

**Article Introduction:** In this last paper we return to something approximating a “history” of the ASB as Arlene Haddon and I set out to capture some of the narratives that come together to form that history. Arlene joined the PhD program in 2007 along with Salvador Barragan whose paper we highlighted earlier. Sadly, Arlene died of cancer in early 2013, shortly after successfully defending her PhD thesis – “*Leading on the Edge: The Nature of Paramedic Leadership at the Front Line of Care*”. We dedicate this history to Dr. Haddon.

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**RECAPTURING THE LOST HISTORY OF THE ATLANTIC SCHOOLS OF BUSINESS  
(ASB): STORIES FROM THE EARLY YEARS<sup>1</sup>**

**ABSTRACT**

Knowledge is a source of wealth that is constructed and reconstructed through stories. This study attempts to capture the story of the Atlantic Schools of Business (ASB) through the voices of the people who were involved during the early years.

**The ASB History Project**

The Atlantic Schools of Business (ASB) is one of the longest-running organizations of its type in North America. Consisting of the schools of business from the four Atlantic Provinces (New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland-Labrador) the schools collaborate on matters of mutual concern. Each autumn, a regional conference is hosted by one of the schools on a rotating basis. There is no formal record of the ASB’s early years, and no stories documented to preserve its rich history.

Stories about the past tell the history of an organization and bind people together in ways that may determine future action and promote cultural norms (Brown, Denning, Groh & Prusak, 2005). Storytelling enables people to gather accumulated wisdom (Patriotti, 2004). With the passage of time and the inevitable aging of the original members, the early stories of the ASB will eventually be lost unless they are preserved. The stories reveal the cultural and historical context from which the ASB grew and flourished.

Recognizing that participants are retrospectively reconstructing the history of the ASB, it is likely that the passage of years has sharpened some memories and dulled, distorted or lost others. On the topic of retrospect, Weick (1995) argues that people only know what they know after they have

lived it. Time is used as a methodological lens to allow the past to be reconstructed (Patriotti, 2004). In the ASB History Project, the past is reconstructed by tracing the ASB back to when it was first conceived or when the storytellers first became aware of its existence, perhaps highlighting the event or trouble that resulted in a need for this type of collaboration amongst the schools.

## **BACKGROUND**

A review of the literature reveals that stories serve as a sensemaking device in organizations and are used for social cohesion and to articulate a shared identity and purpose (Hermans, 2003; Brown et al, 2005). Czarniawska (1998) claims that, “the greater part of organizational learning happens through the circulation of stories” (p. 8). What is known is often taken for granted and remains in the silent background of learned experiences within an individual (Patriotti, 2004). Organizational knowledge can be lost when people leave, taking their stories with them (DeLong, 2004). Retrospective sensemaking involves creating meaning by attending to something that has occurred in the past, is influenced by what is happening in the present, is created from a memory, and is affected by the situational context that caused the response in the first place (Weick, 1995). In this instance, we are interested in what caused the formation of the ASB in the first place.

Gathering the stories of those who lived the experience of the formation of the ASB is essential for reconstructing and preserving the rich history, enabling the voices from the past to share their lived experience with present and future generations of the ASB. The concern is not so much with gathering facts, as it is with the story as it unfolds through the voices of those who lived it (Green & Troup, 1999).

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

From an interpretive perspective, the goal is to understand the subjective experience of those participating in the formation of the ASB, representing multiple perspectives of the same event (Burrell & Morgan, 2005). This exploratory study reconstructs the history of the ASB by interviewing the early participants to give voice to their lived experience through stories. In this instance, we are interested in the people who were deans and directors of the schools of business at the critical point in history when the ASB was conceived and began to meet.

Archival records, consisting of program brochures, suggest the ASB was functioning at least by the early to mid 1970's, consequently more than thirty years have passed, and it is reasonable to expect that the deans and directors who were involved at that time are retired, possibly relocated, and potentially deceased. Through word of mouth, former deans and directors of the schools of business were identified and contacted for an interview. Several retired deans still live in the Atlantic Provinces and were eager to meet for an interview and to share their recollections of the formation and early days of the ASB. In total, six former deans or directors were interviewed for this study. An unstructured interview format was used and a list of tentative questions developed to be used as prompts if necessary. It was the intention that the participants be encouraged to tell the stories themselves, highlighting the events and memories that stood out for them. The prepared questions were only used to prompt memories, or to seek specific information if it was not readily recalled. The questions were rarely needed, in fact in one instance when two of the former deans asked to be interviewed together, the stories started before I even arrived, and some scrambling ensued to get pencil and paper ready, and recording equipment started, sharing in a rich,

informative and at times, humorous walk down memory lane.

Interviews were recorded in digital format and later transcribed in print format. The interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory approach, seeking meaning in the stories themselves as they unfolded. The goal of the project was to capture experiences and anecdotes in order to capture the stories that contribute to the ASB history.

## **THE EARLY YEARS**

A small group of deans and directors from some of the schools of business in Atlantic Canada attended the opening ceremony for the new school of business at the University of Moncton in late 1964. It was suggested by one and heartily agreed to by others that it would be beneficial to meet again, perhaps regularly, “*to trade advice and stories*”. Thus, the seed was planted for the collaboration that became known as the Atlantic Schools of Business (ASB). The following year, in 1965, the first meeting took place. No one is quite certain where that first meeting was held or who took the leadership in hosting the event and inviting the others, but everybody interviewed agreed that the collaboration of this group was a valuable one for all who attended. There were eight schools of business at the time, including Memorial University of Newfoundland, St. Francis Xavier in Antigonish, NS, St. Mary’s University, and Dalhousie University in Halifax, Acadia University in Wolfville, NS, Mount Allison University in Sackville, NB, the University of Moncton, and the University of New Brunswick in Fredericton, NB. ASB was born, a small collaborative of like-minded business deans and directors, leaders who saw the value of working together for their mutual benefit and unforeseen possibilities.

The structure was very informal, and developed with few guidelines. There were no written rules, no terms of engagement, and no minutes most of the time. People made notes, and if somebody agreed to something, a reminder letter might follow, but “*Nothing was minuted, moved and seconded, it was just a very informal group of people, meeting...*” There was consensus around who would chair the ASB group of deans, and it rotated among the schools depending on who volunteered, or whose turn it was.

The deans were primarily concerned with administration issues such as budget, hiring, committees served on, how represented on key university committees, and student enrollment. From the interviews, several reasons for the collaboration emerged. These included trading advice and stories, the shared experience of being an insignificant player that was “not fit to eat” within the university community, regional cohesiveness in the national arena where they were treated like small potatoes, development of the faculty “farm team”, and mutual liking and respect.

### **Trading advice and stories**

The reason for meeting initially was primarily communication that led to shared successes. “*In the early years, we traded advice and stories.*” Each school faced similar challenges and members found it beneficial to hear how others were dealing with the same issues within their respective universities and communities.

Transition from 3 to a 4 year program was a major accomplishment of the collaboration, starting

in the late 1960s. In the three Maritime provinces, students were accepted from senior matriculation after grade 12 and students from Ontario were admitted from grade 13, or its equivalent. Students were admitted into a 3-year program, being given credit for certain high school courses. It was called a 4-year program, but most students were exempted from a full year of study. All the deans were in agreement that a 4-year program was essential, but there were all kinds of issues to overcome. Some sacrifices had to be made, and some members needed to be convinced, but eventually agreement was reached, and they were united to get a 4-year program of study for business in the Atlantic Region. That was felt to be a major accomplishment for the ASB and strengthened the programs. It created internal problems for some schools from the admissions officers, but the deans were all united, and it was instituted at all schools. That was felt to be THE major accomplishment at the time, and that success showed them that they could accomplish more together than they could individually.

A second accomplishment that was credited to the friendship between the deans was the development of the centers for small business and entrepreneurship in several of the Atlantic schools, including Memorial University in Newfoundland, Acadia University in Wolfville, the University of Moncton, and the University of Prince Edward Island. The federal funding that enabled the centers to develop came about because of a proposal from one of the deans that was supported and shared throughout the Atlantic region. *“That’s an offshoot of the ASB and you can give some credit to that association for getting those centers of small business and entrepreneurship going”*.

### **Not fit to eat.**

A second theme that emerged from the interviews concerned the shared experience of being perceived as insignificant players within the university community. Each school of business faced similar challenges as small schools within the larger university environment. ASB members gained mutual support from their peers. At the time, in the mid- 1960s, schools of business were small and typically part of another faculty, generally Arts or Sciences, receiving only a tiny share of funding and scholarships. There was little support within the university itself for developing separate business schools and many people saw no place for a business program within the university. In one university, when the matter came to a senate vote, it passed by a narrow margin of only 12-11 in favor. The business schools were seen as an anomaly. Typically, the university president and vice president came out of the core disciplines such as the humanities, social sciences, and sciences. One president was fond of saying that the business school was, *“not fit to eat”*. Despite evidence that demonstrated that the cost to teach business students was the lowest on campus, the prevailing view was that the business faculty was, *“upstarts from across the road”*. There was a false belief that there was no need to increase business faculty salaries because they were making so much money on external consulting.

A change was coming, however, and the explosive growth in student enrollment in the smaller schools of business grew from 50 or 60 students, to 500 or 600 in the space of a decade. As student enrollment began to account for a larger and larger percentage of the student body, the crusade to create a separate faculty for business was successful. Members of the ASB were powerful allies who supported and coached each other in the quest for faculty status. They supported and informed each other on other matters also, such as the creation of named schools

and the development of advisory boards.

*“Information was traded. What are you doing about.....? How many students? How are you doing? Are you having problems? Somebody else might be able to solve it. Some of the deans were well connected with their President, and with government.”* Each would find out what the others were doing, then use that information to convince their respective presidents to make a desired change.” *Well this is how they’re doing It in .... “*

### **Small potatoes in the national organization.**

A third theme that echoed throughout all the interviews was that of being small potatoes within the national organization. The Canadian Association of Business School Deans met annually and was involved in lobbying the federal government for business school funding, exemptions from various immigration laws that restricted faculty recruitment, and other issues of national concern. The Atlantic schools did not have the long history that some of the larger schools had, and the national conference was dominated by schools such as the University of Toronto, McMaster, Western, Concordia and the others, and were considered the “poor cousins”. The Atlantic group met as a subgroup within the national body, meeting for dinner the evening before or breakfast that morning to discuss issues of common concern. They were seen as a powerful resource, and became a model for other regional groups to get together. They became known as “The Maritime Mafia”. In the early days, it was the intent that they would present a united front at national meetings, but that never really happened. It was all about building regional self-confidence. The ASB group had an affinity with the deans from the Western Provinces, because they had a common “enemy”, Central Canada. *“The catalyst for forming ASB was the fact that ASAC didn’t meet our needs, with one big annual conference in Calgary or wherever, there was a need for a local thing”* where local concerns could be vetted.

### **The farm team.**

ASB originally consisted of the deans and directors of the Atlantic Schools of Business, meeting and collaborating on problems and issues of mutual concern from the mid 1960s. One of the greatest accomplishments that has survived and flourished for nearly forty years is the annual academic conference held each fall. The most visible part of the ASB collaborative, most people think the academic conference *is* the ASB.

*“If you said ASB to me, I would think, that’s the administrative operation of the Deans and Directors, to raise problems about administrative issues, but if you said that to a professor, he would say, that’s the academic organization, where I had the chance to do a paper, and it had nothing to do with the administrative side”.*

Because of the rapid expansion within the Atlantic schools during the early years, most faculty were young, inexperienced and few in those days were academics. They were new in the education system and needed opportunities to develop. The deans felt it was imperative that faculty have opportunities to present papers and research, and the chance of being accepted at one of the larger US conferences was slim because the competition was so fierce, with 300 – 500 papers being submitted in a division. Faculty wanted a first-rate quality conference which

would give first preference to local presenters. The idea was to develop a conference that was less competitive without compromising quality, as a training ground, like a farm team. By restricting it to schools in the region, or at least giving them preference, there was a tendency on the part of some people to say it was a second rate conference, but that was not the case. Cost of travel to conferences in distant places was another factor. By developing a regional conference, rather than sending somebody away for \$2000, for \$500 a carload of people could go, sharing the ride and expenses. While the main reason for the conference was to enable people to get experience and status by presenting at a forum where papers were refereed and peer reviewed, there was also a social aspect where faculty teaching in similar areas around the Atlantic region could get to know one another.

The first academic conference was in the late 1960s or the very early 1970s and was quite informally organized in the early years. The location rotated from school to school on a voluntary basis, perhaps more often in the larger more central locations that were easier to get to and less costly. The deans were not involved in selecting conference chairs or division chairs, except perhaps to railroad somebody into it. *“Once you agreed to host the event, you either organized it yourself or got somebody to do it. After the first couple of years, the academic side figured things out for themselves, with little input from the deans,”* except to give their support to host it in a given year.

Prominent guests were invited to speak at academic conferences according to who had a contact that might have something timely and interesting to say. *“It was all quite informal.”* Frank Stronach, president of Magna Auto Parts whose daughter, Belinda Stronach is an MP, was one of the early speakers. The business schools in the Atlantic region were well connected with the community. *“I remember one suggestion as a speaker was to have the Premier of the province, so we picked up the phone and called him. In the larger centers, you couldn’t do that.”* The speaker one year when the conference was held at SFX was the president of the Canadian Association of Small Business who had just published a book. *“So we took the Minister of Development with us, to hear him speak”*

### **A nice group of people.**

A final reason given by the participants for why the collaboration was successful was that they genuinely liked each other. *“We met informally, and we knew each other personally.”* Even between the scheduled meetings, they talked on the phone or exchanged letters, discussing matters of common concern, and keeping up with what was happening in each other’s schools.

*“We trusted each other, and that was the great thing, and I don’t know, if we were trying to start it now, if it would be nearly as successful. Everybody was equal around the table. Nobody tried to sway things. I don’t recall seeing ourselves as competitors. We were in the same business together ... why not make sure we were all doing a good job?”*

They looked forward to meeting together several times a year, enjoying lively conversation over dinner the evening before, and extending the stories and laughter through the business meetings the following day. There was a sense that there might have been something different about the deans at that time, something that was perhaps unique to that era in history. *“When you talk about these*

*people, you are talking about a bunch of people who spent their entire career in one place. You don't see that these days. They started teaching too early, it is unlikely to have a 40 year career these days. You just won't see that".*

Although all the schools were chronically short of qualified faculty, there was never a sense that they were “stealing” from one another. If there was a vacancy, and somebody knew a person who wanted to relocate there, perhaps for family reasons or to go back home, they would share that information and perhaps facilitate the hiring. *“When we started, the only competition was among the recruiting people at the Registrar’s office, and their competition wasn’t all that strong”.* Changing roles and passing years may have removed the formal reasons for spending time together, but several of the retired deans still keep in touch, and are keenly interested in what their friends are doing now. It is obvious that even after forty years, the affection for one another remains. It was suggested that it would be fun to host a “reunion” where the deans who were involved in the early formative years of the ASB could share their stories, and perhaps spark some long-forgotten memories. If the stories shared thus far are any indication, bringing the group together would be a very rich experience!

### **Conclusion**

The lost history of the ASB has been richly informed by the stories shared by some of the original deans and directors. In the mid-1960s, this group of men saw a need for a regional collaboration between the Atlantic schools of business in order to discuss matters of mutual concern in the Atlantic region. The interviews suggest that there was a strong bond and abiding affection between the early members of the ASB that has survived both the passage of time and forty years worth of changes in the personal and professional lives of the members, and in the schools themselves.

Storytelling is how we make sense out of confusion and create individual and organizational identity, transforming random happenings into a memorable story and creating a history in the process (Kearney, 2002). Stories proceed from stories, and it is hoped that by capturing some early memories of the ASB, more stories will emerge, and that the collaboration known as the ASB will have a stronger sense of what it is, as a result of better understanding why it is.

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## Histories of the Atlantic Schools of Business, 2006-2022

The five histories of the Atlantic Schools of Business that we showcased here were drawn from a rich tapestry of papers that were presented at ASB and other conferences since 2006 until 2022. For those interested in the various histories and historic accounts most of these papers will be available from the ASB website by the end of the year (2021).

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