

SOM: Scholars or Managers? A History of Business Education at Yale

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Abstract

Why did it take Yale until 1976 to establish a business school, nearly a century later than many of its peers? This paper argues that the protracted founding of the Yale School of Management (SOM) reflects a long-standing tension between management education and the academic ideals of America's elite liberal arts universities. Drawing on archival documents, university records, and original interviews, it reconstructs the savvy 15-year campaign under President Kingman Brewster to normalize the idea of a business school operating alongside Yale's existing, storied institutions. Rather than compete with a crowded field of prestigious MBA offerings, Yale developed a new and unconventional degree intended to prepare leaders at the intersection of the public and private sectors—though external pressures soon forced SOM to abandon much of its original distinctiveness. The history of SOM's founding provides insight into how institutional identity and cultural politics collided during the transition from “Old Yale” to “New Yale.” Ultimately, this paper illustrates that the same contending ideologies that defined the mid-century debate over SOM continue to shape the university's relationship with business and entrepreneurship in the present day.

Keywords: Yale University, Yale School of Management, business education, liberal arts education, institutional identity, university governance

The Yale School of Management's history webpage begins by stating that in 1971, “The University received a bequest from the estate of Frederick W. Beinecke, PhB 1909, for the creation of a program in management. Two years later, the Yale Corporation approved the creation of a School of Organization and Management” (Yale School of Management, n.d., “1971” section, para. 1).

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Bequest received, school created. It sounds rather neat and tidy. In reality, the creation of a business school at Yale was anything but simple—the true seeds of the business school had been planted decades earlier. While proposals for a business school were raised repeatedly in the early 20th century, the planning effort that finally succeeded came under the tenure of President Kingman Brewster, Jr. (1963–77). When all was said and done, the birth of the School of Management (SOM; see Figure 1) in 1976 took nearly 15 years. The vigorous

Figure 1

School of Management Building



Note. Exterior of the Yale School of Management building. From *Teaching Social Entrepreneurship*, by Yale University, 2018, For Humanity (<https://forhumanity.yale.edu/news/teaching-social-entrepreneurship>)

debates that caused such a delay, and defined the school’s mission, are rich with insight into how Yale perceived itself at the time. Through this lens, the School of Management can be seen as exemplary of the root-and-branch changes embroiling the campus as the university transitioned from “Old Yale” to “New Yale.”

By exploring Yale SOM’s 15-year struggle, this paper unveils the historic tension between business schools and the universities that house them—namely, whether an institution devoted to the liberal arts

can successfully educate students in professional management without straying from its founding ideals. While existing literature has explored this dilemma in the context of the nation’s first business schools at the turn of the 20th century, this paper argues that the contentious founding of Yale’s business school eight decades later speaks to the lasting nature of this debate at elite American universities. President Brewster’s championing of SOM is a master class in political maneuvering, revealing a patient and peacekeeping leader who, thinking years ahead, introduced the university’s first interdisciplinary centers as a stepping stone on the path to a school of management. Even so, Yale’s eventual solution to the question of training scholars or managers—a deliberately unconventional, interdisciplinary “anti-business business school”—aroused significant controversy that no amount of political finesse

could fully dispel, and the school would spend its early decades pivoting, searching for a satisfactory resolution. That Yale's compromise caused broad displeasure is, in retrospect, unsurprising: the difficulty of establishing SOM reveals the persistent tension between traditional academic values and the world of commerce—a tension evident not only in the nation's earliest business schools, but also at Yale in the 1970s and, arguably, into the present day.

American Business Education Before Yale

The earliest schools of management in the United States sprouted alongside the burgeoning white-collar workforce of the mid-19th century. Proprietary and for-profit, these “commercial colleges” operated both locally and as franchises, seeking to supplement young men's apprenticeships with theory-oriented coursework (Conn, 2019, pp. 16–17). They were not regarded as particularly prestigious, and as such, their model of business education was more readily adopted by midwestern state schools than by the genteel universities of the Ivy League, which devised their own approach to management pedagogy (Khurana, 2007, p. 113).

The first modern business school, the Wharton School, was founded at the University of Pennsylvania in 1881 (Johnson, 1931). It was followed in 1900 by Dartmouth's Amos Tuck School, the first graduate school of business, and in 1908 by Harvard's Graduate School of Business Administration, which introduced the MBA degree (Wren, 2005, p. 231). From the outset, these schools were confronted with the same dilemma that stymied Yale. Many members of Penn's faculty at the time viewed Wharton as an unnecessary and unfitting addition to the university (Conn, 2019, p. 8). A trade school had no place among the liberal arts, they argued. Yet, buoyed by substantial alumni pressure and funding, the three schools were established with a shared mission: to transform business leadership into a learned profession “alongside that of ministry, law, and medicine” (Khurana, 2007, p. 114).

Whereas Penn, Dartmouth, and Harvard grew to embrace their role as leaders in the field of professional business education, Yale remained steadfast in its disapproval. Under a long succession of presidents devoted to a humanist undergraduate education, Yale's business school found no footing until nearly a century after Wharton. The throughline tracing this debate—that Yale, 88

years later, found itself still confronting the same controversy its peers had earlier faced—provides a lens through which to evaluate the evolving role and perception of business education at elite universities in the United States. Because the idealist objection to a business school was most entrenched at Yale, the university's eventual compromise reveals, in heightened form, the terms on which the liberal arts university could finally make room for the study of management.

A Zero-Sum Game: Griswold and the Rejection of a Business School

While Yale initially authorized a limited array of business courses, the era spanning the 1930s through the presidency of A. Whitney Griswold (1950–1963; see Figure 2) was defined by a refusal to institutionalize these offerings. Yale's leadership considered a "trade school for businessmen" antithetical to the university's celebrated liberal arts tradition and pointed to the corporate accomplishments of its undergraduate alumni as proof that no such school was needed.

Business education has existed at Yale since the early 20th century. In his account of the early management courses at Yale, John Perry Miller (1986) reported that by 1930, the Sheffield Scientific School ("Sheff") offered programs in Applied Economics and Industrial Administration, equipped with practical syllabi that prepared students for "business or law or industry" (p. 4). They were organized jointly by the Economics Department and the Engineering

Figure 2

Yale President A. Whitney Griswold, 1951



Note. Yale president A. Whitney Griswold on the June 11, 1951, cover of *Time*. Cover illustration by Ernest Hamlin Baker (Baker, 1951).

School. After Sheff was discontinued as a teaching institution in 1945, the programs continued under the banner of Yale College until Applied Economics was dissolved in 1954 and Industrial Administration grew into a proper, research-oriented Department of Administrative Sciences in the 1960s. The department, with a growing emphasis on theory, “would prove to be both an asset and a liability in the launching of SOM” (Miller, 1986, p. 6).

Miller (1986) further noted that the earliest known proposal for a business school at Yale dated back to the 1930s (p. 2). Professor O. Glenn Saxon, head of the Applied Economics program, petitioned the Corporation for approval, presumably noting the popularity of his courses on “federal regulation of business, corporation organization and finance, business organizations and operations and international trade” (“O. Glenn Saxon,” 1962, p. 82). As Miller (1986) recounted, though Saxon assured the Corporation he could solicit enough funding, his efforts were unsuccessful (p. 2). Before long, World War II engulfed Yale along with the rest of the nation. Exploratory expenditures, while always difficult to secure, were now completely off the table. This was the environment that A. Whitney Griswold inherited upon his appointment to the presidency in 1949. As Corporation trustee and philanthropist William S. Beinecke remarked in his 1983 address to the Charter Class of 1978, “it was inevitable that President Griswold viewed Yale’s finances as what we today would call a zero-sum game. That is, any funds required for new educational programs would have to be withdrawn from current programs” (Beinecke, 1983, p. 3).

Griswold dedicated his presidency to ensuring that a Yale diploma would denote the highest tier of humanist education in the world. Anything that did not directly contribute to this mission, such as what he referred to as “a trade school for businessmen,” would be kept on the sidelines (Beinecke, 1983, p. 2). Indeed, at least two formal proposals for a business school were shot down during his tenure. Henry “Sam” Chauncey, Jr. (see Figure 3), an assistant dean under Griswold and later special assistant to Kingman Brewster, noted that he once floated the idea of Yale following MIT’s model of schooling, but inverted to fit Yale’s principles (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025). As Chauncey shared, Griswold was receptive to building Yale into “the greatest humanists in the world, with a core of great scientists,” but they soon realized

Figure 3*Henry "Sam" Chauncey Jr.*

Note. Photograph of Henry "Sam" Chauncey Jr. From *Meet the Author of "May Day at Yale, 1970"* Henry Sam Chauncey, by Pequot Library, 2015, Patch.

that a university had to be either "second rate in the sciences or you have to go all out. There is no middle ground."

In this decision, Griswold had the support of both the Yale Corporation and influential benefactors, including individuals such as Irving Olds, Brewster Jennings, Juan Trippe, John Hay Whitney, and Paul Mellon (Beinecke, 1983, p. 3). Other alumni, however, penned letters to the alumni magazine or the president and complained about Yale's lack of a business school—and Harvard's thriving one (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025). As Chauncey elaborated, they correctly observed that the Harvard Business School (established decades earlier, in 1908) was instrumental in

dethroning Yale with regard to the number of graduates in top executive positions. By 1973, a Standard & Poor's study (Lyons, 1974) found that Harvard had 770 leaders of Fortune 500 companies, of which 610 earned diplomas from the graduate schools. Yale, meanwhile, had only 441 leaders, of which 399 graduated from Yale College. The only other university to crack 200 total executives was Princeton. The study noted that its findings corroborated George W. Pierson's 1952 findings (Lyons, 1974). Despite its runner-up position overall, by this yardstick, Yale's undergraduate program produced the most titans of business by a wide margin in the mid-20th century (Lyons, 1974). That, Griswold argued, said all anyone needed to know about the value of a liberal arts education (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025).

Brewster Carefully Lays the Groundwork

Under Kingman Brewster, Jr. (1963–1977; see Figure 4), a methodical string of committees and reports would provide a growing corpus of recommendations that could justify steps toward a school of management. Brewster pursued this goal indirectly, first normalizing interdisciplinary study at Yale via the Institution for Social and Policy Studies, before casting a business school as the natural extension of these studies. By focusing on problems of both public and private leadership, plans for the burgeoning school sought to position it as a clearly distinguished alternative—not a competitor—to Harvard and Wharton.

Chauncey's interview offered striking insight into Brewster's early years as president (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025). By 1960, Griswold was secretly battling severe colon cancer.

He brought on Brewster from Harvard Law School to serve as Yale's provost and help handle the responsibilities of the presidency. Unbeknownst to the Yale community, Brewster effectively served as president in the year and a half leading up to Griswold's untimely passing in 1963. Even so, Brewster had to endure a five-month search for a formal successor to Griswold, as some on the Corporation had reservations about installing a liberal Republican to the university's highest seat. From an outside perspective, Brewster did not yet command a mandate powerful enough to enact sweeping change at the start of his tenure. Nor was that his intention, since Brewster idolized the witty and affable Griswold; they had sailed together and summered jointly at Martha's

Figure 4

Yale President Kingman Brewster Jr., 1967



Note. Yale president Kingman Brewster Jr. on the June 23, 1967, cover of *Time*. Cover illustration by Robert Vickrey (Vickrey, 1967).

Vineyard. Though he was more amenable to a business school, Brewster was reluctant to push forward with anything that Griswold would have opposed. Moreover, as Chauncey clarified (personal communication, April 21, 2025), he first needed to spend time familiarizing himself with Yale's inner workings from this new vantage point.

In the course of this exploration, Brewster sought to understand the landscape for a potential business school. Under the directive of Brewster and John Perry Miller, dean of the Graduate School, a University Council Report of the Committee on the Graduate School was compiled in December 1964 (Young, 1964). Chaired by George B. Young, BA and PhD in History at Yale and CEO of Field Enterprises, Inc., the report evaluated the existing Department of Industrial Administration as a starting point. The report stated that the committee was impressed with evidence of Yale's many "doers," and suggested that Yale explore a program similar to Oxford's Ethics, Politics & Economics (which the College did eventually adopt). However, for the following reasons, they did not believe Yale should establish a graduate business school:

(a) the fact that Yale would start far behind many leading universities having well-developed business schools, (b) the very large expenditures that would be required to set up such a school *de novo*, and (c) more fundamentally, our serious doubt whether the typical business school curriculum, with its emphasis on "practical" business courses, is really most relevant to the problem in hand. We believe that it would be far better for Yale to write on a fresh slate and work out an entirely new approach to the problem. (Young, 1964, p. 1)

This recommendation, as Miller (1986) detailed, became the guiding principle behind the eventual creation of SOM (p. 8). Rather than compete directly with HBS and Wharton, Yale adopted what might be described as an "if you can't beat them, play another game" strategy. The belief shared by Brewster and the committee was that the most effective training for business should address a broad range of large organizations, both public and private. To make such an institution more palatable at Yale, interdisciplinary studies first had to be normalized. As Chauncey (personal communication, April 21, 2025) explained, "That alone was pushing the envelope. It was not seen as a pure, 'Old Yale' institution."

When Griswold took the helm after World War II, he set about dismantling

the practical and interdisciplinary initiatives that had popped up in the course of Yale's contribution to the war effort (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025). By trimming the university down to discrete departments, Griswold often said he was "purifying the place" (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025). Brewster, an expansionist, tasked himself with reorienting Yale toward growth. Proposals for interdisciplinary centers began taking shape from multiple directions, including one to bolster Yale's secondary and public education research and another to focus on New Haven and urban studies (Miller, 1986, p. 11). Miller (1986) further detailed that funding for these initiatives would come from the deluge of federal subsidies for the social sciences under the Johnson administration's Great Society legislation and a massive influx of alumni donations during the postwar boom of the mid-1960s (p. 12). In Brewster's 1965–66 annual report (as cited in Miller, 1986), he framed the push for interdisciplinary programs in terms of Yale's grander mission:

There is a need to ask a question most fundamental to Yale's origin and tradition, its ambition and its promise. Are we doing everything we should be doing in order to continue to make a disproportionately large impact not only on the arts and the sciences ... but also upon its direction, on its public and private executive leadership? (p. 12)

While a business school was not the answer—the tools taught by a vocational school would quickly grow outdated, he explained—centers for the social sciences would be established in the coming years.

In his 1966–67 annual report, Brewster envisioned the beginnings of a Center for Educational Studies, a Center for Urban Studies, and a Center for the Study of Management (as cited in "A Proposal for the Creation," 1968). Setting the stage for a formal announcement the following year, Brewster argued:

If Yale is to contribute to the leadership of the nation in the next generations by the same measure as it has in the past, ways must be found to apply the new learning in the social sciences to the pressing needs of government and business at the international, national, and community level." (as cited in "A Proposal for the Creation," 1968, p. 9)

In 1968, this official proposal took the form of an Institute of Social Science ("A Proposal for the Creation," 1968), later renamed "by Presidential sleight of hand" the Institution for Social and Policy Studies (ISPS) (Miller, 1986, p. 15). In purpose, ISPS combined the application of the social sciences to human

problems with the education of future leaders in the public and private sectors.

Brewster and the committee behind the proposal anticipated numerous objections to ISPS and addressed them head-on. Explicitly, the report stated that ISPS “is in no sense to replace the important disciplinary work of the departments but to complement and strengthen it by providing new opportunities for cooperation by scholars in a variety of disciplines” (“A Proposal for the Creation,” 1968, p. vii). Similarly, it reiterated that “Yale College is the heart of Yale University” and the liberal arts education it provided would always take precedence over professional education (“A Proposal for the Creation,” 1968, p. 15). The proposal went on to argue that undergraduates already possessed an interest in these societal challenges and that by showing students how pure fields of study applied to these interests, the departments would be strengthened (“A Proposal for the Creation,” 1968, p. 16). In making this argument, the proposal simultaneously linked social science courses to “important contemporary human problems,” aligning ISPS with Yale’s humanist approach to education (“A Proposal for the Creation,” 1968, p. 5). Most importantly, while the proposal did outline a one-year fellowship at ISPS for mid-career leaders, the report emphasized that “what is being suggested is not a management development program similar to that which now exists on many other campuses” (“A Proposal for the Creation,” 1968, p. 12).

While it is true that ISPS was not a business school, unacknowledged in the report was the fact that many alumni proponents of such a school viewed ISPS as a stepping stone toward this eventual goal. “Yale was responding to the urgings of numerous alumni,” explained ISPS’s inaugural director, John Perry Miller; most notably, William S. Beinecke and Milton Steinbach (Miller, 1986, p. 17). Not coincidentally, ISPS itself was the culmination of a deliberately planned sequence of bureaucratic reports. At SOM Alumni Weekend, Beinecke (1983) explained that Miller and Brewster together had sought “to appoint a sequence of committees on the social studies at Yale” (p. 5). Over the years, these had the effect of building upon one another, using the previous committee’s recommendations as evidence that expansion into leadership education and the social sciences was desirable (Beinecke, 1983). As Miller (1986) cynically—and cryptically—stated in his 1986 account of the SOM’s creation, the people involved “did not always articulate their objectives with clarity or complete candor. While we in academia are committed to the pursuit of truth, like other

people we often conduct our daily affairs with calculated ambiguity and dissimulation, if not deceit” (p. 3).

From Chauncey’s perspective, “Brewster’s sole goal was to have an interdisciplinary program and show it could work, and he didn’t know where it would go from there” (S. Chauncey, personal communication, April 21, 2025). By many measures, ISPS was a success. Humanities faculty were unruffled by it, and the social scientists generally appreciated it. The Centers for Educational and Urban Studies were operating by 1969; however, Chauncey further recalled, to the disappointment of many involved with ISPS’s creation, Management Studies was delayed. At first, the delay resulted from insufficient faculty recruitment. But by 1970, nationwide antiwar protests were in full swing across college campuses. At Yale, they culminated in the May Day rally on the New Haven Green, attended by thousands. According to Chauncey (personal communication, April 21, 2025) and Beinecke (1983, p. 7), Brewster navigated the crisis deftly, with empathy and diplomacy. However, he could not push his luck by announcing a management program and risk Yale being seen as a “lackey of corporate America” (Beinecke, 1983, p. 8). ISPS itself was briefly a point of objection by the protesters; Miller was unsure why, but Chauncey (personal communication, April 21, 2025) believed it was due to their concerns about establishing an independent African American Studies Department, rather than one subsumed under the social sciences or ISPS.

Finally, Funding: SOM Takes Shape

To parlay ISPS’s success into the creation of a business school, the administration had to secure three essentials: funding, faculty, and a founding philosophy. A pivotal bequest supplied the funds; the repurposing of the Department of Administrative Sciences supplied the faculty; and the appointment of William Donaldson as dean supplied the school with a model for the leaders they sought to develop. SOM defined itself as a training ground for changemakers working at the intersection of government and business—a risky and ambitious attempt at a new kind of institution.

By the start of 1971, campus unrest had passed, but the delays had significantly hampered efforts toward a management studies center and eventual business school. As Beinecke put it,

with no faculty, no financing, not even any housing at hand for one, the long-sought goal remained remote. As the boom times and expansionist outlook of the 1960s faded into the distance, the prospect of reaching it *ever* became more bleak with each passing month. (Beinecke, 1983, p. 8)

Alumni donations that had been optimistically intended for management training were starting to be used for ISPS's other centers of study. Salvation came in the form of a \$15 million bequest from Frederick W. Beinecke, father of William and an outspoken business school advocate, who passed away in 1971 (Beinecke, 1983, pp. 8–9). With the promise of enough funds to start a school of management on the horizon, Miller received approval in 1972 for a terminal master's program housed under ISPS (Miller, 1986, p. 20), again deriving his justification from passages in the earlier report establishing ISPS ("Institution for Social and Policy Studies," 1972, p. 1). Still, it was neither an MBA nor a business school, but rather "an attractive alternative to existing programs in ... business administration or public administration" ("Institution for Social and Policy Studies," 1972, p. 2).

Thus, funds had been secured and a degree authorized. The only missing components were faculty and a separate institution to house the program. A year earlier, it had been recommended that the Department of Administrative Sciences be terminated, but it survived with only budget cuts (Miller, 1986, p. 19). It was now to be subsumed by this new "Educational Unit," and the faculty aired their concerns through Victor Vroom, chairman of the department and consolidation committee (Vroom, 1973, para. 3). In a letter to Brewster, he expressed "a fear that the high quality doctoral program(s) ... will be lost or drastically changed" and that "the demands of a professional program will reduce Yale's commitment to standards of scholarship and basic research" (Vroom, 1973, para. 2). Although their concerns that a business school would be less academically rigorous remained, the department acquiesced, primarily because its members feared the department would otherwise be shut down entirely (Miller, 1986, p. 24). Miller reported that, after a protracted series of votes and debates, it was decided the program would branch off from ISPS and officially be known as the School of Organization and Management, offering a Master of Public and Private Management (MPPM).

An arduous two-year search thus began for the inaugural dean of SOM. As Victor Vroom (1974) warned, "I am sorry to have to report that some of the

excitement has been lost ... the decision to postpone the introduction of the MPPM program ... [has] been costly to faculty identification with the School and its mission” (para. 4). There was considerable pressure to conclude the search. The two leading contenders were faculty members at the Harvard and Stanford business schools, William Massy and Joseph Bower (Miller, 1974, p. 1). Brewster rejected them due to worries that they would be insufficiently innovative and revert to their previous employers as models for SOM, which, of course, was not a “business” school (Miller, 1986, p. 30).

The magnitude of this concern stemmed from the fact that the mission statement of SOM was unfinished and somewhat unoriginal; without a guiding principle, those candidates might drift back to the familiar. As Henry B. Schacht, a Yale graduate and committee member, wrote to Miller, “our current mission definition is very close to [those] for Harvard and Stanford” (Schacht, 1974, p. 3). The primary reasons for Yale to build SOM, as he saw it, were Yale’s historical role in preparing leaders (who were now seeking graduate degrees in management) and that Yale overall would be “a better and broader, more interesting, diverse and lively place” for it (Schacht, 1974, pp. 1–2). This alone—or even supplemented by arguments that SOM would be smaller, care more for its students, or be values-based—would be insufficient to distinguish the school. The committee needed to find a niche in organizational leadership training that not only addressed an unfilled need but was also distinctive enough that Harvard and Stanford could not easily pursue it. In a June 1975 *New Haven Register* article titled “Yale Business School Far Behind Schedule,” the search committee described kinds of problems SOM graduates might be prepared to address, including relationships between federal agencies and private industries, Federal Reserve decisions affecting bank mortgages, and the delivery of health care (Hemming, 1975).

Although articulating this vision remained an open question, time was running short, and William “Bill” Donaldson was appointed to the role in 1975. A self-described “academic entrepreneur” with an action-oriented approach, Donaldson had experience in both the public and private sectors, including as undersecretary of state for Henry Kissinger, an advisor to Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, and a founding partner of the investment banking firm Donaldson, Lufkin & Jenrette (“Remembering Founding Dean,” 2024). His vision was of an SOM graduate who could seamlessly transition between government and

business, and he immersed himself in every aspect of the developing school. Donaldson was confident this new type of school was necessary:

There was a terrible breakdown in American society [in the tumult of the 1960s] and within that breakdown there was increasing conflict between business and government ... [There was a need for] businessmen who were more cognizant about what government is all about. (Hsieh, 1986)

In *The New York Times*, Donaldson reiterated, “People on the left tend to regard business with suspicion and people on the right are suspicious of government. We need more people who can see the varying shades of grey in between” (Phalon, 1976, p. 53). On September 14, 1976, the School of Organization and Management opened its doors to just such people:

a student body as diverse as the curriculum its members will be asked to absorb ... The class roster includes a partner in a commodities trading firm who already has a doctorate from Oxford, an assistant professor in Japanese history, a theater manager with a master’s degree in fine arts from Columbia University, a network television administrator, and a West Point graduate fresh from armored training at Fort Knox. (Phalon, 1976, p. 53)

As Phalon (1976) reported, the composition of the incoming student body was meticulously planned by Donaldson and his team. Though students were aware there was a risk in committing to an unproven MPPM degree, many were optimistic about the prospect of helping to shape this new institution. Others were proud that SOM was unique in how it packaged and taught management principles (Phalon, 1976).

The “Anti-Business Business School”

Thanks to Donaldson’s efforts, the first cadre of students was one that relished contributing to the school’s unconventional culture. Yet the very distinctiveness that gave SOM its character also left it vulnerable to criticism. As employers puzzled over the MPPM and graduates drifted toward the lucrative private sector, the school spent the 1980s and 1990s rethinking its relationship with conventional business education—that is, how to enhance its reputation without surrendering the mission that justified its existence in the first place.

The eclectic and energetic students of the inaugural class created an environment rich with levity. According to Michelle Spinelli, SOM’s resident

historian (personal communication, April 21, 2025), like the rest of Yale, “it was a very intense place, but there was also a feeling like they weren’t taking themselves too seriously,” a sentiment echoed by many alumni of the Charter Class. Consider the following cartoon from *The New Yorker*, which appeared prominently in the SOM’s weekly bulletin on October 2, 1978 (see Figure 5):

Figure 5

Cartoon About Management Consultants



Note. Cartoon by Edward Koren, reproduced in *Week of 10.2 Bulletin* (October 2, 1978), School of Management, Yale University, Records (RU 486, Box 1), Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

It is this spirit of lighthearted, slightly self-deprecating humor about their part in the “anti-business business school” that defined the infant SOM.

In the spring of SOM’s first year, student Jeffrey Yudkoff organized The SOM Follies of 1977, “a skit-based variety show that parodied the nascent school’s faculty, staff, and academic culture” (Spinelli, 2025, para. 1). During one skit, when the student parodying John Perry Miller was asked how an MPPM differed from an MBA, he stood on a chair and sang, “You know we’re not like them, so hard and cruel, those other business schools” (Spinelli, 2025, para. 8). The production became a unifying event for the school: 35 of the 49 initial SOM

students participated, and the Follies evolved into an annual tradition. SOM's embrace of stories, jokes, and performances illustrates just how "Yale" the school became (see Figure 6).

Figure 6

SOM Follies, 1978–1984



Note. Stills from "SOM Follies" performances from 1978 to 1984. From *The First SOM Follies*, by M. Spinelli, 2025, Yale School of Management (<https://som.yale.edu/story/2025/first-som-follies>).

For all its success in fostering an attractive *esprit de corps*, SOM could not—as Hanna Gray, president pro tempore after Brewster, explained—"create a great school overnight, especially in a universe of already-existing and successful programs" (Gray, 2018, p. 225). The School of Management was no exception, encountering significant hurdles to its mission in the following years. By the 1990s, external pressures were forcing SOM to reevaluate its commitment to both public and private management. Employers were confused by the MPPM degree, and outside scholarships often applied only to actual MBAs (M.

Spinelli, personal communication, April 21, 2025). Further, as one 1981 alumnus recalled, “Instead of the half-and-half mix of graduates taking jobs in government and business, nearly all the graduates took jobs in business” (Perry, 1996, para. 3). This was a deep disappointment to Donaldson, whose vision of “tearing down the academic walls and artificial limitations that were put up between business and public administration” seemed increasingly idealistic (Phalon, 1976, p. 53). Miller’s worries from 1986 were beginning to prove prescient: “is [SOM] destined to become just one more of the schools of business administration, struggling to establish its parity with those whose preeminence was well-established before Yale entered the field?” (Miller, 1986, p. 2).

According to *BusinessWeek* rankings reported by Fellman (2002), SOM ranked 22nd when Jeffrey Garten became dean in 1995 (Yale School of Management, n.d.). Its graduates “were often seen as too businesslike for the nonprofit world, but not tough enough for corporate America” (Fellman, 2002). The following three years were marked by the turbulent restructuring of SOM under Michael Levine, culminating in disgruntled alumni hiring an airplane to fly a protest banner over the Harvard-Yale game (Cheong, 1995). Simultaneously, community members worried that turning Yale into a regular business school would further weaken it, because—echoing discussions from 30 years prior—it was years behind other top business schools. The situation deteriorated to the point that, in 1996, President Richard Levin stated, “I believe SOM should be first-rate or it shouldn’t be prolonged” (Fellman, 2002, para. 8). Jeffrey Garten took over as the eighth dean of SOM, overseeing its transformation into what he described as “unabashedly a hard-edged business school,” while maintaining that SOM remained distinct because “most schools are little more than glorified employment agencies, but our mandate is to educate leaders for both business and society” (Fellman, 2002, para. 17). Its name was shortened to School of Management in 1994, and its degree changed from MPPM to MBA in 1999 (Fellman, 2002). Following its shift toward more traditional areas of study, Yale SOM was ranked first in the nonprofit specialization and 10th overall among U.S. business schools by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2025 (Ethier, 2025).

Business Education at Yale Today

Born at the inflection point of Old Yale and New Yale, the school had the opportunity to redefine what it meant to pursue an interest in business at Yale. In the old days, one alumnus remarked, “half the class expected to wind up in the family business” (Phalon, 1976, p. 53). This was not lost on the wave of new arrivals at Yale in the 1960s and 1970s. At the start of Brewster and Chauncey’s tenures, faculty were vocally protesting that the antiquated admissions process “was biased against intellectuals, artists, scientists, and scholars, and brought in too many conformist future businessmen” (Kabaservice, 1999, para. 16). This put SOM in a precarious position and contributed substantially to its delays: Old Yale viewed SOM as too interdisciplinary and too closely aligned with New Yale, while New Yale viewed SOM as too corporate and too closely aligned with Old Yale. Donaldson and Miller sought to navigate the divide in the SOM they ultimately created, teaching management skills to a diverse group of students—an entirely new type of business school, and a compromise that could have been born nowhere else.

Through the process of its creation, SOM has irrevocably altered Yale’s perception of itself as solely for traditional academia. The school and many entrepreneurial resources created in the wake of its founding align with Yale’s stated mission: “Yale educates aspiring leaders worldwide who serve all sectors of society” (Yale University, 2019, Standard 1, p. 2). As Josh Geballe, senior associate provost for entrepreneurship and innovation, put it, “business is very compatible with Yale’s liberal arts education. We have no debates that it’s a good idea to teach science and engineering, and entrepreneurship is the application of those domains” (J. Geballe, personal communication, April 21, 2025). As the head of Yale Ventures since 2022, Geballe has worked to centralize entrepreneurial resources for undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Just as Yale’s humanist mission fundamentally shaped SOM’s mission, Geballe viewed Yale Ventures as enabling the university to apply its research toward “solving the problems of the real world that people care about” (J. Geballe, personal communication, April 21, 2025). Geballe and Clare Leinweber, executive director of the Tsai Center for Innovative Thinking at Yale (Tsai CITY), observed that more students were interested in business now than 20 years earlier. Leinweber explained that before the dot-com bubble, business was

perceived as stifling and corporate; today, entrepreneurship has made business a far more attractive and attainable pursuit to Yale students (C. Leinweber, personal communication, April 24, 2025).

According to C. Leinweber (personal communication, April 24, 2025), Yale has never been completely sure of its approach to business education, and the internal tensions that defined SOM's founding still exist. Even today, the question remains how extensively Yale should invest in student startups and maximize their growth, at the risk of distracting them from their studies, which would arguably be antithetical to Yale's purpose. Leinweber observed that at Tsai CITY's creation, the prevailing outlook was that "incorporating a startup, generating revenue, raising capital, and then working out of Tsai CITY was crossing a line between the educational and actually doing real-world business" (C. Leinweber, personal communication, April 24, 2025). In Leinweber's view, this philosophy now puts Tsai CITY—whose goal is to support learning and creative innovation broadly—into tension with more business-oriented organizations such as Yale Ventures, which quietly absorbed Tsai CITY in 2024 (C. Leinweber, personal communication, April 24, 2025). Both types of groups, though similar in purpose, represent different manifestations of the entrepreneurial spirit at Yale. For now, that traditionally "Yale" concern—isolating its liberal arts education from business—has faded, as the pendulum swings toward an administrative embrace of student engagement with business. As the ongoing push and pull in Yale's entrepreneurial ecosystem shows, the competing ideologies that framed years of debate on the eventual SOM still shape Yale's perception of itself. The university must heed the voices of students, faculty, and alumni, as business education's role in New Yale continues to adapt to a changing world.

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