I did not have a summer job. So, via persistent calls to my parents in Milwaukee, he managed to track me down in the wilderness and offered me a position as his research assistant on what became the famous Post Instant Breakfast study. These acts of kindness, generosity, and even mercy continued for the rest of our time together, up until he passed away in 1999, three and a half decades after we had first met (Holbrook, 1989; 1998; 2001))

It should be clear from what I have said thus far that my CUGSB professors in general and John Howard in particular were, in every sense, "full service" education providers. They felt excited about the intellectual content of business and marketing studies; they regarded their areas of expertise as real academic specialties; and they encouraged the efforts of any student who shared their interest in research-related methods and topics. They preached and practiced the virtues of scholarly investigation, and they supported the efforts of those who, like yours truly, wanted to follow in their footsteps.

During my first few years on the CUGSB faculty, starting in 1975, I keenly felt the oft-acknowledged pressure to "publish or perish." But the School facilitated my task of publishing frequently by letting me teach the same course over and over – the Introduction to Marketing Strategy, which I taught four times a year

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