

# Dean déjà vu

What is it like to become a business school dean for a second time after a break of 25 years? **Herman Berliner** reflects on the changes he has had to adapt to





The next step in my career was all planned out. After almost a half a century in academic administration, including 25 years as provost of Hofstra University in New York and almost nine years as dean of its school of business, I was set to take a sabbatical and return to the full-time faculty.

I was set and psyched about the move.

However, sometime after I announced my plans and well along in the process of selecting a new provost, the dean of the business school announced that he was stepping down after five years in the position (a typical length of service for a dean).

By this point in time, a new provost was about to be named and a decision needed to be made as to an interim leader of the business school. Hofstra's president asked me to postpone my sabbatical and instead serve as dean of our Frank G Zarb School of Business for the 2015-2016 academic year. Not what I expected; but I have a strong commitment to Hofstra University and to its president and I said yes.

Subsequently, given initiatives that were underway, the president asked that I continue until 2019. It took me longer to respond to this request (though I ultimately said yes). The hesitation was not about the position; business school dean is a great position. You interact with the students, faculty and the university community and you also interact extensively with the business world. The hesitation was purely focused on what made the most sense for me at this stage in my career.

Now that I am in the second year of service as the dean of a school of business after that 25-year break, certain things have become very clear.

The position I left as dean and the position I returned to are two very different things. The title is the same, the position's place on the organisational chart is the same, and you still have great interactions with students, faculty, staff and the business community. But the differences are pervasive.

The environment today is much more competitive on every level and consequently the pace has quickened enormously. (Please note that my comments are not focused on Hofstra; rather this is a discussion of how the role of a business school dean has changed in general and impacted almost all business schools and almost all deans.)

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Twenty-five years ago being dean of an AACSB nationally accredited school in a respected university provided a comfortable niche. Today, national accreditation still matters but there are now multiple rankings and the public is confronted with an ever-increasing number of accreditations, ratings and rankings, often with methodology that is less than transparent.

In business education in the US, national accreditation is not very widespread and does not regulate the number of credits required. In its place many states regulate the masters degree as having a minimum of 30 credits, which would cover any MBA, and national accreditation covers the outcomes (assurance of learning), which are competencies mastered rather than credits earned. Credits that translate into time and money are variables; part of the competition that takes places routinely today.

Not only are we competing on the number of credits, we are also competing on the degrees awarded. A quarter century ago, graduate business education was the MBA degree (unless you went on to the doctorate). Today there are MS degrees available in every business area that provide a shorter more specialised graduate education and typically are 30 credits. They compete with the MBA and often the fewer credits, and consequently lower price of an MS degree, carries the day.

During my earlier spell as a dean, national accreditation was input focused. The number of “terminally” qualified full and part-time faculty in relation to the number of students, faculty scholarship, admissions standards and coursework in all the key business areas were the usual

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determinants in awarding national accreditation. Now the focus is on outcomes assessment, which is more difficult to measure than a simple input. Assessment overall also has to be more decentralised since every course needs to have learning goals that are measurable by evaluating the outcomes.

Integrating all these individual outcomes into an agreed-upon framework of competencies (the required degree outcomes) and then validating these outcomes is a challenge for all of us, a challenge that did not exist previously. And, of course, how you achieve needed outcomes is by definition variable and allows for differing credits per competencies mastered. It is this flexibility that helps fuel a greater level of competition.

Tuition discounting at the graduate level did not exist when I was last a dean. Employers often paid the tuition and those few scholarships that were awarded were usually based on need. Now, given the priority placed by key rankings on the quality of the incoming students (GPA and GMAT scores), the landscape has changed. Consequently, we all work to shape the class.

Discounting has been a norm in recruiting first-time full-time undergraduates and it is now becoming more and more important in recruiting graduate students. A sizeable enough discount rate helps shape the class, just as it helps impact the decision making of possible students. And since employees change jobs much more frequently, employer-paid tuition is now the exception.

Discounting takes many forms—fewer credits constitute a discount, scholarships constitute a discount and dual degrees also represent a discount. If a student combines his or her undergraduate and graduate studies, it often results in a significant savings in time, credits and money. In that way, your recruitment for graduate programmes now begins when (or before) a first-time undergraduate starts his or her first-year programme.

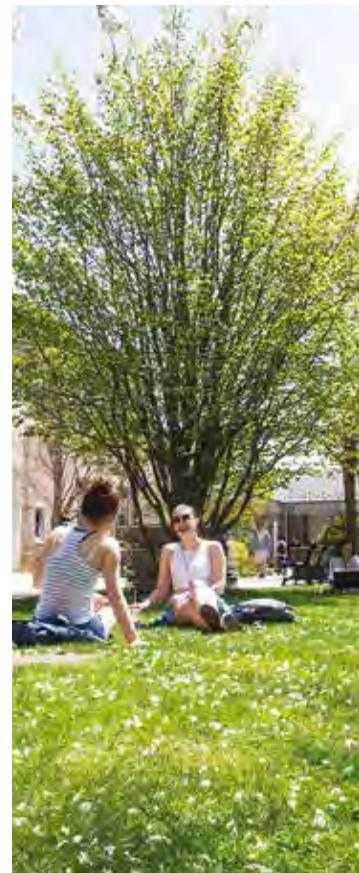
Twenty-five years ago the part-time recruiting area was geographically local and defined by a reasonable commuting distance. Institutional competition was also defined by a reasonable distance. It was likely that the vast majority of the competition was located within no more than an hour and at most two hours commuting distance.

Online and hybrid programmes did not exist, and students tended to apply to one or at most two graduate programmes. But now, with more and more high-quality programmes available online and in hybrid form, the recruiting area is vastly greater and the competition has increased exponentially. And students in significant numbers are applying to many more programmes. With this heightened competition and a recruiting area that is nationwide and beyond, the best school in the area does not always win.

For full-time students, our population is now much more global with a significant numbers of students coming from China and India, other parts of Asia and South America. The last time I was dean, you could count the total number of international students on the fingers of both hands for most business schools. Now in many schools, these students are approaching a majority.

International students add a global perspective to the classroom and are a welcome addition. But the recruiting of these students is competitive and challenging, with many schools relying on third-party recruiters. Having a staff that handles international recruitment or hiring agents to serve as recruiters and/or making use of sophisticated online recruitment are all approaches in wide use. With the number of domestic graduate business students levelling off, international students are more and more important.

However, the present climate may not be conducive to our international recruiting goals. The implementation of a travel ban and related immigration initiatives have led to a large



**Above:**  
Dean Herman Berliner  
the first time and (right)  
the second time



percentage of international students who are now less likely to study in the United States. And at the same time, other countries, seeing the benefit of increasing their international student population, have ramped up their international initiatives and recruitment activities. In addition, if in the short run, the international student population declines in the US, it is not likely that an increase in domestic population will make up for that decline. It will however increase the competition for students across the board – both domestic and international.

In addition to the complexities in recruiting international students, these students often come with needs that must be met, needs that most business schools were not involved in 25 years ago. Immigration regulations need to be adhered to. Reading, writing and speaking skills cannot be taken for granted, even with an acceptable TOEFL score. More support needs to be given; there is really no choice.

And just as international students coming here have a more global view of the world economy and business than students who only study in their home countries, our domestic students also need to attain that global perspective if they are to be fully successful in a world where business is often no longer defined by national borders.

Whereas 25 years ago there were very few study-abroad opportunities at the graduate level, today there not only need to be those opportunities but they also need to include in-depth study of the business environment in whichever country is being visited.

International students and today's domestic students also require more sophisticated and comprehensive career services support. Today's business students attend graduate school sooner (often immediately after receiving their bachelor's degree), are more full-time than part-time, and are less likely to be working and less likely to have significant job experience.



The lack of business experience that is common among many of today's graduate business students also requires us to provide more and more experiential learning opportunities. These hands-on projects provide a helpful proxy for work experience. Internships are commonplace today and incubators on campus and student-managed investment funds are more and more the norm. All of these opportunities and more are what is expected of a good business school today.

Providing all these support and services needed for today's students plus the scholarship support required to attract the best students you are looking for, entails much more than tuition revenue. Fundraising used to provide the icing on the cake and took up a small fraction of a business school dean's time. A key part of that fundraising was in support of recognizing outstanding students and faculty.

Now the fundraising effort is inextricably interwoven with the heart of a dean's mission and the funds support pivotal programmes as often as they provide icing. The time spent by a dean on fundraising has also increased enormously since there is no substitute for face-to-face contact.

Today, at least a day a week would not be an unreasonable amount of time to be devoted to fundraising. It is an important part of what the job requires. Without the fundraising a dean will likely not be successful.

The speed of technological change has also increased greatly. Being dean in a pre-internet world and being dean today are two very different experiences. Our students enter college and graduate school with an impressive level of sophistication.

For us to make best use of this sophistication requires faculty to have a similar level of expertise. But this is not always the case. If faculty are less interested in getting and/or staying up to speed on the latest learning technology, it is up to the dean to provide the necessary impetus. In the past staying current meant relevancy in your discipline; today it also means relevancy in the use of technology. The faculty member's job is more difficult and the dean's job has more oversight responsibilities.



When you consider generational differences, you also need to consider the end of mandatory retirement. During my earlier stint as dean, mandatory retirement was a fact of life. Now life has changed and there is no mandatory retirement whatsoever for faculty.

If faculty are not as up-to-date in their discipline or in technology as they should be (and I am not implying that this correlates to age), your options are limited. Shifts in demand and supply are also harder to reconcile. I don't believe in mandatory retirement but in its absence, bringing in new hires and faculty with emerging areas of expertise are both harder to achieve.

Jobs evolve over time and that includes a dean's job. The complexities can only increase and lead to significantly changed responsibilities.

None of the above detracts from the positive and pleasurable components of being a dean. But they do impact the work/life balance for a dean and the scale is increasingly tilted more to the work side. We need to remember that changes in jobs fundamentally impact interest in pursuing them.

The changes in the job of a business school dean over the past quarter century (a very short period in the calendar of academe) have been immense. Hopefully the best candidates will continue to be interested in and attracted to these key higher-education positions.



#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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