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*Crises and Collective Purpose: Distraction or Liberation?*¹

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As our colleagues who study management have shown, purpose serves as the bedrock upon which well-aligned organizations rest. Using a less static metaphor, why we exist helps us understand how we should move forward. Typically, an organization's purpose is institution-specific, but COVID-19 and other sustained national and global crises give rise to a sense of *collective* purpose. For the COVID-19 crisis, this collective purpose could be expressed as "Flatten the curve" or, in the UK, "Save lives and protect the NHS." This collective purpose bears no resemblance to our pre-COVID-19 individual senses of organizational purpose.

COVID-19 and its aftermath have tested leaders of all institutions, including business schools. Faced with a massive, externally imposed crisis, how do we prioritize our activities? What do we stop or start doing? The answers to these questions reflect our organizations' sense of individual purpose, as influenced by the broader collective purpose. Sustained existential crises allow us to understand the interplay between collective and individual purpose and the organizational implications of internalizing an externally set collective purpose. Are external crises, and the collective sense of purpose they engender, a force to liberate institutions like ours or are they a distraction?

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Were the purposes of business schools solely defined by our customary activities – teaching and research – an external shock like COVID-19 would be a distraction. We would simply move all of our activities online, from teaching to research to professional services, in order to “keep the show on the road.” We would feel no need to change what we teach or whom we teach.

But if we strongly adopt the collective, higher purpose – to vanquish COVID-19 and the associated public health, economic, and social ills it has surfaced – might we be led to a completely different direction, as our colleagues in Oxford’s vaccine labs have shown? Might we rethink not just how we teach but the content of our curricula, the composition of our student bodies, and how we measure success?

Going beyond COVID-19, the call to “build back better” reflects the judgment that prepandemic “normal” was not ideal and that we need to come out of lockdowns creating new approaches for business to deal with the urgent global problems of social, economic, and national fissures; racial inequality; looming public health crises; and perhaps most importantly, an existential climate crisis. If we internalize these longer-term collective purposes, we might set ourselves an ambitious agenda and, in the process, fundamentally transform ourselves, changing what, who, and why we teach and research.

As a scholar, I know the value of learning from history, not to slavishly repeat the experiences from decades ago but rather to learn from how educational leaders reacted to massive external shocks that gave rise to a sense of collective purpose. Given the relatively short history of business education, there are a number of fruitful periods for studying how business schools navigated between individual and collective purpose in the face of sustained global crises. In the twentieth century, these would include World War I, the Great Depression of the 1930s, and World War II. In this chapter, I examine how business schools behaved – and therefore displayed their purposes – in the most recent of these events, World War II.

In World War II, business school deans found themselves in a changed world: the world became much less certain and predictable; international mobility was restricted; students and faculty were either unwilling or unable to study or teach due to the draft; the student experience was compromised relative to “normal” times; financial budgets were under pressure from falling student numbers due to the draft; typical metrics such as career outcomes of graduates seemed out

of place; and top-down university edicts were more frequent and consequential. As the war was coming to an end, the situation was completely different – economies and societies needed to rebuild peacetime economies and absorb hundreds of thousands of returning veterans. In the first half of the 1940s, the collective purpose was “Win the war,” a call that was jarring to the more genteel activities of teaching and research – much like “Flatten the curve.” In the second half of the decade, “Win the peace” was a more familiar call to action for business schools but still as challenging as “Build back better.”

What paths did different schools take when the gap widened between the external mandate of winning wars and their traditional roles of teaching and research? Did they insulate themselves as much as possible from the requirements of the war, or did they fully internalize this externally imposed purpose? If the latter, what were the implications? In this chapter, I look at five leading US business schools in the 1940s and study how they reacted to World War II. How, if at all, did wartime – and the collective purpose of “winning the war” – change what and how they taught and how they conducted research, organized themselves, presented themselves, and made decisions? Can we learn anything from our predecessors from eight decades ago that might help us to better lead our institutions as our societies and economies face our generation’s crises?

Identifying Purpose

Words and deeds provide cues to understand how an organization sees its purpose and, in this case, how an organization might internalize a collective purpose. We could examine how the leaders, staff, and employees speak about their work to gauge changes in their conceptions of their purpose. For example, consider how firms are dealing with issues of climate change. Some researchers are studying how organizations are adopting climate-related language in their outward-facing communications. Or we could look at their actions, say, in the form of changes in their carbon footprints.

For this work, I look at both words and deeds, using “modern” authorized histories to gauge how the schools understood and internalized the collective wartime imperative of winning the war. From the current day looking backward, are the war years referenced extensively and seen as critical to the development of the modern institution?

For most schools but one, the answer is a resounding no. Tellingly, as some recount their histories from the present, the war years hardly get any mention. Recognizing that this backward-looking approach may obscure the full impact of World War II on the schools, I contacted each of the current deans of the five schools profiled, asking for additional information that might not have been available in their official histories or current materials.

How can we compare the different ways that organizations internalize collective purpose – and react to crises? As a simple example, in our COVID-19 period, consider how a restaurant's actions might reveal the degree to which it adopts the collective purpose. The restaurant might try to ignore or deny the collective purpose, running business as usual, and shun mask wearing or social distancing. It might comply with externally imposed mandates but otherwise carry out business as usual. It might go a step further and make some changes to its menu to reflect lower likely in-person customers and greater takeout orders. Or it might make major changes to its activities – for example, reconfiguring part of the restaurant into a produce store, transforming itself into a dark kitchen for takeout only, or dramatically changing its menu and pricing – perhaps donating services – to help families suffering from the economic consequences of COVID.

More generally, organizations can react to crises that induce collective purposes in four different manners:

- *Denial*, in which the organization carries out its activities as usual by not taking any particular measures to take account of the crisis or the collective purpose
- *Compliance*, in which the organization obeys externally imposed rules and regulations but does not go further to change its activities
- *Reactive adaptation*, in which the organization goes beyond compliance to make minimal changes to its activities but leaves its core activities intact
- *Transformational adaptation*, in which the organization internalizes the collective purpose and radically changes its activities.

Reactions to World War II at Five Leading American Business Schools

In a related paper on which this chapter is based (Tufano, 2020), I study in depth five of the leading US business schools and their

reactions to World War II.² I look at American schools not because they were the earliest nor only business schools at the time but, rather, because the earlier continental European schools, largely under Nazi occupation, were often forced to make changes by their occupiers. Their American counterparts had more latitude and management authority to determine how vigorously to adopt the collective purpose of winning the war. The five that I studied – Wharton, Berkeley, Tuck, Chicago, and Harvard – were well established as of 1941, were clearly recognized as some of the leading schools of their time, and demonstrate a full range of responses.³

The schools' reactions ranged from simple compliance to reactive adaptation and, in one case, to transformational adaptation, but each story is rich, deserving of far more than a label. In the following sections, I briefly summarize the histories, and then I conclude with possible lessons for leaders of business schools today.

Compliance

In general, modern authorized histories of business schools spend little time discussing the war years, but even by these standards, some schools, such as Wharton, skip over the war years almost entirely. Stephen Sass's history of Wharton (Sass, 1982) suggests that the school endured rather than embraced the collective wartime purpose.

By way of background, during World War II, 50 million American men aged 18–45 were registered for the draft, and 10 million were called into military service (National WWII Museum, New Orleans, n. d.). At the time, business school faculties and students were primarily men, and all students and many faculty were of draft age. Drafts would thus decimate student and faculty numbers at all schools. For example,

² Other early American business schools include those at Northwestern University (School of Commerce founded in 1908, now Kellogg), Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT; originally Engineering Administration in 1914, now Sloan), Babson College (1919), Indiana University (School of Commerce and Finance in 1920, now Kelley), and Stanford Graduate School of Business (1925). The UK business school sector and many of the modern elite European business schools were postwar innovations – for example, INSEAD (1957), IESE (1958), London Business School (1964), Cambridge Judge Business School (1991), and Saïd Business School–Oxford University (1996).

³ I also examined in less detail other schools (e.g., Columbia, New York University, MIT) whose wartime reactions are similar to the range discussed here.

at New York University (NYU), MBA enrollments fell from 1,196 in 1940–1941 to 1,001, 656, 707, and 1,013 in the 4 following years (Gitlow, 1995, p. 120).

Wharton would suffer a similar decline, as well as a hollowing out of its faculty who were drafted or volunteered. The official Wharton history, *The Pragmatic Imagination: A History of the Wharton School, 1881–1981*, written by Stephen A. Sass and published by the University of Pennsylvania Press in 1982, devotes only about 3 pages out of 342 to the war. The draft reduced student and faculty numbers:

Professors ... left the school's employ and found their way into a great variety of useful positions with the federal government. Wharton, in fact, all but adjourned for the duration of the conflict, and the number of its full time faculty, which had recently totalled 165, fell to 39 by 1944. (Sass, 1982, p. 226)

Those remaining, however, carried out business as usual: "The school continued to train large numbers of students in traditional business subjects, such as accounting, finance, and insurance, and professors and graduates in these areas also found themselves drafted into responsible positions during the war" (Sass, 1982, p. 228). The war seemed to be a pause, not an inflection point. In the immediate postwar period, the school picked up from before, as Sass summarizes: "But as the worlds of affairs and ideas rushed headlong into the future, the Wharton School *resumed its prewar routines*" (emphasis added; Sass, 1982, p. 233).

The scant mention of the war in Sass's (1982) history, and the description of "all but adjourning," teaching "traditional business subjects," and finally, "resuming its prewar activities," tells a consistent story about how Wharton endured the war and complied with the draft, rather than vigorously embracing the collective purpose of winning the war.

Reactive Adaptation: Doing Our Part, Innovating, and Advancing Peacetime Agendas

Although all schools complied with the draft, most went beyond this base level, joining the war effort more actively while still operating under business as usual, as much as possible. Tuck, Berkeley, and Chicago all reflect this approach, running reduced versions of their

undergraduate, MBA, and in one case, PhD programs while taking into account that many of their students and faculty members would be called up or would volunteer. They shortened undergraduate programs to allow men to go to war earlier and made minor adjustments to their curricula to enhance teaching on operations and logistics. All did their part, as part of broader university programs, to train officers. Two created innovations specifically aimed at addressing wartime management shortages that would long outlast the war and used wartime to press forward long-planned changes to their peacetime programs.

For example, at Berkeley, the draft reduced the number of undergraduate commerce students (the core business degree) by about a third, to approximately 1,000. The broader University of California system adopted various changes, including pass-fail grades, some refinements in curriculum, and rule changes permitting students to complete a 4-year undergraduate program in 2 years and 8 months (Epstein, 2015, p. 149). Sandra Epstein – the chronicler of Berkeley’s history – remarks on the modest changes in the curriculum at the university and the College of Commerce:

The general curriculum did not change, but some courses were added and others received stronger emphasis. For commerce studies, a minor adjustment was made in the area of operations management. What had been a minor area saw new courses added in response to the defense needs of producing essential materials and supplies. Several senior business students joined a Department of Mechanical Engineering course in time and motion study; likewise engineering students took technical courses like Production Management and Control in the College of Commerce. (Epstein, 2015, p. 149)

At Dartmouth University’s Tuck School, similar changes took place, including providing training for military personnel. Founded in 1900, Tuck was the first *graduate* school of business in the United States, with a 3+2 model of 3 years of undergraduate education (if a Dartmouth College undergraduate) followed by 2 years of postgraduate business training – including non-Dartmouth College students.⁴ The school and university took a joined-up approach when the war broke out. President Ernest Martin Hopkins laid out two goals for the college and its three professional schools: to maintain the liberal arts

⁴ For a history of the early years of the school, see Broehl (1999).

curriculum for civilian students and to support the war effort (Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, n.d.). In effect, two parallel sets of activities took place at Dartmouth – civilian and military. The civilian agenda was much changed from the prewar period:

The College and its three professional schools accelerated their curricula and shifted to three-term, year-round operation. Fraternities closed, Winter Carnival was cancelled, the *Daily Dartmouth* ceased publication and rationing was put in place. Civilian students were outnumbered three to one on campus. Run on military time, with reveille at 6 am and taps at 10 pm, Dartmouth operated like a naval base for the duration of the war. (Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, n.d., para. 2)⁵

The majority of students on campus were part of military programs:

Adjusting to the consequent shortage of college-educated commissioned officers, the U.S. Navy developed a way to combine college education with military service: the Naval Indoctrination Training School and the V-12 Naval Training Program. Dartmouth became host to the largest of the Navy's V-12 units. (Rauner Special Collections Library, Dartmouth College, n.d., para. 2)

The V-12 program, launched in December 1942, was designed to train young commissioned officers for the US Navy and Marines (Herge, 1996). Over 130 colleges and universities participated in the program, which trained 125,000 young officers. The program had the added benefit of supplementing the finances of colleges and universities whose students were being drafted. Virtually every major university, including Dartmouth, Berkeley, Chicago – as well as the University of Pennsylvania and Harvard – participated in this program.

World War II was also consequential for the University of Chicago. Although traditional undergraduate, master's, and doctoral programs continued to be offered, after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the university took on the war effort, albeit with a characteristic Chicago approach:

The effects of total war were soon seen throughout the campus. The University agreed to host a variety of military training programs, and by 1942 all available dormitory space had been consigned to military programs... However, the military training programs of 1942–44 were different from the [World War I] 1918 SATC [Student Army Training Corps] model, which [Chicago's President Robert] Hutchins and other

⁵ For additional detail, see Seaton (2008).

university leaders despised. In June 1940 Hutchins had joined with six other midwestern university presidents to write a memorandum outlining the appropriate roles of the university in time of war. The presidents affirmed that the universities should do what they could do best – namely, provide substantive knowledge-based training programs – and not become substitute army encampments. (Boyer, 2015, pp. 301–302)

Perhaps the most far-reaching wartime initiative was the recruitment of refugee scholars from Europe, including Enrico Fermi and Hans Morgenthau, as well as the “Met Lab,” which was a joint government–university project connected with the highly secretive atomic bomb project (Boyer, 2015, p. 305).

Adaptive Reactions: War-Specific Innovations

Going beyond participating in government consortia like the V-12 program, both Tuck and Chicago created innovative institution-specific programs to address the wartime needs for management, which have survived nearly eight decades later. Although it is impossible to know if these programs would have been created without the stimulus of the war, they provide examples of how reactive adaptation can have long-term benefits.

During the war, Tuck created the Tuck–Thayer program, combining forces with the Thayer School of Engineering at Dartmouth (Dartmouth Engineering, n.d.). This collaboration between business and engineering was a direct response to war needs to create leaders with backgrounds in both technology and management. The program survives today.

At Chicago, the wartime impetus to train factory managers led to America’s first executive MBA (EMBA) program in 1943. This part-time program was explicitly seen as a way to address the wartime shortage of trained managers. Although these first EMBA students’ profiles were quite different from those of “traditional” students, the content of their program and faculty were the same as for Chicago’s full-time counterparts:

The 52 students comprising the world’s first Executive MBA class met two nights per week in downtown Chicago. Many of the students came from iconic Chicago companies such as Marshall Field’s, Commonwealth Edison, Illinois Bell Telephone, Walgreen Co., Chicago Tribune, and Spiegel. Some worked at local manufacturing companies that made gears, freight cars,

conveyor belts and machinery. They were accountants, plant supervisors, engineers, production managers, purchasing agents and even one librarian. In the early years, students were typically in their 40s or early 50s, with decades of work experience but little formal business education. They attended classes taught by the same faculty as students in the Full-Time MBA Program, unusual for part-time programs of that era. (University of Chicago Booth School of Business, 2018, para. 6)

The EMBA program at Chicago remains an important part of the school's offerings, and the current website celebrates the program's wartime origins.

Adaptive Reactions: Advancing Peacetime Agendas during the War

While wars were fought in Europe, Asia, and Africa, leaders of US business schools and universities used wartime to advance more local conflicts – pressing for change within their organizations. We see this at Chicago, Tuck, and especially at Berkeley.

In the years prior to the war, University of Chicago president Robert M. Hutchins was engaged in a controversial effort to reform undergraduate education at Chicago. With the onset of the war, Hutchins pressed and succeeded in forcing this change:

Early in January 1942, in the aftermath of the American declarations of war on Japan and on Germany, Hutchins suddenly and with considerable drama proposed that the BA degree be transferred from the jurisdiction of the divisions to the College and that it be conferred upon completion of a four-year program in general education beginning with grade eleven, thus making it possible for Chicago to graduate eighteen- or nineteen-year-olds with BA degrees. (Boyer, 2015, p. 253)

This set of changes was accompanied by an adjustment in membership in the college faculty and disenfranchisement of a number of faculty members. The implication of this university-wide innovation was to “effectively eliminate the departments and specializations from the undergraduate curriculum,” including the undergraduate business program, to delineate between the undergraduate Chicago experience and the “specialized learning offered and the divisions and the professional schools” (Boyer, 2015, pp. 254–255).

At Tuck, the war years were used to refine the peacetime framing of the school. In 1942, the school changed its name from the Amos Tuck

School of Administration and Finance to the Amos Tuck School of *Business Administration* (Tuck School of Business, n.d.).

Berkeley provides the most dramatic example of reconfiguring peacetime organization during wartime. In the middle of the war, the priorities of its new dean were to split its economics and business administration activities, set up the latter as a “school” rather than a “college,” establish the master of business administration graduate degree, and set up joint curricula with engineering and other departments (Epstein, 2015, p. 152). Indeed, in Sandra Epstein’s history of the school, the most important activity during the war, receiving far more attention in the volume than war-related activities, was the creation of the School of Business Administration in 1943 and awarding of the MBA degree in 1944.

The issues seem contemporary: wanting greater autonomy within the university, finding a positioning (“business” versus “commerce”) that had a more modern ring to it, gaining budget and space for the new school, having control over faculty hiring, and “winning long-sought independence from the Economics Department.” The war provided a backdrop for the move:

Having gained departmental status, the groundwork was now laid for conversion of the College to a School, and Dean [Ewald T.] Grether urged that the action be taken quickly. Drawing upon historical precedent, he feared that if the new organizational plan was not adopted, it might again be lost among postwar enrollment pressures, precisely what had occurred after World War I. He also pointed out that failures to adopt those 1915 and 1921 proposals to establish a “school” of business had left the University a quarter of a century behind the times. . . . The timing was propitious since the wartime campus enrollment was smaller. (Epstein, 2015, 158–159)

The leadership at Berkeley used the wartime crisis to forge meaningful institutional change within the university. As the war raged in Europe, North Africa, and Asia, its battles were closer to home. It is as if the war was a diversion that permitted long-standing peacetime institutional changes to move forward.

Berkeley, Tuck, and Chicago each engaged deeply in the war effort through participating in consortia to train military personnel. Tuck and Chicago went further, creating new institution-specific programs to meet the war need that were built upon their existing approaches. All three internalized the collective purpose of winning the war. But in

each case, they held on to their peacetime programming, with some modifications. And each used the conditions of wartime – reduced enrollments, distracted colleagues, and leadership transitions – to advance long-sought peacetime agendas. They reacted to the war and internalized it to an extent, but they never lost sight of their peacetime purposes.

Transformational Adaptation

In the book-length histories of Wharton, Tuck, Berkeley, and Chicago, World War II plays a modest role, only receiving a few pages of discussion in each. In contrast, Jeffrey Cruikshank's (1987) history of the Harvard Business School (HBS), *A Delicate Experiment*, devotes 61 of its 285 pages to discussing World War II.

Like the other schools, HBS would experience a substantial reduction in students and faculty due to the draft. Like other schools, HBS would participate in consortium military training. Like Chicago and Tuck, it would create unique programming to address the needs of managers left behind – in effect creating modern non-degree-bearing executive education and a shorter-lived program bringing together unions and management. Like at Chicago and Berkeley, strong educational leaders pushed for institutional change.

But HBS took one quite large step beyond its peers: the faculty voted in December 1942 to stop offering its flagship MBA program and all other peacetime programs. Perhaps most radically, in 1945, as the war was winding down but not yet ended, the faculty voted unanimously not to reinstate any of the prior peacetime programs in what was called the “clean slate resolution” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 270). In addition, while HBS celebrated faculty who left the school to work for the government as Wharton did, it also brought war-related research onto campus, as Chicago had done. In effect, during the war, HBS stopped being a business school in a traditional sense and focused entirely on the business of winning a war abroad and training those left to run factories at home.

To be clear, HBS faced the same financial and operating pressure as the other schools. Wallace Donham – who served as the dean of HBS from 1919 to 1942 – sought not to repeat the school's experience in World War I, when it lost too many men from the MBA program, lost faculty to the draft, and ran a large financial deficit. While “doing its

bit,” the school would maintain business as usual as much as possible. Robert McNamara, a young assistant professor at HBS at the start of World War II, described the dean’s concerns:

The dean at Harvard was far-seeing, since he recognized that the market for Harvard Business School students was drying up because of the war, the draft, and the desire of individuals of that age to volunteer. Therefore, there would be fewer individuals applying to the Harvard Graduate School of Business. (Watson and Wolk, 2003, p. 6)

In the first year of the war, HBS’s activities were similar to those of Tuck, Berkeley, or Chicago. In the months before America entered the war, HBS took tentative steps to prepare. A Reserve Officers’ Training Course (ROTC) was established at HBS in April 1941; this did not alter the MBA training but simply added an extra course in defense mobilization.

HBS fairly quickly sought out unique opportunities to contribute to the war effort. The Naval Supply Corps School had been in existence since 1905, in two locations: Philadelphia and Washington, DC. In June 1941, these two merged, and the new Naval Supply Corps School was physically co-located on Soldiers Field Road, sharing the HBS campus alongside the traditional MBA program, “work[ing] more in proximity with each other than together” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 226). “We do not teach these officers,’ [HBS] Dean [Donald] David noted, ‘but we do house and feed them, and we feel fortunate in having this group of outstanding officers living and associating with us here’” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 226).

At first, HBS tried to maintain its status quo programs, including its flagship MBA. For example, in February 1942, HBS admitted the Navy Supply Corps Midshipman Officer School but merely bolted additional curriculum onto the existing first year of the MBA in a form of curricular co-location.

Moving first from physical to curricular co-location, HBS next made the larger leap to develop customized programs for the military. As McNamara noted, school leadership was acutely aware of the likely impacts of the draft, and as a result, the dean “sent two professors to Washington in an attempt to gain some government contracts for Harvard” (Watson and Wolk, 2003, p. 6). McNamara goes on to describe the creation of the Army Air Force Statistical School (Stat School), a customized program built by HBS faculty to train officers of

the Statistical Control Office of the Army Air Forces with instructors drawn from the core HBS faculty.

Although financial pressures might have initially motivated HBS's rapid expansion into wartime efforts, it ultimately chose to fully devote itself to the war, internalizing the collective purpose of winning the war. The decisive rejection of business as usual transpired a year after Pearl Harbor, in December 1942, when the faculty voted to discontinue *all* non-wartime programs – to shut its MBA program, even while Berkeley was working to create one. By 1943, all activities at HBS were devoted to winning the war, training the officers who would lead overseas and the civilians who would lead the factories at home, as well as conducting war-related research.

If this were merely a financial expedient, then we might have expected other parts of the school to be untouched, for example, its general approach to teaching, academic norms, or research activities. Yet all of these seemed to be altered, if only temporarily, during the war. The Stat School became a state-of-the-art program even though its content was a substantial deviation from the school's prewar programs. Although the school was known for its devotion to written case studies, in the war, it adopted a wider variety of teaching approaches, including what we would today call "live cases."

In the war, the school embraced the controversial idea that older executives could be taught. HBS's modern prowess in executive education was a wartime innovation. The prevailing sentiment at HBS and other business schools before the war was that older executives were not clever enough to learn or were too rigid or set in their ways to learn. But someone needed to run the factories. HBS reluctantly embraced this idea and, at first, did not know how to do it. The result, after some missteps, was a formula that survives today and defines executive education: focusing on executives at mid- and senior levels, both nominated by their employers and self-sponsored. What seems obvious today was deeply resisted in its time. One director of an airplane division described potential students as "dummkopfs" (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 236). The program was initially derided on campus as the "retread" program but eventually was acknowledged as critical. According to Cruikshank, "the School's novel concept of executive retraining seemed to be proving itself. Perhaps most important, it was clear that men and women twenty or thirty years out of school could still learn – a dubious assertion, to many, before the

retread program” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 257). This notion of training mid- and senior-level executives defines today’s huge executive education activities of major schools. Both Chicago and Harvard saw this need but delivered it in different ways. Chicago stayed close to its academic roots, using the same curriculum as the full-time MBA and creating the executive MBA as a degree-bearing program. Harvard innovated with a non-degree format, now its AMP program, which led the way for the broader executive education market.

Even the research activities of the school were altered during the war, directed to projects that would have a material impact on the winning of the war. There was a pointed concern for the utility of the work, such as the Air Research Program, carried out in conjunction with the aviation industry. In a spirit that characterizes the contemporary impact agenda, the program was evaluated in clear terms: “No matter how thorough a research study may be, it will be of little use if there is no interest in the subject on the part of the public or industry” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 255). Research that crossed boundaries was also embraced, such as the HBS Fatigue Laboratory, done in collaboration with the Climatic Research Laboratory, combining science, physiology, and behavioral research to determine how airmen would fare in extreme weather conditions. Whereas Wharton’s professors left the school to join the government to do applied research during the war, Harvard’s model was to bring very applied research inside the school. In both cases, professors made valuable contributions, with the difference perhaps reflecting a judgment of *where* it was appropriate to conduct highly “useful” research.

All of these changes could be interpreted as putting the war purpose ahead of tradition. They were the product of what one junior professor at the time, Dan T. Smith, called “the temporary repression of traditional academic perfectionism” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 243). Whereas peacetime has the luxury of slow, tested, and careful change, wartime does not. This partial “temporary repression of perfectionism” laid the grounds for modern business education, even though not all of these innovations persisted in the 75 years of subsequent peacetime.

At the conclusion of the war, Wharton, as described by Sass (1982), “resumed its prewar routines” (p. 233). Harvard went in the opposite direction. In February 1945 – well before the end of hostilities – in a 4-hour faculty meeting, the faculty unanimously passed the “Clean Sweep Resolution,” which rescinded all previous authorizations of

courses (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 270). The faculty members voted that they would not mechanically return to their prewar ways but would determine the future from that day forward. It is nearly impossible to imagine this vote in peacetime. The postwar curriculum drew deeply from the wartime experience.

The mantra of winning the war was replaced with winning the peace. When the war was won, the cessation of wartime production and the large amount of surplus war material meant that the economy could easily go into a tailspin just as the troops returned home looking for jobs, as had happened in the wake of World War I. The clear imperative was to create a stable and growing economy. Dean Donald David acknowledged this in 1945: “Surely the School’s wartime record would soon seem incidental and would be quickly forgotten if our efforts on behalf of the men who have won this were any less determined than our efforts in the officer-training program” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 275).

The Harvard example is one of transformational adaptation. By adopting the collective purpose, first of winning the war and then winning the peace, it fundamentally transformed itself. While others were setting up MBA programs, it shuttered its program. While others maintained their degree formats, Harvard experimented with non-degree courses. While others had their sights on the resumption of the past, Harvard’s faculty unanimously voted to abandon it.

Macro-Crises, Collective Purpose, and Business Schools

Although business school campuses of the 1940s and today might project a sense of calm and stability, they – and higher education institutions more generally – are not immune from the crises that plague our economies and societies. In the 1940s, deans and their colleagues were faced with a faraway war and an unavoidable collective purpose. We, too, are subject to wars, pandemics, economic depressions, and climate crises – as well as the implications of national, cultural, and racial divides. When a collective response or purpose emerges in our communities, we choose how we react. In many ways, universities – or more accurately, university students – have been at the forefront of the cultural reactions to macro-crises like wars, as we saw in the US protests against the war in Vietnam in the 1960s or the student protests in Germany against the Nazis in the 1940s, such as the nonviolent White Rose movement (Ray, n.d.).

Although history will, in time, judge how we dealt with COVID-19, eight decades of hindsight allows us to draw a few conclusions – or perhaps hypotheses – from the experiences of our predecessors in World War II and how they internalized the collective purpose of winning a global war.

First, although all schools confronted the war and social imperative, they reacted in different ways. All complied with the requirements of the draft, but organizational reactions ranged from compliance to reactive adaptation to transformational adaptation. All of the schools were strong before the war and continue to this day, so clearly, there was no one “right” answer.

Second, although it is difficult to offer a satisfying explanation of why different schools behaved in different ways, the histories suggest a key role played by the specific leaders of the different institutions. Academia cherishes academic freedom and integrity and tends to embrace concepts of academic democracy. Institutionally, academic democracy is enshrined in bodies such as academic senates or advanced in an extreme way, such as in Oxford’s “Congregation” – a 5,500-member “sovereign body” that has the ultimate authority to decide on virtually any matter in the university if 20 members of the university advance the proposal and it receives a majority vote (University of Oxford, Governance and Planning, n.d.). The wartime experiences of the different schools, as recounted in their histories, often deviate from the ideal of academic democracy and involve strong leaders, such as Chicago’s President Hutchins, Berkeley’s Dean Grether, or Harvard’s Deans Donham and David.

As an example, Dean Donham at Harvard piloted the school as it went into the war during his last year as dean after serving for more than two decades of leadership. In May 1942, he was “six weeks from retirement. . . . [He] apologized for having taken a series of unilateral actions without adequate faculty consultation, but said that the fluid circumstances necessitated this approach” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 223). In one amusing exchange, Donham informed a faculty member, “You are volunteering for the job [to work with the government]” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 226).

The highly deliberative, consultative process of peacetime was replaced with a temporary new model: more rapid, centralized, strategic decision making, granting others closer to the battlefield (classroom) the flexibility to make tactical decisions.

Third, why these leaders made the decisions they did is less clear. Was it national fervor in support of the war or more practical consideration? Secondary research cannot uncover the motivations of these leaders, but there are clues that the decisions were motivated by a range of considerations. Chicago's President Hutchins strongly opposed the war, at least until it started, and so was not a natural person to advance a wartime agenda. Donham's initial concerns were clearly to protect the finances of the school, as indicated in Robert McNamara's reflections. There is a strong parallel in how businesses or business schools might find themselves engaging with climate measures: some might frame this as a moral imperative; others might simply see it pragmatically as good business.

Perhaps most importantly, the five examples present two quite competing yet consistent implications of the power of purpose to maintain or transform an organization.

The first is *individual purpose as anchor*. The histories of Wharton, Berkeley, Chicago, and Tuck display the role of purpose as anchor. Each school held fast to its prewar institutional purposes. While accepting the draft and joining government programs, they never wavered in delivering traditional business programs to a small number of young business students. They kept operating their MBA programs, even with reduced numbers. They kept the content of their curricula largely unchanged. When they innovated, they built directly onto existing programs (Tuck-Thayer), or they maintained the same degree standards as before (Chicago's EMBA). They advanced prewar academic initiatives and continued to fight their domestic university battles, most vividly at Berkeley, while the war raged elsewhere. Their prewar individual purposes anchored them throughout the war.

The second is *collective purpose as liberator*. After a tentative start, Harvard all but abandoned its prewar individual purpose and embraced the collective wartime effort. Innovation flourished in nearly every aspect of the school. For a while, it welcomed new types of students (young and old, business and unions, men and women, those of all races). It created new programs, such as the retread initiative, that bore no resemblance to its prewar MBA. It emphasized new subjects, such as statistics, that had not been at the heart of its curricula and briefly moved away from its case-method approach. It brought onto the campus new research approaches. Ultimately, the faculty voted not to slavishly re-create the prewar past by rescinding all

prewar course authorizations. By embracing the demands of the war and accepting “temporary repression of academic perfectionism,” the stage was set for the postwar HBS.

I believe these lessons are not only relevant but critical for leaders of business schools and other organizations today. We can never waver from our traditional goals of delivering excellent teaching and research – nor can we abandon academic freedom. Nevertheless, our world faces threats – and opportunities – that arise from pandemics, a climate emergency, and gaping inequality that have given rise to dangerous national, social, and global fissures. As business schools, we can hold fast to our individual purposes, downplay these issues, and reluctantly begin a few initiatives while we carry on largely with business as usual. Or we can use the emerging collective purposes in society – around public health or climate issues – as invitations to transform ourselves.

In our discussions of our purpose at Oxford Saïd, one of my very perceptive colleagues asked a disarming question: What’s the purpose of purpose? Although we will always exist to deliver excellent research and teaching – helping advance the careers of students, improving the performance of organizations, and protecting the academic freedom of our scholars – to what end? Would a goal of advancing economic, social, and climate justice be constraining or liberating?

A collective or higher purpose doesn’t liberate an organization from the laws of gravity or its financial equivalents. A collective or higher purpose doesn’t allow us to deliver poor-quality education or research or fail to train our students for the next steps in their lives. Collective purpose does not and must not silence the important role of critical inquiry in a university. But in our tradition-bound, sometimes inertial institutions, adopting a collective or higher purpose may enable us to unleash innovation that might otherwise be inconceivable and reinvent our institutions as we put ourselves at the greater service of the world.

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