It's Alright, Ma (They're Only Failing): How Business Schools Made Modern Universities

Conn, Steven. *Nothing Succeeds Like Failure: The Sad History of American Business Schools*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019. x + 277 pp. $32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-5017-4207-1.

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Historians of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era will find much of interest in Steven Conn's *Nothing Succeeds Like Failure: The Sad History of American Business Schools,* which traces the development—or lack thereof—of college-level business instruction over the past 150 years. Business schools are, perhaps unsurprisingly, a product of the Gilded Age. Some of the era's so-called "captains of industry," seeking to prove that success in business was neither a crapshoot nor confined to a select cadre of elites, championed such programs to prove that theirs was as serious a profession as any. What readers will find more surprising is the extent to which progressives propped up these shaky enterprises. No less a figure than Louis Brandeis, in a commencement address at Brown University in 1912, declared that the proliferation of business schools would lead to a future where big business "will mean professionalized business, as distinguished from the occupation of petty trafficking or mere money-making. And as the profession of business develops, the great industrial and social problems expressed in the present social unrest will one by one find solution" (46). Indeed, business schools were not solely built to stroke the egos of a select few but to promote the greater good. On the latter count, they have failed miserably.

Nothing Succeeds Like Failure reveals that business schools grew up with the modern American university, which itself was "founded on a set of contradictions, competing claims, and compromised positions" (217). While Conn's emphasis on continuity undercuts the high-minded notion that business schools have somehow debased the university, it also makes clear that they have consistently fallen short of their own goals. Nonetheless, they continue to grow in power and scope, hence the book's Bob Dylan–evoking title. In this sense, the book calls to mind *Railroaded,* Richard White's study of the transcontinental railroads, another wildly mismanaged and ill-conceived project that nonetheless enjoyed broad support from the public and all levels of government. The transcontinentals, White argues, "created modernity as much by their failure as their success."[1] Business schools have had a similar impact on American universities. As Conn describes, business schools originally "fit nicely on the landscape of campus because they mirrored the rest of the university." Today they thrive "because the rest of campus now more closely mirrors them" (221).

Rather than taking a comprehensive, chronological approach, Conn's book consists of several case studies. The book's first chapter contrasts early business programs at American universities—most notably the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania—with the more accessible options offered by commercial business schools. Perhaps not surprisingly, the main difference was and perhaps still is the perceived value of the credential the former conferred. The book's most damning chapter takes a close look the curricular ferment that has characterized business schools from the outset. Put simply, undergraduate and graduate business schools have never developed a coherent rationale for why they should exist, nor have they produced much in the way of meaningful research. Other chapters detail business schools' uneasy and ever-changing relationship with the discipline of economics; their role in creating a corporate culture that has marginalized women and people of color; and their track record of responding to major economic crises by rebranding rather than self-reflecting.

The book's final chapter, which effectively serves as an epilogue, outlines how business schools, an innovation of the Gilded Age, helped create the new Gilded Age. That might give them too much credit, whether you agree with the idea that our current moment constitutes a new Gilded Age or not. Still, Conn makes some winning observations here. Business schools, he notes, have "aspired to turn business into a profession and to make professionals out of businessmen. Yet no other profession produces felons in quite such abundance" (206). Like most of us who have taught undergraduates within the last ten years, Conn has heard students' common complaint that they are majoring in business either at their parents' urging or because they see it as a safe path to a career. Just as well, he points out that universities are increasingly run like businesses that view students as customers. Conn also makes sure to remind readers that Donald J. Trump is a proud Wharton alum.

All told, *Nothing Succeeds Like Failure* is persuasive and frequently entertaining, a prime example of how historians can address present-day concerns with style and verve while not sacrificing analytical rigor. The book's thematic organization can lead to a certain degree of repetition, but the structure makes the arguments of the respective chapters stand out all the more. While readers will find many of the book's critiques satisfying, they can be equally dispiriting. Though Conn makes clear there was no golden age of American higher education, it is difficult to view the book as anything but a declension story. Yet in addition to its contribution to historiography on both education and capitalism, Conn's book ought to provide ample ammunition to critics of the business school's outsized place on campus. Rather than leaning on the sentimental and self-congratulatory view that their disciplines are the "heart of the university," advocates of the humanities and liberal arts—in addition to making a positive case for why their work matters—should highlight the myriad failings of business schools. Conn makes abundantly clear that business schools have "disappointed even their most enthusiastic boosters … to an extent simply not true of any other academic pursuit" (10). Though it seems doubtful that any of their powerful supporters on or off campus will care, this point bears repeating.

Note

1 Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York, 2011), xxi.