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Ronald J. Alsop
Wall Street Journal

Will the ethics focus at business schools fade along with the corporate scandals?

That question was put to me when I spoke about corporate reputation last year at the Simon Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Rochester. The MBA student who asked the question seemed skeptical about how dedicated b-schools really are to teaching about ethics and other subjects related to corporate reputation.

I agreed with her that some of the b-school reaction to the scandals did seem to be knee-jerk and could prove to be only temporary. Clearly, there was pressure on the schools to do something fast, with MBA graduates of Harvard Business School and Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management enmeshed in the Enron scandal and President George W. Bush, a Harvard MBA himself, calling for schools to become “principled teachers of right and wrong.”

Not only had schools neglected ethics lessons, but critics also believed they had encouraged students to go to practically any lengths to increase corporate profits and short-term shareholder return. In a public opinion survey

of how companies can repair their tainted reputations, there was clearly an MBA backlash: “Fire all of the MBAs under 35,” one respondent said, whereas another commented, “Listen to common sense and not some off-the-wall MBA.”

For now, of course, it’s too soon to tell how lasting and effective the ethics courses will be. But I remain optimistic that many schools will continue to develop new and better ways to incorporate ethics, as well as social res-

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