The AACSB and Legitimacy: Creating Canadian Business School Wannabes

In the past five years, the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB International) has been focusing on expansion and Canadian business schools have been a target. The number of Canadian business schools achieving accreditation in the last three years has doubled so that now 27% of business schools in Canada are AACSB accredited. While this is well below the U.S. level, the increase is surprising given that ten years ago the views of Canadian business school deans were not that positive, with the majority reporting that they did not support accreditation efforts and specifically did not look favourably upon the AACSB.

This paper explores the forces driving the interest by Canadian business schools in AACSB accreditation. In doing so, the paper examines the strategic efforts undertaken by the AACSB to foster its organizational legitimacy, and then considers the responses and motivations of one group of key institutional actors – Canadian business school deans.

The authors argue that the pursuit of accreditation by Canadian business schools may be considered a direct result of the strategic legitimizing efforts undertaken by AACSB International. Several changes made by the organization are examined, namely the significant changes to its accreditation process in 1991, its use of international accreditation pilots in the late 1990s and its name change in 2001. The authors propose that these changes were strategic choices made by AACSB International in a deliberate attempt to create or reinforce perceptions of their legitimacy through both symbolic and substantive changes.

The responses of Canadian business school deans to the AACSB are examined through an institutional lens, considering three main institutional processes. These consist of the influence of a U.S. educated professoriate, the reproduction or reinforcement of an American ideological perspective through the use of American-based pedagogical methods and materials within business studies and, finally, the presence of institutional isomorphic pressures in the development of the organizational field of business education in Canada, essentially mirroring those within the United States.

The authors conclude that Canadian business schools represent a small and relatively homogeneous population that is dominated by U.S. educated faculty and American pedagogy, and prone to significant isomorphic pressures from south of the border. They contend that AACSB accreditation may be viewed as simply the capstone in a long list of American influences on the Canadian business school, and that Canadian business school deans opting for ACCSB accreditation do so for both strategic and legitimating reasons. They suggest that once the overwhelming majority of Canadian business schools are accredited, the AACSB designation will lose some of its cachet and no longer serve as a differentiating factor. They ask whether the continual pursuit of legitimacy actually strengthens or weakens the business school, and propose that pursuit of legitimacy is a choice that in the end constrains us all.