Responding to crisis: World War 2, COVID-19, and the business school

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Abstract
The COVID-19 crisis will continue to have an immense impact on society, especially on the economic livelihood of ordinary people worldwide. Given the role of business schools in training managers to lead organizations and people across industry, the COVID-19 crisis highlights a new opportunity to reflect on the purpose of the business school, which stakeholders it serves, and how it might evolve toward broader consideration and effective anticipation/response to pressing societal issues. Thus, we set out in this study to investigate these questions by examining the role that Harvard Business School played during World War 2, a crisis that also had an unprecedented impact on society. Based on this examination, we highlight the importance of flexibility and organizational innovation in times of crisis. We also discuss how the business school might expand its focus and its audience to consider broader societal issues, allowing it to better prepare students to serve society in the future, where the next crisis might be right around the corner.

KEYWORDS
COVID-19, business schools, crisis
“In the history of national crises, not the least significant chapters are those which recite the efforts of universities and professional schools to adjust their programs of instruction and research to certain immediate and compelling facts, without doing violence to their long-run objectives and obligations. The problem is one of perspective and balance” (Harvard Business School Dean Wallace B. Donham to Harvard President James B. Conant, 1941 Annual Report, Baker Library Historical Collections).

1 INTRODUCTION

The quotation above from Dean Wallace B. Donham suggests that institutions of higher education are to some extent measured by how they adapt to serve the common good in the face of crisis. Donham’s quote is based on his own experience leading Harvard Business School (HBS) during the run-up to and eventual entrance into World War 2 (WW2) by the United States (US). During WW2, HBS partnered with the US military and private business to train both military officers and civilians engaged in war industries in support of the United States’s war efforts. Through these partnerships, HBS experimented with courses that set the stage for new civilian business education programs after the war. In this paper, we examine this story to uncover lessons that may have been obscured to help us better define the purpose of the business school in the wake of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

The stated purpose of the university-based business school in the United States has morphed throughout its history. Khurana (2007) tells us that the invention of the university-based business school in the late-19th century was borne of the desire to train a new class of professional managers, stemming from calls for administrative reform from within Progressive political circles in response to the disorder and corruption let loose by the second industrial revolution. American business leaders also began to take more of an interest in higher education, seeing the possession of a college degree as not only a sign of status but also as increasingly necessary for administering the complex new business organizations arising at the time (Wren, 1983). Thus, placing the business school within the US research university helped lend credibility to college-level business education by linking it to the moral authority of science and the professions (Khurana, 2007), in contrast to the 19th century European perception of business education as vocational training (Arseneault et al., 2021).

From within this institutional context, several business schools with names that are still prominent today were founded, including the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania (1881), the Tuck School at Dartmouth (1900), and HBS (1908). Nonetheless, Ruef (2008) reminds us that the first attempt at a university-based business school in the United States was undertaken at the University of Louisiana in 1851. Founded by the ardent Southern Nationalist James D. B. De Bow, Louisiana’s school strove to advance “Southern commercial aspirations and the management of unfree black labor during the antebellum era” (Ruef, 2008, p. 747). Although this school was shuttered within a few years of its founding, it is important to acknowledge its existence, as it calls into question the “higher aims” of professionalism by situating the business school within the research university (Khurana, 2007). Thus, Üskiden et al. (2021) suggest that discussion about the future of the business school should focus on its purpose rather than discussing it with respect to profession, as university-based business schools have never fulfilled their lofty ambitions to be fully recognized as professional schools.
In light of Üskiden et al.’s (2021) advice, we turn to the story of HBS during WW2 to gain insight into the question of purpose for the business school, especially during crises. When the United States entered WW2, it was still grappling with the impacts of the Great Depression, an event that wrought long-term economic devastation for a wide swath of Americans. While there is not a consensus, many historians suggest that the New Deal programs and agencies implemented by the US federal government did alleviate some of the most damaging economic consequences of the Depression (Billington & Ridge, 1981). However, a fuller recovery was not achieved until after WW2. Today’s COVID-19 pandemic also follows on the heels of a major economic downturn, the Great Recession of 2007–2009. Much like the Depression, the recovery from the Recession has been gradual and uneven for some members of society (Hart, 2018). While there are early signs that the new governmental programs implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have reduced the poverty rate in the United States, especially among children (Wheaton et al., 2021), it remains to be seen if the recovery will be more evenly felt across gender, racial, and ethnic lines than after WW2.

A consistent refrain heard from business school leaders and academics in both eras related to purpose has been the need to imbue our students with “social consciousness” and a “service-to-society” ethos (Donham, 1927; Ferlie et al., 2010; Rynes & Shapiro, 2005). However, how should “social consciousness” and “service-to-society” be defined? Examining HBS’s story during WW2 can help us to reflect on how we might answer this question. Exploring history can also help us to discover new insights and potentially open new paths forward (Cummings & Bridgman, 2016), especially in regard to what we might teach our students that will prepare them to serve society through business during future crises. Thus, in this paper we endeavor to answer Cummings et al.’s (2017) call to management scholars to look back to help us think differently about the purpose of the business school.

It is important to note that drawing analogies from history based on poor presumptions about how similar two situations are can result in bad prescriptions (Neustadt & May, 1986).

Equating a pandemic with a total global war runs the risk of oversimplifying a very complex situation. Wars are man-made, often reflecting conflicts of ideology, and typically end at some point, while viruses originate in nature and persist even after a vaccine is discovered. However, both situations impact human life and can have devastating economic consequences. The war metaphor invoked in the context of COVID-19 emphasizes the urgency of the situation and the need to come together to overcome a crisis (Zaki, 2020). We suggest that both situations are examples of an intractable crisis, a type of crisis which can be sufficiently anticipated but is difficult to influence because of social and political factors (Gundel, 2005). Thus, while the parallels are not exact, we believe that insights can be drawn from the former era that can inform us presently and in the future regarding the purpose of the business school in times of crisis.

The remainder of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, we discuss why the COVID-19 pandemic invites us to examine the purpose of the business school, especially in times of crisis, and why drawing on history might help us better understand what is possible. We then present HBS’s story during WW2. The standard story is that the Allied Powers won WW2 due to superior statistical and operations research techniques, many of which were pioneered by researchers stationed at the Army Air Forces Statistical School at HBS and subsequently adopted and further refined by researchers at other business schools in the ensuing decades. Our re-examination of this story suggests that other lessons have been obscured, namely that superior adaptability contributed to the Allies’ victory and that the embrace of flexibility played an integral role in mobilizing actors from all sectors to support the
common good. The partnerships that these actors engaged in at HBS during the war also highlight that business schools can serve as venues for bringing together diverse stakeholders in order to address societal concerns, not just those of business. Based on these lessons we then explore three important questions for the business school going forward: (1) what is its purpose? (2) who does it serve? and (3) how can it better prepare students to help society in times of crisis? Finally, we conclude with some observations about why the business school has struggled to address broader societal issues and the role that histories can play in helping it re-orient itself moving forward from the COVID-19 pandemic.

2 THE PURPOSE OF THE BUSINESS SCHOOL IN TIMES OF CRISIS

As noted in the introduction, the stated purpose of the university-based business school has undergone considerable change over the history of the institution. While it may have never become a true professional school (Üskiden et al., 2021), most students who have graduated from a business school have likely gained skills that are relevant to performing specific business functions (e.g., accounting, marketing, and supply chain management) and to managing people in organizations, though this assertion has been called into question (e.g., see Detrick, 2002, for Russell Ackoff’s perspective on the contributions of business education). Nonetheless, it is important to consider what outcomes the skills that are taught support, bringing the question of the purpose of the business school squarely into focus. Is the business school simply the training ground for the economic sphere of life, a sphere where the market is the main value (Weber, 1970)? Or is the business school, as part of a broader university, potentially a venue for bringing students and leaders together from multiple spheres of life to better understand the values of each in an effort to collectively support human flourishing?

The COVID-19 pandemic provides an ideal backdrop against which to explore these questions. With mounting scientific evidence to suggest that climate change is making outbreaks of disease like COVID-19 more dangerous and more likely to occur with increasing frequency in the future (Lustgarten, 2020), businesses will need to be prepared to contend with the health and economic consequences. Many of the people who will populate these businesses will graduate from a university-based business school. In addition, some of these graduates will take positions with non-profit organizations, NGOs, and in the government. Thus, it is important to consider whether the content of what we currently teach our students will help them to collaborate with people from multiple sectors, especially in times of crisis. As business educators, we bear the responsibility for shaping our programs to respond in ways that can best help business to contend with the health and economic challenges that lie ahead in partnership with organizations from other sectors.

Examining questions about the purpose of the business school solely in light of the COVID-19 pandemic runs the risk of assuming that today's challenges are of an unprecedented scale, scope, and stake. Bridgman et al. (2016, p. 736) warn against such “presentism,” suggesting that it “would be wise to take a broader historical perspective ... so that we may learn from the past.” Thus, as Starkey (2015) suggests, rather than fail to learn from history, we focus seriously in this paper on the history of an era that we view as presenting parallels that can help inform us about how to move ahead today. We believe that there is more than a passing resemblance between the economic devastation and threat to human life wrought by WW2 and the dual economic and public health crisis brought about by COVID-19. Each crisis has
followed on the heels of a major economic downturn, leading to questions about the future of capitalism and the relationship between business, government, and society (Henisz, 2011; Marens, 2010; Mills et al., 2015), questions which are directly related to the purpose of the business school.

In the wake of the Great Depression, the business school was called upon to adapt its curricula “to contribute to national economic recovery and stabilization” (Khurana, 2007, p. 184). In response, several schools instituted new courses with an emphasis on the relations between business and society during the late-1930s (Khurana, 2007, p. 189). This emphasis continued after WW2 with the rise of the corporate social responsibility movement (Spector, 2008). Similarly, after the corporate scandals in the early 2000s and the collapse in banking and the housing market in 2007–2008, the business school was called upon to add courses on ethics, as many critics charged that what was being taught in the business school contributed to these events (Starkey, 2015; Tett, 2009; The Economist, 2009). While many schools have added such courses, these critiques have continued since the end of the Great Recession and broadened, calling into question whether the business school has also contributed to climate change (Gill, 2020) and racial inequality (Dar et al., 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has particularly brought these challenges into focus. For example, job losses stemming from the closure of businesses deemed non-essential in mid-2020 for Black, Hispanic/Latinx, and Asian workers outpaced those for white workers (O'Keefe, 2020). Although early evidence suggests that government relief efforts have had a positive impact, the impact has lagged behind so far for the former group of workers (Wheaton et al., 2021). Income instability for socioeconomically disadvantaged families stemming from erratic employment is persistent during the best of times, let alone during periods of relative economic hardship (Hardy, 2017). Given that most people's livelihood is largely tied to their ability to earn an income as an employee of a firm (Anderson, 2017), government does not bear the burden alone—business also has a responsibility. Thus, it is important to consider whether what we teach in the business school has contributed to employment and income instability and how we might help businesses to acknowledge the dignity of all workers with the aim of ensuring that their rights are respected not just when crises situations arise, but at all times.

Toward this end, we set out in the next section of this paper to recount the history of HBS during WW2 in search of obscured or forgotten lessons that may help us to think differently about the purpose of the business school in times of crisis. Examining how the business school responded to previous challenges that parallel the ones we currently face can help to inform discussion about how business educators might better prepare students to deal with contemporary challenges.

3 | HBS AND WW2

3.1 | The traditional story

Many histories attribute at least a portion of the Allied victory in WW2 to the development and use of statistics, operations research, and hard quantitative decision-making techniques (Crowther & Whiddington, 1947; Fortun & Schweber, 1993; McCloskey, 1987), many of which were developed by economists and business school professors. For example, economists Milton Friedman and George Stigler both worked at Columbia University on a US Navy-sponsored statistical research team headed by economist W. Allen Wallis that carried out a variety of
studies such as evaluating gun effectiveness in air dogfights, comparing bomb sights, and calculating pursuit curves for homing torpedoes (Mirowski, 2002). The trio would be reunited at the University of Chicago in the 1950s, Friedman in the economics department, and Stigler and Wallis (as dean) in the business school. As the story goes, these techniques were widely adopted by business schools after the war, especially following their endorsement in the 1959 Foundation Reports (Gordon & Howell, 1959; Pierson, 1959).

Faculty members at HBS also contributed to the advancement of these techniques during WW2. Robert McNamara, better known for his tenure as President of the Ford Motor Company and later as US Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam conflict, was an assistant professor of accounting at HBS in the early-1940s. He was drafted to work alongside HBS Professor Edmund Learned in the Army Air Forces Statistical School. Learned had already revamped the Business Statistics course at HBS so that statistics could be used in management decision-making when he was tasked with shaping the curriculum for the Statistical School (Cruikshank, 1987). The statistical officers trained at HBS developed the systems used in England to schedule B-29 bombers more efficiently and played a key role scheduling the raids in Germany that contributed to the defeat of the Luftwaffe (McDonald, 2017). A notable student at the Statistical School was future HBS professor Kenneth Andrews, who applied what he learned as a Second Lieutenant in the Army Air Forces in the Pacific theater. On the civilian side of supporting the war effort, the operations and productions courses developed by Professor Franklin Folts trained managers how to manufacture war materiel (i.e., aircraft, tanks, and armaments) more efficiently in order to alleviate the stress placed on US industrial capacity (Folts et al., 1952).

Conventional accounts of history draw a relatively straight line from these advancements during WW2, including those at HBS, to the quantitative approach to business education adopted over the next quarter century. This history is presented as important, as it often underpins critiques about the purpose of the business school and the reliance on scientific analysis and quantitative techniques in business education (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Henisz, 2011; Mintzberg, 2004). We do not dispute the elements of this story, but when a story becomes common sense, its legitimacy and permanence are often taken for granted (Bottom, 2009), making it difficult to question the conclusions drawn from it. Rather, in what follows, we examine this history anew “in search of ways in which it makes points other than those it seems to make” (Summers et al., 1997, p. 345).

3.2 Crisis, adaptation, and innovation

Harvard’s sudden transition to online classes ‘was a shift with few parallels in our history. The last time we had to pivot our operations so significantly was in the 1940s against the backdrop of World War II, when the School’s campus (and that of the University) was turned over to military training’ (HBS Dean Nitin Nohria and Executive Dean for Administration Angela Q. Crispi, announcement to HBS community, as reported in the Harvard Crimson, March 11, 2020).

As we started researching the history of HBS’s experience during WW2, we became aware of the major programmatic adaptations and innovations implemented at HBS to support the war effort. While HBS faculty did play an important role in the development of operations research techniques, an underappreciated element of the story is Donham’s concern about developing new programs for war training without completely losing focus on HBS’s long-run
objectives. Thus, our interest in examining past responses by the business school in times of crisis led us to focus on HBS during the mid-1930s to mid-1940s, a period that Nohria and Crispi suggest presented HBS with challenges not unlike those we are facing today.

Our investigation began by carefully reading existing histories of the events written by the key participants from HBS such as marketing professor Melvin Copeland (Copeland, 1958). Another important secondary source was Jeffrey Cruikshank’s comprehensive history of HBS up to the late-1940s (Cruikshank, 1987). It was important to examine other sources to rule out any bias, as Cruikshank’s work was commissioned by HBS. Thus, we consulted the Baker Library’s Digital Archives to examine digitized versions of many of the documents Cruikshank relied on. Unfortunately, the personal correspondences of the deans and faculty members active during WW2 have not been digitized, but we did examine other relevant digital materials from the era available from Baker Library including articles from the Harvard Crimson, HBS Bulletin, and Harvard Business Review. We also consulted Armsby’s (1946) comprehensive report about the university programs commissioned by the US military during WW2.

Our approach to using the information that we gathered reflects the philosophical assumption that histories are written from a perspective that reflects the concerns of the writer (Bridgman et al., 2016). Thus, it would be inconsistent with the view that histories are subjective to refute or dismiss the conclusions of previous writers. Rather, our purpose in constructing this history is to gain insight into HBS’s response to a previous crisis with parallels to today. We pay particular attention to Donham’s and his successor Donald David’s thinking about how and how much to adapt HBS’s programs so that the school would remain viable after the war in the event of an Allied victory, which may help us better understand the purpose of the business school as we move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic.

3.3 A fresh look at HBS’s experience during WW2

The story of the role that HBS played during WW2 begins in the 1910s. When war broke out across Europe in 1914, President Woodrow Wilson proclaimed that the United States would remain neutral. However, that neutrality unraveled by the spring of 1917 after several suspected acts of sabotage and aggression by Germany that killed American citizens at home and abroad (Floyd, 2013), prompting the United States to officially enter World War 1 (WW1) on April 6, 1917. HBS was still a very young school at that time, having only been established in 1908. In anticipation of entering the war, HBS established a Committee on Military Preparation in 1916 and by 1917 it had initiated a tuition-free course for military supply officers (Cruikshank, 1987). As WW1 progressed, members of the HBS faculty, including founding Dean Edwin Gay and Professor Melvin Copeland, were called upon to serve in a variety of governmental roles. Gay served as Director of Planning and Statistics of the US Shipping Board, while Copeland was the secretary of the Commercial Economy Board (Copeland, 1958). All but three members of the HBS faculty left Cambridge to serve the government during the war (Cruikshank, 1987).

Enrollments dropped precipitously at US universities in general during WW1, but with the war coming to an end on November 11, 1918, there was an enormous surge in enrollment in 1919, as soldiers returned to civilian life (Irish, 2015). However, unlike the G.I. Bill after WW2, only limited benefits were provided to veterans of WW1. For example, the World War Adjusted Compensation Act, or Bonus Act, was passed in 1924, which awarded veterans with additional pay in various forms, but only on a limited, short-term basis (Greenberg, 2006). Veterans could also take advantage of the services offered by the Federal Board of Vocational Education, which
had been established in 1917 (Holt, 1922). Yet, returning soldiers faced a difficult readjustment period marked by soaring unemployment, massive strikes, and the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1918–1920 (Goldberg, 1999).

In the aftermath of WW1, HBS judged its war-related efforts to be unsuccessful, as the military supply courses were hastily conceived and underattended, and the war had also ended before the courses could be modified to provide better training (Cruikshank, 1987). Thus, when hostilities broke out in Europe in the 1930s, HBS initiated efforts to remedy the deficiencies of its WW1 programs and it sought to establish ties with the US War Department (Copeland, 1958). For example, when Secretary of War John Weeks initiated the Army Industrial College (AIC) in Washington, prospective AIC instructors were trained at HBS (Cruikshank, 1987). In collaboration with the HBS-trained AIC instructors, HBS faculty member developed new courses in the fall of 1940 specifically focused on the problems of industrial mobilization during a war (Copeland, 1958).

With the conflict rapidly evolving in Europe and the United States poised to enter, Donham faced three important questions: Should the faculty be kept intact or be allowed to disperse as during WW1, should civilian enrollment be suspended, and how should instruction be altered to serve immediate defense needs while keeping postwar needs in mind? Donham invited the HBS faculty to his house in November 1940 for a meeting to consider these questions (Cruikshank, 1987). As reflected in the quote opening this paper, he had several concerns about modifying the curriculum: How fast is fast enough, what elements are enduring, and what is adaptable in the short term? These concerns led him to challenge the faculty Committee for Instruction to design something “to meet the needs of youth swept up in the necessity for militarization” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 211), resulting in the creation of the Industrial Administrator (IA) program.

The IA program was designed for men going into government service or industries connected to national defense (Copeland, 1958). The program emphasized the elements of production training related to war-preparedness, while addressing the school’s need to be on solid financial footing. To rapidly introduce the IA program, the faculty began working in early 1941, securing the new case material required for the program during the summer. The new program was launched in September 1941, with the faculty teaching in the program voting to work on a 12-month continuous basis without additional compensation or a new contract (Cruikshank, 1987).

Outside of HBS, the Unites States had been rapidly escalating its preparations for entering the war. Over 140 colleges and universities around the country joined the preparation as part of the first wave of the Engineering Defense Training (EDT) program initiated in 1940, a program which provided men and women with short, intensive, skills-related courses to prepare them for specific technical and scientific work in war industries (Armsby, 1946). In 1942, the EDT program became the Engineering, Science, and Management War Training (ESMWT) program, with management added to address the need for production supervisors brought about by the expansion of the production of war materiel. HBS was contracted by the War Department to participate in a new element of the ESMWT, the War Production Training (WPT) program (Urwick, 1953).

HBS decided to take an interesting approach to the WPT program, formulating a retraining program for executives with experience in finance, sales, law, or other non-manufacturing activities to meet the need for production managers in war-related industries (Copeland, 1958). The initial idea for its version of the program was for companies to sponsor experienced executives from their community who were displaced due to the war for supervisory positions in
those companies. When Assistant Dean Eugene Zuckert visited Buffalo, NY-based Curtiss-Wright, one of the largest producers of aircraft engines and planes during WW2, he was met with silence when he pitched this idea to the director of the aircraft division. In response, the director suggested that it would perhaps be a better idea to send his own employees to the program (Cruikshank, 1987). When the program launched at HBS, it ended up being composed of both self-sponsored and company-sponsored individuals (Copeland, 1958).

A second experiment at HBS during WW2 was the Army Air Forces Statistical School. The Stat School, as it became known, was housed at Soldiers Field on the Harvard campus, and directly involved HBS faculty (Stevens, 2001). The Stat School’s goals and methods of instruction were constantly reconfigured and revised over the program’s life, but one consistent method employed by its instructors was HBS’s case-based pedagogy. While the Stat School certainly taught about the use of statistical controls, the more than 3000 officers who completed the program also learned about administration and decision making (Cruikshank, 1987). In a letter to David, the Assistant Secretary of War for Air Robert A. Lovett offered the following assessment:

“The present statistical control system of the Army Air Forces was set up within a space of time far shorter than I had believed possible. We have not only been enabled to apply modern business statistical methods to our intricate problems, but in conjunction with the School, we have devised various new techniques which will be of interest to government and industry after the war. (quoted in Cruikshank, 1987, p. 248)”

With WW2 winding down, David faced the question of what to do with the WPT program after the war’s conclusion. His solution was to continue it due to demand from business for “men competent for the tasks of administration at the higher levels” (Copeland, 1958, p. 127). Thus, what had started as the WPT program to narrowly develop production supervisors for the war effort evolved into the Advanced Management Program (AMP) in 1945, the precursor of today’s various Executive Education programs at HBS (McDonald, 2017; Stevens, 2001). In establishing the AMP, David clearly grasped the importance of the second part of Lovett’s comment about the apparent transferability of lessons learned from the Stat School program to other areas of business and government after the war.

Enrollments surged at US universities in the years following the war as many veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill (Grant, 1993). However, David expressed concerns about relaxing admission standards, stating that schools like HBS would be under pressure from “the American Legion, the Veterans Bureau, and others to admit all comers” (Cruikshank, 1987, p. 264). Many of the soldiers returning home from the war did not even hold a high school degree, let alone a college diploma. Nonetheless, David acknowledged that HBS had an obligation to veterans, as many of them were likely to become the business leaders of the next generation. Thus, the size of the incoming class at HBS was increased to 900 in 1946 to accommodate the expanded pool of applicants (Cruikshank, 1987).

As early as 1942, David had engaged his faculty in individual conversations about their views of the MBA program, surfacing a general state of discontent with the overall emphasis of the program and doubts about its post-war relevance and applicability (Cruikshank, 1987). When the time came to consider reopening the school to civilians, the faculty had already been deeply involved in conversations about the redevelopment of the MBA program. Drawing on the IA, WPT, and Stat School programs, the faculty landed on a new curriculum that focused
heavily on fostering a top management point-of-view, rather than the previous strong functional focus (McDonald, 2017). The new program was distinguished by the fact that it consisted of only one first-year course titled “Elements of Administration.” The course itself was comprised of six “subjects,” but these subjects were not simply divided along functional lines (Cruikshank, 1987). Rather, the subjects were supposed to provide unity and flexibility around the top-executive perspective, with the focus on developing the technical competence of men along with their insight into the nature of the administrative process “in the production and distribution of goods and services” (Dean Donald David to President James Conant, 1945 Annual Report, Baker Library Historical Collections).

4 | DISCUSSION

4.1 | Were lessons obscured?

As noted earlier, the traditional story is that many schools adopted the quantitative stance to business education advocated for in the Foundation Reports, an approach grounded in the statistical decision-making techniques partially developed at HBS during WW2. However, many schools adopted HBS's case-based approach to teaching even if their research agenda became more rigorous and grounded in “management science” (Ruef, 2008). This outcome is not particularly surprising. The Ford Foundation knew that HBS's involvement in the report would be vital to any effort to reform business education, so it invited David, now retired from his post as dean but still involved with HBS, to join its board of trustees in 1955 (Augier & March, 2011). As chairman of the board, David interacted with the Ford Foundation vice president in charge of its business school reform initiative, Thomas Carroll, himself a former HBS faculty member (Khurana, 2007). Thus, strong backers of the case method were among the key architects of the Ford Foundation’s report.

HBS's experience during WW2 illustrates that the traditional case method was central to its new programs during the war. For example, the Umpteenth Fighter Squadron case was used to introduce the Stat School's statistical officers to the human and organizational issues that many of them would face firsthand in the field (Cruikshank, 1987). In fact, HBS only tentatively took steps to adopt a more quantitative stance to business education later in the 1950s alongside its traditional focus (Augier & March, 2011). Thus, our purpose in what follows is not to dismiss the conclusion that the Foundation Reports played a role in the diffusion and adoption of this “new look” to business education over the quarter century following the war (Muller et al., 1997). Rather, given McClaren's (2019) conclusion that the Foundation Reports merely formally stated ideas about the shape of business education that had been under debate and development since the interwar years, we set out to uncover other lessons that may have been obscured from the story of HBS during WW2 that might inform us about the purpose of the business school as we move forward from the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1.1 | Lesson 1: Experiment with innovation, strategy, and processes

The first lesson that we suggest has been obscured from the story of HBS's experience is that when faced with a crisis, leaders should be willing to experiment in real-time with “new approaches to devise strategy and structure of tasks and units, modify the organization’s
management processes and administrative systems, ... and enable organizational adaptation and change” (Damanpour & Aravind, 2012, p. 423). However, as Spector (2019) suggests, a “crisis” is not a corporeal thing, but rather a claim of urgency regarding the immediacy and seriousness of a threat that is used to help shape the understanding of and actions by others. Thus, a threat only becomes a crisis when the claim of urgency emanates from a leader. For example, WW2 was not declared a crisis by US President Roosevelt, despite the threat to human life and the economic devastation that it posed, until after the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 (Spector, 2020).

In this light, it is not surprising that managers often narrow channels of communication and fall back on routinized patterns of action when their organizations are under threat (Starbuck et al., 1978), as declaring a crisis can upset entrenched power structures. Managers can, however, pre-emptively use claims of crisis to mobilize their organizations for action when a threat is looming. Barnett and Pratt (2000) call this “autogenic crisis generation.” In such an instance, the future threat is initially conspicuous primarily to senior leadership, who can imagine the impact but not necessarily know how severe it will be. However, if their assessment of the severity of the impact appears accurate and plausible, the claim of an impending crisis may be viewed as legitimate by organization members (Spector, 2019). In turn, the legitimacy of the claim can be used by leadership to spur efforts to flexibly innovate to be as “crisis-prepared” as possible.

What HBS’s story shows is that it avoided a rigid organizational response to the threat to its operations posed by WW2. The probability of the United States eventually entering the war was high as it spread across the globe, but not inevitable. Again, Roosevelt did not declare a crisis until the United States was directly attacked. Nonetheless, Donham’s pre-emptive posture in the late-1930s allowed HBS to experiment before it was left in a position where civilian instruction had to be suspended. By invoking the state of its operations during WW1, Donham was able to make a legitimate claim that US entry into the new war posed a serious threat for HBS, allowing him to engage the faculty in a discussion about how the school should prepare itself. Rather than retreating into a reflexive and programmed response out of fear that experimentation could be too costly given dwindling resources, HBS’s faculty responded to the urgency and immediacy of Donham’s claims by suspending its typical governance processes allowing it to fast-track new programs with short courses of study geared toward preparing students for specific management jobs in war industries.

Establishing such short courses, let alone new programs, on short notice was certainly not a trivial task, but HBS’s faculty moved quickly to collect material and develop new cases for use in the IA and WPT programs (Cruikshank, 1987). Also, rather than consolidating power, and limiting communication and transparency, Donham, and later David, regularly communicated with the faculty to find solutions that could help HBS maintain a solid financial footing in the face of declining enrollment and the eventual suspension of regular instruction. By creating “safe ambivalence,” Donham and David were able to “transform the energy of the crisis into learning that increases functionality” (Barnett & Pratt, 2000, p. 84). Thus, HBS’s story illustrates threat-flexibility rather than threat-rigidity in the face of crisis, a stance characterized by open communication, decentralized control, continuous information seeking, and experimentation. By invoking a crisis deemed urgent and legitimate, HBS’s early efforts to counter the threat to its operations resulted in a major overhaul of its core MBA program and the introduction of new programs like the AMP for new audiences in the post-war era.
4.1.2 | Lesson 2: The business school as mediator between public and private sector

We suggest that the second lesson that was obscured in the story of HBS’s experience during WW2 is that the business school, as part of the broader university community, can serve as a crossroad for fostering relationships between a variety of stakeholders from both the public and private sector. In turn, these relationships can help each stakeholder gain an understanding of the others’ major concerns, leading to the identification of problems of mutual interest that require cross-sector collaboration to solve.

The foundations of this lesson can be found in the 1930s and HBS’s response to the agencies and programs of the New Deal, which involved government in realms previously reserved for business alone. While there was considerable apprehension on the part of the business community when these agencies were first authorized by the US Congress, an eventual détente emerged as it became clear that action was needed to contend with the economic impact of the Depression. An interesting feature of many New Deal agencies was that they did not act unilaterally, but rather in partnership with business, to develop new codes or laws. For example, trade associations were called upon to draft new codes of fair competition, which were then reviewed by the National Recovery Agency to ensure that they did not foster monopoly conditions (Skocpol & Finegold, 1982). In addition, New Deal agencies including the Civil Works Administration and the Works Projects Administration each employed over 3 million people, dwarfing the scale of the largest private companies of the era (Foster et al., 2014).

In recognition that many of the problems that the United States faced in the 1930s required coordination between public and private stakeholders, Donham wrote that “an understanding of government relations is essential” (Donham, 1933, p. 433). He went on to state: “the university environment enables us [the business school] to build bridges to other faculties giving access to a wide range of specialized disciplines, outside narrow concepts of business but essential in its largest problems” (Donham, 1933, p. 433). These insights led Donham to argue that HBS had two new obligations: (1) to train businesspeople to deal effectively with agencies of the New Deal, and (2) to train people to staff those agencies (Cruikshank, 1987). While adding new courses to the curriculum about public policy could fulfill the first obligation, Donham secured funding for a School of Public Administration to satisfy the second. However, as the 1930s wore on, the new Public Administration school became increasingly identified with Keynesian economics, which often stood at odds with the stance to public administration favored in HBS. As a result, the two schools parted ways, never truly fulfilling Donham’s aspiration of building bridges between faculties.

WW2 offered a second chance for HBS to build bridges between various stakeholders and as the history recounted in Section 3.3 demonstrates, it capitalized on the opportunity to a greater extent than it had in the 1930s. Examples of partnerships between HBS itself and the government that we have already discussed include the AIC and the Stat School. The Fatigue Laboratory was another initiative that directly involved HBS faculty, partnering them in this program with members of the engineering school in an effort to investigate problems such as oxygen deprivation in pilots and exposure to extreme climatic conditions (Cruikshank, 1987). As discussed earlier, the WPT program bridged the military and private business. And finally, the Trade Union Fellowship Program that ran from 1942 through 1954 brought the perspective of the labor movement to HBS through the 166 American trade union members who attended and took classes with students from the WPT program and the AMP (Copeland, 1958).
However, the faculty Subcommittee on Objectives decided in 1944 that HBS should focus solely on the issues of private enterprise even though the war had demonstrated the usefulness of its training to stakeholders outside of business (Cruikshank, 1987). Many schools followed suit, initiating executive education programs that emulated HBS's AMP (McDonald, 2017). Thus, while the new network of supportive contacts in government fostered during WW2 left HBS well positioned to interact with the growing federal government, it nonetheless missed an opportunity to apply what it had learned from its relationships with key stakeholders during the New Deal/WW2 era about serving as a crossroad for multi-stakeholder conversations. In fact, very few textbooks from that era show any evidence that lessons from the programs and agencies of the New Deal were incorporated into the business curricula at any schools let alone HBS (Foster et al., 2014).

4.1.3 | Summary

Fragueiro and Thomas (2011) suggest that crises provide the business school with opportunities to create a new business model. For example, INSEAD began planning for a new Singapore campus in the late-1990s to gain a foothold in Asia. Dean Antonio Borges moved ahead with the plan even after the Asian financial crisis broke out, as he felt that firms would need INSEAD's executive programs when the crisis abated. When the campus opened in 2000, Asian economies were still struggling in the face of global terrorist attacks and an outbreak of the respiratory disease SARS in Singapore, but enrollment of Asian students sharply increased over the next decade, creating new revenue for the school (Fragueiro & Thomas, 2011). While this seems like a success story, it is fair to ask whether INSEAD’s curriculum reflects any of the lessons learned by the school’s leaders as they navigated their way through the Asian financial crisis. In the end, does altering the business school model without addressing what is taught and why simply ignore the causes that lead to the crisis?

Whereas the first lesson that we discussed above speaks to an innovation process that individual schools can adopt to survive a crisis and potentially improve performance, the second lesson raises a more fundamental question about the purpose of the business school. The second lesson also leads us to consider whether the business school has an obligation to serve a broader group of stakeholders, not only students interested in a career in business, and if so, what should those stakeholders be taught. Drawing on these lessons, we take up these questions next, as addressing them is critical to the business school’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. We then conclude this section by looking at how the business school might better prepare students to serve society during times of crisis.

4.2 | What is the purpose of the business school and which stakeholders should it serve?

From its supposed humble aspirations of training a new class of professional managers in the late-19th century (Khurana, 2007), the stated purpose of the business school has morphed over its history, with a large portion of the calls to examine its purpose emanating from within its own walls (Parker, 2018). Several deans addressed this topic at AACSB's Annual Meeting in the 1920s and 1930s, a period marked by concerns not unlike those of today about the embrace of laissez-faire market ideology by the business school and the impact of that ideology on human
dignity and economic stability (Khurana, 2007). For example, at the 10th Annual Meeting in 1928, Northwestern Dean Ralph Heilman asked his audience whether the business school performs “a service that is socially desirable?” (Khurana, 2007, p. 178). At the 18th Annual Meeting in 1936, Wharton Dean Joseph Willits told his audience that there should be a broader societal purpose for the business school beyond simply sending graduates “out with a social philosophy concentrated on the goal of ‘a million before I’m thirty’” (Khurana, 2007, p. 181).

While the desire for a “good society” is seen as universal, the definition of “good” and the processes for achieving it are not (Spector, 2008). Even though Heilman and Willits expressed concerns about the business school’s impact on society, neither went into particular detail regarding how to define “socially desirable.” In contrast, Donham presented a clearer vision about his views on a “good society” in several articles published in *Harvard Business Review* in the 1920s and 1930s. His fear was that society was on the brink of revolution, in reference to growing support for socialism in the United States, creating an immediate and real threat to “our civilization” (Donham, 1927, p. 406). Donham’s preferred process for staving off revolution was for business to reform itself from the inside. Thus, to restore stability and maintain democratic capitalism, his “good society,” Donham advocated for the business school to foster “social consciousness” in its graduates (Donham, 1927, p. 412), by training them to consider “emotions and sentiments” as well as individual and group behavior (Donham, 1936, p. 263).

Donham’s arguments about the business school’s obligations to the welfare of society were built upon and adapted by Columbia Dean Robert Calkins and David during the Cold War (Calkins, 1945a, 1945b, 1946; David, 1949, 1950). Their views on what was “socially desirable” were largely shaped by fears of communism (Spector, 2008). While he never used the terms capitalism, communism, or socialism in any of his articles, Calkins (1946, p. 47) spoke about the “conflicting ideologies and divergent conceptions of the appropriate roles of private enterprise and public regulation.” David (1949, p. 2) was more direct, stating that communism presented a challenge to “our way of life”, echoing Donham’s earlier use of “our civilization.” While communism certainly featured prominently in their views about corporate responsibility and the role that the business school should play, the concerns of the business community about a growing federal government increasingly reaching into its affairs were also a factor (Abend, 2014). David (1950, p. 25) specifically warned about the pendulum swinging too far, leading toward a welfare state that would result in the “the loss of human dignity.”

With the collapse of the Soviet Bloc in the late-1980s apparently signifying the victory of capitalism over communism (Fukuyama, 1992), the Cold War significance of the business school was supplanted by the logic of shareholder value maximization (Locke & Spender, 2011). It was not long, however, before this logic came under scrutiny too. Mintzberg (2004) and Ghoshal (2005) squarely placed the blame for the corporate scandals in the early-2000s on the teaching of this view in the business school and its assumptions about the selfishness of humans. Khurana (2007, p. 380) concluded that it is not surprising that “[n]otions of sustained effort to build companies that create useful products and services, provide employment, and contribute to their communities are less and less a part of the aspirations of American business school students” given that creating shareholder value is being taught as the primary task of the firm. This line of critique continued following the financial crisis that began in 2007, as many directly linked the crisis to the business school training received by the leaders of the banks that collapsed (Starkey, 2015; Tett, 2009; The Economist, 2009).

On the cusp of the COVID-19 pandemic, Parker (2018) concluded that not much had really changed despite the calls made after the fall of communism to examine the purpose of the business school more carefully. Rather, Parker (2018) suggests that the business school is still
the bastion of capitalism, even if the overt language of the Cold War is no longer invoked in support of its ideology. Thus, by taking capitalism and the corporation for granted as the starting point in much of what is taught in the business school, what is “socially desirable” comes to be defined as market managerial forms of order resulting in the production of “knowledge for management rather than knowledge about management” (Parker, 2018, p. 37). By focusing solely on the concerns of management, business education then tends to exclude ideas and practices that do not fit this definition of “socially desirable.”

HBS’s story during WW2 suggests that the business school could have adopted a different definition of “socially desirable” service. HBS’s faculty engaged with stakeholders in both the public and private sector through the programs and partnerships that were developed and used its knowledge to help those stakeholders solve a wide range of problems, not just those of the business community. However, much of the promise went unfulfilled as HBS turned inward. For example, the WPT program could have served as a model for how to contend with persistent unemployment and income instability by providing people looking to refresh their skills with periodic retraining and sponsorship by companies looking to hire. Rather, the WPT program was redesigned to serve executives already employed by many of the world’s top companies looking to move into the ranks of top management. Executive programs garnered $168 million in revenue in 2015 for HBS, with new tailored, company-specific programs added to the mix (McDonald, 2017). Thus, there is little wonder that scholars have expressed concerns about “corporate capture” (Pfeffer & Wong, 2004, p. 1510; Starkey & Tiratsoo, 2007, p. 102).

Despite the missed opportunities, ideas have been offered regarding how the business school might perform a “socially desirable” service. As a first step in this direction, Crossan, Mazutis, Seijts, and Gandz (2013, p. 286) call for changes to business education that develop leaders who want to make a “positive difference in the world tomorrow.” However, it is important to determine whether such changes actually reflect a difference in ideological focus or simply reinforce the current focus. Thus, Rynes and Shapiro (2005) suggest that the business school needs to engage with public policy and social concerns that are of interest to a wide variety of business and other constituencies. Freed from focusing exclusively on the concerns of business, scholars in this “public interest model of the business school” (Ferlie et al., 2010, p. S64) will be able to examine, debate, and even teach ideological perspectives and practices that do not neatly fit into market managerial forms of social order.

Over the last decade, there have been promising efforts to re-align the business school to engage with broader societal issues that are of importance to a variety of different constituencies, including but not limited to business. For example, Bard College and the University of Vermont launched sustainability-focused MBA programs in the early-2010s. Many schools also instituted ethics and corporate social responsibility courses (GMAC, 2013), and the 2017 update to AACSB’s accreditation guidelines cite ethics and social responsibility as values critical to achieving its mission. There have also been efforts made to incorporate training about diversity, equity, and inclusion into the curriculum, especially in recognition of the diversity of the students attending business schools (Zhang et al., 2016). The latest call has been for business schools to contend with systemic racism (Contu, 2020; Dar et al., 2020), an issue brought into focus during the COVID-19 pandemic.

One advantage of the university-based business school, as noted by Donham (1933), is that it is part of the larger university community, presenting business scholars with an opportunity to collaborate with colleagues around campus to investigate questions and design classes that are not only of interest to aspiring managers but also to students in other disciplines (Currie et al., 2016). Such initiatives have the potential to expose business students to those
who they will work with from government and the organizations found in Mintzberg's (2015) plural sector. Thus, while the business school's job is likely to remain training people who are going to work in or start their own business, there is an opportunity to foster better understanding between business, government, and the plural sector if offerings are developed that bring people from these sectors together in the classroom.

In practice, what might it mean for the business school if its purpose was to address broader societal concerns rather than simply the interests of business and to expand its audience to also serve people from the public and plural sectors? In agreement with Khurana (2007, p. 318), we suggest that adopting this view “would have obvious benefits for society if it helped foster such virtues as custodianship, duty, and responsibility,” especially for the most vulnerable, not just in the workforce, but in society as a whole. Next, we turn to a discussion of how we might better prepare our students to carry out this important job so that they can serve during future times of crisis. On the surface, the curricular initiatives that we propose may not seem particularly new, but what we hope to show is that they could serve stakeholders inside the business school and beyond.

4.3 How do we better prepare our students for crisis?

In the 2000s, management development programs took the lead by experimenting with flexible, on-demand, “bite-sized” offerings (Armstrong & Sadler-Smith, 2008). University-based business schools followed suit in the 2010s, creating specialized master’s programs, certificates, stackable credentials, and fully online MBA programs (GMAC, 2019). While such offerings have been criticized as simply a ploy to increase the business school’s revenue (Parker, 2018), the COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare the finances of many universities, putting budgets under even more pressure than they previously faced (Bevins et al., 2020). Thus, rather than “fattening up the coffers,” the revenue from the business school and these offerings often subsidizes other university programs unable to cover their costs (Parker, 2018), a trend which does not portend well for the future of the business school or the university.

Nonetheless, the pandemic has accelerated efforts to move instruction online, especially at the undergraduate level (Brammer & Clark, 2020), forcing schools to innovate and experiment with new formats of instruction in real-time. On their face, these efforts to adapt are consistent with the first lesson we discussed above, but the question is whether they simply maintain the status quo or serve broader societal needs. We suggest that new programs that take the idea that business schools can serve society seriously can help universities to become more financially sustainable while welcoming stakeholders from outside of the business school to create a dialogue between sectors about common challenges.

Given the potential for future health crises similar to COVID-19, there will likely be a need for short programs on crisis and risk management. Such programs exist within schools of public administration and business, but the former generally serve people interested in the public sector whereas the latter serve those interested in the private sector. Like Donham (1933), we suggest that there is the possibility to build bridges between schools and offer joint programs that bring stakeholders together from different sectors to engage in an informed conversation that can help them identify key problems of mutual interest that require cross-sector collaboration. It is important to note that our suggestion is not simply for the business school to become a generalist social science school. Rather, its research focus will still be on generating
knowledge about key business functions, but also knowledge that can help business address major questions of public interest in partnership with stakeholders from other sectors.

While business has played an important role in COVID-19 relief efforts, these efforts have frequently been in partnership with other institutions. For example, the 60 organizations that are a part of the Pandemic Supply Chain Network founded by Henry Schein Inc. in 2015 include private sector businesses, government organizations and NGOs (Fortune, 2020). The cross-disciplinary programs that we are suggesting on crisis and risk management could provide an ideal forum for the members of such a network to share what they have learned from their cooperation during the COVID-19 pandemic with current students, putting them in position to work in an organization in their preferred sector with an understanding of how to identify key problems of common interest and collaborate with stakeholders from other sectors during a crisis. Consistent with both lessons we outlined above, proactively establishing such programs can help the business school to emerge from a crisis on a stronger footing while also fostering relationships between sectors that can serve the common good in future crises.

The first key element of a cross-disciplinary crisis management certificate is that its structure should allow for flexibility. To achieve this goal, courses should be modular, stackable, and separable in time and space, allowing for easier transfer. Second, the courses should focus

| Course                          | Certificate: Managing for Uncertainty | Certificate: Operations under Volatility | Certificate: Leading during Disruption | Credits |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|---------|
| Risk Management                 | X                                     | X                                       |                                        | 3       |
| Data Modeling & Visualization   | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 3       |
| Project Management              | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 3       |
| Entrepreneurial Thinking        | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 1.5     |
| Emerging Technologies           | X                                     | X                                       |                                        | 1.5     |
| Statistical Methods for Decision Making | X                                  |                                         |                                        | 3       |
| Supply Chain Management         | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 1.5     |
| Analytics in the Service Industry | X                                  |                                         |                                        | 1.5     |
| Leading Self and Others         | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 3       |
| Leading Organizational Change   | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 3       |
| Teams                           | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 3       |
| Storytelling                    | X                                     |                                         |                                        | 3       |
on helping graduates to understand the challenges faced by organizations in all sectors in times of crisis, rather than simply those faced by business, so that they can learn how to identify common challenges that require collaboration to solve them. Third, the certificate should develop skills and competencies that would allow graduates to manage their organizations based on the threat-flexibility approach of autogenic crisis proposed by Barnett and Pratt (2000) that was discussed earlier. Finally, while course content should reflect that business can address broader societal concerns and not just its own interests, it should acknowledge that business techniques are not always transferrable. Thus, the instructors in such programs will need to be conversant with a wide variety of perspectives on management, not just market managerial ideas.

Table 1 depicts three examples of certificates that each cover a different aspect of crisis management. The focus of the management for uncertainty certificate is on developing competencies around quickly understanding emerging trends and leveraging technologies to make an organization resilient in times of crisis. The focus of the certificate for operations under volatility is on developing competencies around using data to understand risk and guide supply chain decisions in manufacturing and service industries. Finally, in recognition of the importance of leadership and the need for sensemaking in times of crisis (Weick, 1988), the focus of the certificate for leading during disruption is on building competencies around the use of storytelling and narrative to effectively communicate about organizational change.

These certificates certainly include some courses that are familiar such as operations and risk management. However, by embracing modularity and online delivery, these courses could offer maximum flexibility, allowing for incorporation of specialized content based on either student interest or industry idiosyncrasies. More importantly, online delivery allows for single courses to be offered outside of degree programs. Thus, opportunities could be expanded to reach not just aspiring managers but also people looking to enhance a skill, demonstrating an appreciation that no role or job is too small or unimportant in a crisis situation. In the German system of co-determination, worker members of the Aufsichtsrat (works council) have had opportunities such as these to take courses focused on specific skills and short programs about corporate governance delivered by the Fachhochschulen and other universities associated with the Wuppertal Kreis since the 1970s (Locke & Spender, 2011).

5 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, we set out to examine the story of HBS during WW2 to uncover forgotten or obscured lessons that might help us better define the purpose of the business school in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. Each crisis closely followed an economic collapse in which the business school and what it teaches were implicated in the collapse. In addition, the threat to human life posed by each crisis compounded the inequities stemming from the gradual and uneven recovery from each economic collapse. Thus, the similarities between the eras highlight that today’s challenges are not necessarily beyond anything previously experienced, suggesting that there is much we can learn from the past, but such similarities are often missed. Historical analyses can help us to identify commonalities and the ideology driving past decisions made in response to a crisis. By exposing the insularity of our thinking, choice opportunities that were previously dismissed on ideological grounds can be revisited (Kieser, 1994), setting the stage for a response geared toward serving the interests of society-at-large.
The first lesson that we drew from HBS’s story is that leaders need to be willing to experiment in real-time with organizational innovations during a crisis. However, adopting Barnett and Pratt’s (2000) threat-flexibility posture is often easier said than done. While departmental structures, accrediting bodies, and faculty governance handbooks protect faculty (at least to some extent) from unilateral and capricious administrative policies, they also often prevent quick innovation and experimentation (Thayer & Morgan, 2018). Thus, while Donham could invite the faculty to his house for brainstorming in November and have a program ready for the following September in the 1940s, this is not the process typically followed today. Nonetheless, business schools around the globe moved quickly to adopt new modes of content delivery, particularly at the undergraduate level, when the spread of COVID-19 led to the suspension of face-to-face instruction (Brammer & Clark, 2020).

The second lesson that we drew from HBS’s story is that the business school, as part of the broader university community, can serve as a crossroad for stakeholders from both the public and private sector, allowing it to have a broader impact by addressing questions of interest to a variety of constituents, including but not just business. Toward this end, we briefly outlined examples of three graduate certificates that each cover different aspects of crisis and risk management with broad applicability across sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated that it is possible to remotely deliver collaborative programs to stakeholders from different sectors, overcoming the need that HBS faced during WW2 to have all of the participants together in the same location. While participation in a certificate program can lead to higher earnings and better job prospects (Belfield & Bailey, 2017; Gaulke, 2021; Meyer et al., 2020), such offerings can also provide lifelong learning opportunities that allow participants to reassess their own goals and their contributions to society (Fragueiro & Thomas, 2011).

The suggestion to re-orient the business school to engage with broader social issues should not be too surprising given similar calls issued over the past two decades (Ferlie et al., 2010; Pfeffer & Wong, 2002, 2004; Rynes & Shapiro, 2005). Our concern, however, is that the business school will again miss an opportunity to apply the lessons learned from its own past after the COVID-19 crisis abates. Despite its experimentation with new programs and the connections it formed with stakeholders in the public and private sector during WW2, HBS turned inward after the war, seeing its responsibility as mainly serving the interests of business, rather than acting as the bridge between faculties that Donham (1933) envisioned. Many other schools followed HBS’s example. Decades later, in the wake of the Great Recession, two prominent deans also discussed the need for the business school to build bridges given what they saw as a new era “emerging in which there will be closer collaboration between business and government” (Fragueiro & Thomas, 2011, p. 3). And yet, it is not clear that bridges were built this time around either in the decade leading up to the COVID-19 crisis.

Perhaps unspoken assumptions about the ability of capitalism to provide prosperity have prevented recent calls to re-orient the business school from being heeded (Parker, 2018). After the late-2000s financial crisis, prominent business school professors and deans suggested that capitalism needed to be reformed (Henderson, 2020; Martin, 2011). Reminiscent of Donham’s earlier sentiments, the HBS dean at the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, Nitin Nohria, said in a 2019 Harvard Crimson interview that the business school must ask “what can we do to make sure that society’s trust in capitalism remains strong and can be rebuilt.” But is it reason-able to rely on market-based solutions to problems created by market-based thinking in the first place (Giridharadas, 2018)? Thus, by avoiding this difficult question, the business school has not significantly deviated from a model that provides knowledge for managers for the
flourishing of business, rather than knowledge about managing for the flourishing of society. Nonetheless, in the midst of the pandemic, voices in the business school have begun to question the dominant economic narrative (Adler, 2019; Admati, 2021).

Or perhaps an alternative explanation for what prevents the business school from tackling broader societal concerns is our limited understanding of our own past (Bridgman et al., 2016). Historical analyses can be a powerful tool, helping to inform organizational innovation (Kieser, 1994). As demonstrated by our account and analysis of HBS’s story of innovation and collaboration during WW2, the business school can serve a wide range of stakeholders during times of crisis and help to solve problems in the public interest. When we ignore or forget stories such as these, we run the risk of privileging “the history created by a select group of people with a particular goal” (McClaren, 2019, p. 55). Recapturing lessons like those we discussed in this paper has the power to loosen the dominant narrative, allowing us to question the status quo. Thus, our hope is that HBS’s story of service during WW2 inspires our colleagues to examine other stories that can provide additional lessons regarding how the business school can serve society in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and in future crises.

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