

Business as a vocation: a formative foundation for advancing business toward a true profession

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Abstract

Purpose – Business education faces growing pressure to address declining social trust, ecological challenges, stakeholder expectations and questions about the legitimacy and purpose of business. While efforts to establish management as a true profession emphasize specialized knowledge, ethical standards, public responsibility and social trust, business education often struggles to cultivate the internalized commitment needed to shape managerial identity and practice. This conceptual article argues that vocation is a necessary, though insufficient, formative condition for advancing business toward a true profession. It develops an occupation–profession–vocation (OPV) framework distinguishing three overlapping paradigms: occupation-centered education, focused on competence; profession-centered education, focused on responsibility and public trust; and vocation-centered education, focused on identity, purpose, service, and formation. Building on this framework, the article proposes a vocation-based business education (VBBE) model comprising ecological ontology, ecological epistemology, and formation-centered learning. These elements address the relational nature of business, the dialogical and integrative means of understanding it, and the kinds of persons business schools should seek to form. The article translates vocation from its theological origins into existential-ethical and pedagogical terms suitable for pluralistic and secular institutions. It also presents an implementation architecture involving learning outcomes, reflective and stakeholder-engaged pedagogies, formative assessment, faculty development, institutional alignment, and safeguards against coercion. Artificial intelligence is positioned as a supportive but non-substitutive educational tool. The article contributes to responsible management education by showing how ethics, ESG, CSR, stakeholder theory and PRME can be deepened through the formation of managers oriented toward society and the common good.

Design/methodology/approach – This conceptual article adopts an integrative approach, bringing scholarship on management professionalization into dialog with theological and secular accounts of vocation, responsible management education, stakeholder theory, and formation-centered pedagogy. Through this synthesis, it develops the OPV framework as a diagnostic and constructive model for identifying the contributions and limitations of occupation- and profession-centered business education. It then formulates the VBBE model in response to the formative gaps identified. The study does not test causal relationships empirically but constructs a theoretically grounded framework to guide pedagogical implementation and future empirical research.

Findings – The article finds that competence- and responsibility-centered approaches are necessary but insufficient for forming managers committed to stakeholders, society, and the common good. The OPV framework shows that vocation deepens occupation and profession by integrating competence and responsibility with identity, purpose, service and moral formation. The proposed VBBE model identifies ecological ontology, ecological epistemology and formation-centered learning as mutually reinforcing foundations for responsible management education. Vocation can be translated into pluralistic and secular contexts through reflective, stakeholder-engaged and formation-oriented pedagogy, while artificial intelligence can support but not replace human judgment, conscience and vocational discernment.

Research limitations/implications – As a conceptual study, the OPV framework and VBBE model have not yet been empirically validated. The article focuses primarily on the formative dimension of business professionalization and does not address fully the institutional requirements of a true profession, including professional bodies, governance, self-regulation and public accountability. Future research should test the model across diverse cultural, religious and institutional contexts and examine its effects on ethical reasoning, stakeholder awareness, professional identity, moral imagination and commitment to the common good. Longitudinal studies are particularly needed to assess whether vocation-centered education produces durable changes in managerial judgment and practice.

Practical implications – The VBBE model offers business schools a practical architecture for integrating competence, responsibility, identity, purpose, and service. Schools can embed vocation-based learning through reflective writing, stakeholder dialog, service learning, mentoring, ethical simulations, community-engaged projects and capstone experiences. Assessment should focus on ethical reasoning, stakeholder integration, reflective judgment, and responsible action. Faculty development, mission alignment and safeguards for pluralism and freedom of conscience are essential. VBBE can also support assurance of learning,



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PRME implementation and AACSB societal-impact goals, while using artificial intelligence as a supportive rather than substitutive educational tool.

Social implications – By forming managers whose professional identities are oriented toward stakeholders, society, and the common good, VBBE can strengthen the social legitimacy and public-serving role of business. Its relational and ecological perspective encourages future leaders to recognize the human, social, and environmental consequences of managerial decisions. The model may help reduce the gap between corporate commitments and practice by embedding responsibility within identity and purpose rather than treating it solely as compliance. It also supports more humane and accountable uses of artificial intelligence by placing technology within a broader commitment to dignity, justice, sustainability, stakeholder flourishing and social trust.

Originality/value – This article advances responsible management education by positioning vocation as a necessary formative complement to the professionalization of business. Its originality lies in developing the OPV framework and the VBBE model, which integrates ecological ontology, ecological epistemology, and formation-centered learning. It translates vocation from its theological genealogy into existential-ethical and pedagogical terms suitable for pluralistic and secular business schools. The article also provides an implementation architecture linking vocation to learning outcomes, pedagogy, assessment, faculty development, institutional alignment, and ethical safeguards, while clarifying artificial intelligence's supportive but non-substitutive role in human formation.

Keywords Vocation, Vocation-based business education (VBBE), Responsible management education, Business as a profession, Formation, Stakeholder responsibility, Common good

Paper type Conceptual paper

Business education today stands at a critical crossroads. Faced with growing social distrust, ecological breakdown, widening stakeholder expectations, and renewed questions about the social legitimacy of business, business schools are being challenged to reexamine not only what they teach, but also what kind of persons and leaders they seek to form. The central problem is not simply that business curricula need more courses in ethics, sustainability, or social responsibility. Rather, the deeper challenge is that much of management education continues to operate within an occupation-centered paradigm that emphasizes technical competence, market performance, and analytical skill, while leaving underdeveloped the formative question of how future business leaders come to internalize responsibility for stakeholders, society, and the common good.

In response to this problem, several scholars have argued that management should aspire to become a true profession, comparable in certain respects to law, medicine, divinity, and academic scholarship. A true profession is not merely an occupation requiring specialized knowledge; it is also marked by a public-serving ethos, an altruistic orientation, norms of self-regulation, and a social contract grounded in trust (Khurana and Nohria, 2008; Khurana and Podolny, 2007; Hoffman, 2025). This professionalization argument remains highly important for responsible management education because it asks whether business schools can educate leaders who understand their work not only as a means of private advancement, but also as a form of public responsibility. Yet the professionalization project in business remains incomplete. Although business schools have developed sophisticated bodies of knowledge and increasingly visible discourses of ethics, ESG, CSR, stakeholder responsibility, and responsible management education, these developments have not fully resolved the deeper formative challenge of management education (Khurana, 2007; Khurana and Nohria, 2008; Russo *et al.*, 2023). As Ghoshal (2005) warned, management theories and pedagogies can shape managerial assumptions in ways that affect practice, while recent work on responsible management education suggests that principles often remain high in aspiration but unevenly translated into curricular and institutional action (Russo *et al.*, 2023). Thus, business schools have been less successful in forming the inner orientation through which commitments to stakeholders, society, and the common good become part of the learner's identity, judgment, and sense of purpose.

This article argues that the concept of vocation offers a necessary formative complement to the project of making business a true profession. We do not claim that vocation-based business

education, by itself, can complete the professionalization of business. Professionalization also requires institutional structures, professional bodies, standards of practice, governance mechanisms, and broader social trust. Rather, our more focused claim is that vocation-based business education addresses one of the most neglected conditions of true professionalization: the cultivation of an internalized altruistic orientation toward stakeholders, society, and the common good. In this sense, vocation is not presented as a substitute for profession, but as the deeper formative ground that can help professional responsibility move beyond external compliance toward identity, meaning, and self-transcending service.

To develop this argument, we propose an Occupation–Profession–Vocation, or OPV, framework for reimagining the development of business education. The OPV framework should not be read as a rigid historical sequence or as a simple hierarchy in which one stage replaces the previous one. Occupation, profession, and vocation each name a distinct educational paradigm. Occupation-centered education asks what students must know and be able to do in order to function competently in organizations and markets. Profession-centered education asks how students should act responsibly within standards, roles, and obligations that serve society. Vocation-centered education asks who students are called to become, what purposes should guide their work, and how their talents can be directed toward stakeholders, communities, and the common good. The aim of this framework is therefore diagnostic and constructive: it helps identify the limits of technical and compliance-oriented models of management education, while pointing toward a deeper model of formation.

Building on this OPV framework, the article develops a Vocation-Based Business Education, or VBBE, model that translates the insight of vocation into a framework for responsible management education. Although vocation is rooted historically in religious and wisdom traditions, we argue that it can also be articulated in pluralistic and secular educational contexts as a formative concept concerned with identity, purpose, moral imagination, and altruistic orientation. VBBE therefore does not replace existing approaches to ethics, ESG, CSR, stakeholder theory, or PRME. Rather, it deepens them by asking how commitments to responsibility and the common good become internalized in the learner's identity, judgment, and professional aspirations. In this sense, the article contributes to responsible management education by reframing business education not only as the transmission of knowledge or the development of ethical competence, but as the formation of persons capable of serving business, society, and the common good.

Methodologically, this article adopts a conceptual and integrative approach. It brings scholarship on management professionalization into dialog with theological and secular accounts of vocation, responsible management education, stakeholder theory, and formation-centered pedagogy. Through this synthesis, the article develops the OPV framework as a diagnostic and constructive model for identifying the educational contributions and limitations of occupation- and profession-centered business education. It then formulates the three elements of VBBE as an educational response to the formative gaps revealed through this conceptual analysis. The purpose is not to test causal relationships empirically, but to construct and clarify a theoretically grounded framework that can guide pedagogical application and future empirical research.

The article proceeds as follows. It first examines the limits of occupation- and profession-centered models of business education and then develops the OPV framework as a way of clarifying the formative role of vocation. It next traces the theological and educational meaning of vocation, explains how vocation can be translated for pluralistic business schools, and presents the VBBE model through the elements of ecological ontology, ecological epistemology, and formation-centered learning. The article then discusses implementation architecture, including learning outcomes, pedagogy, assessment, faculty roles, and institutional alignment, before considering AI as a supportive but non-substitutive tool for VBBE. The conclusion summarizes the contribution of business as vocation for the future of responsible management education.

Historical background: from commercial training to professional aspiration

The evolution of management education has followed different historical trajectories depending on cultural and institutional contexts. For instance, the German *Handelshochschule* model, emerging in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, reflected a bourgeois civic ideal in response to Germany's rapid industrialization and growing commercial middle class. These commercial higher schools emphasized applied economics, law, and practical foreign languages—offering an alternative to traditional university faculties that were seen as too theoretical (Kaplan, 2022). In Japan, *Shogyo Kyoiku* (commercial education) was introduced during the Meiji era as part of a broader modernization effort. Strongly influenced by German models, but adapted to Japan's imperial and bureaucratic context, these schools were designed to cultivate loyal and technically skilled civil servants and business administrators, serving the state's industrial and colonial ambitions (Kiyokawa, 2022).

In the United States, business schools developed in the early twentieth century in response to the growth of large industrial enterprises and the perceived need for professional managerial expertise. Their development reflected several distinct but intersecting influences. Scientific management contributed an emphasis on efficiency, measurement, and administrative technique, while case-based instruction and leadership education reflected a broader aspiration to cultivate professional judgment and managerial responsibility (Locke, 2022).

However, a broader pattern becomes visible when we examine these developments in light of the Industrial Revolution, a civilizational turning point that not only reorganized economic life, but also reshaped educational needs and institutional structures. Across regions, business education initially developed as occupation-centered, aimed at producing technically competent administrators for trade, banking, and industry. Over time, there was a significant push to professionalize management education, especially in the United States, mirroring developments in law and medicine. This was an effort to imbue business with a public-serving ethos, ethical standards, and the kind of autonomous judgment expected of professionals.

As Khurana (2007) convincingly argued in *From Higher Aims to Hired Hands*, American business schools originally sought to create a profession grounded in civic purpose and social trust. However, this project was gradually undermined by the rise of market logic and shareholder primacy, leading business schools to emphasize managerial technique and personal gain over public responsibility. This degeneration, Khurana notes, “transformed management from a profession into a market for managerial services” (Khurana, 2007, p. 4).

Similarly, Locke (2022) emphasizes that “the professionalizing impulse in American management education was shaped more by the demands of corporate capitalism than by an ethical or civic mission.” In contrast, the German model, as Kaplan (2022) explains, retained closer links to the civic dimension of professional education through its dual-track system and close university-industry cooperation.

By tracing the evolution from occupation-level technical training to the professional ideal of ethical responsibility, and ultimately toward a vocation-based approach centered on identity, purpose, and human flourishing, we aim to recover a more integrated vision of what it means to educate for leadership in the 21st century. This OPV model not only helps diagnose the current fragmentation of business education, but also points the way forward, toward a pedagogy that is not merely transactional, but transformational.

We are concerned to move business into what social scientists call the “higher” professions of law, medicine, divinity, and academic scholarship. Analyzing these professions, social scientists have identified four elements that are required in order to call an occupation a true profession. These are: (1) an intellectual component—this would entail serious academic training; (2) an altruistic orientation focusing on the needs of others and society—this is perhaps the element most lacking in business; (3) a true professional is a member of a professional body that determines acceptable standards, provides guidance for professional education and a licensing process; (4) an implied social contract between the state and the professions—this means there is a trust that a profession works for the public interest and not

solely for income or power. There is an assumption here that professionals will be virtuous in the professional-client relationship embodying care, concern, and compassion, for example (Ladd, 1997).

While these four elements entailed in a true profession are ideals, they do set the goals for moving ahead in business management development. What most find lacking in business today is the second element, the altruistic orientation (Khurana and Nohria, 2008).

The limits of occupation- and profession-centered business education

The modern development of business education can be understood, in broad terms, as a movement through two dominant educational paradigms: occupation-centered education and profession-centered education. Both paradigms have made important contributions. Occupation-centered education has equipped students with the technical, analytical, and functional competencies necessary for organizational performance. Profession-centered education has sought to place business within a wider moral and social horizon by emphasizing ethical responsibility, public trust, and service to society. Yet both paradigms remain incomplete if business schools are to educate leaders capable of responding to the complex moral, social, ecological, and technological challenges of the present age.

Occupation-centered education: necessary competence, insufficient purpose

The origins of management education are closely tied to the industrial era, when the primary concern was to prepare technically competent administrators for trade, banking, manufacturing, and corporate growth. As discussed in the preceding historical overview, early business education developed through different national and institutional forms but shared a strong occupational orientation toward technical, commercial, and administrative competence. In the United States, this orientation combined efficiency-focused administrative training, influenced in part by scientific management, with case-based pedagogy and leadership education aimed at cultivating managerial judgment (Locke, 2022). These different traditions nevertheless converged around a common educational purpose: preparing capable administrators for increasingly complex organizations and markets.

This occupational model remains indispensable. Business students must learn how to analyze markets, allocate resources, organize work, manage risk, interpret data, and make effective decisions under uncertainty. Frederick W. Taylor's Scientific Management, introduced in 1911, helped shape a managerial imagination centered on measurable efficiency, task optimization, and the separation of planning from execution (Taylor, 1911). Such methods contributed to the rise of modern managerial competence and organizational productivity. Yet they also encouraged a view of management in which human beings could be treated as components within an organizational machine. Critics have argued that Taylorism's separation of thought and action disenfranchised workers and overlooked their intrinsic worth (Witzel, 2012). Braverman (1974), for example, argued that scientific management contributed to the degradation of work by subordinating skilled labor to managerial control. The Human Relations Movement associated with Mayo (1933) recognized the social and emotional dimensions of workers, but it often remained framed within managerial concerns for productivity and control rather than a deeper affirmation of human dignity.

The limitation of occupation-centered education, therefore, is not that it teaches technique, but that technique can become the dominant horizon of management education. When business education is organized primarily around efficiency, performance, and measurable outcomes, students may come to see organizations as instruments, workers as resources, customers as targets, and society as an external environment to be managed. In such a paradigm, the question "What can I do?" becomes detached from the deeper questions "Why should I do it?", "Whom does it serve?", and "What kind of person am I becoming through this work?" Technical education may produce capable managers, but it does not necessarily form responsible persons.

This limitation is also visible in the epistemological and institutional assumptions that have shaped many business schools. [Mulligan \(1987\)](#), drawing on C. P. Snow's "two cultures" thesis, argued that post-war business education became increasingly dominated by the scientific culture of hypothesis testing, statistical modeling, and mechanistic causality, while marginalizing the humanistic culture of meaning, moral agency, and practical wisdom. Likewise, [Abreu-Pederzini and Suárez-Barraza \(2019\)](#) show how business schools in postcolonial contexts have often internalized Western norms and accreditation pressures under the banner of continuous improvement, thereby reproducing epistemic hierarchies and marginalizing local knowledge, ethical reflection, and human-centered values. These critiques suggest that the occupation-centered model is not simply a historical stage; it remains a powerful educational logic that privileges control over conscience, technique over wisdom, and competence over character.

Occupation-level education is thus necessary, but not sufficient. It teaches students how to function effectively within organizations and markets, but it does not by itself teach them how to evaluate the moral purposes of those systems or how to imagine business as a form of service to society. In an age that demands not only competence but conscience, business education must move beyond technical proficiency toward questions of purpose, dignity, and responsibility.

Profession-centered education: necessary responsibility, insufficient formation

The professionalization of management emerged as an effort to overcome the limitations of occupation-centered education. In the early twentieth century, leading business schools in the United States sought to elevate management from a technical trade to a profession comparable in certain respects to law, medicine, divinity, and academic scholarship. [Khurana \(2007\)](#) argues that American business schools originally aspired to form managers with civic purpose and social trust, but that this professionalization project was gradually weakened by the rise of market logic and shareholder primacy. In his words, management was transformed "from a profession into a market for managerial services" ([Khurana, 2007](#), p. 4). [Khurana and Nohria \(2008\)](#) later argued that management should become a true profession, one publicly committed to serving society rather than merely advancing private gain.

A true profession is not defined only by specialized expertise. Social scientists and business ethicists have identified several elements that distinguish a profession from an occupation: a specialized body of knowledge grounded in serious academic training; an altruistic orientation toward clients, stakeholders, and society; a professional body that establishes standards, provides guidance, and supports licensing or credentialing; and an implied social contract through which society grants trust to the profession on the assumption that it serves the public interest rather than merely income or power ([Ladd, 1997](#)). Among these elements, the altruistic orientation is perhaps the most underdeveloped in business and management ([Khurana and Nohria, 2008](#)).

The sociology of professions further clarifies that professionalization is not solely an educational or moral achievement. [Abbott \(1988\)](#) shows that professions emerge and maintain legitimacy through control over specialized knowledge, jurisdictional claims, institutional relationships, and recognition within a wider system of professions. [Freidson \(2001\)](#) similarly presents professionalism as a distinctive form of social organization, sustained by expertise, autonomy, standards, and normative commitment rather than by market or bureaucratic control alone. These perspectives reinforce the limited claim of this article: vocation-based education can contribute to the formative and ethical foundations of professionalization, but it cannot substitute for the institutional structures through which a profession establishes authority, accountability, and public trust.

This professional ideal remains essential for responsible management education. Business schools should help students understand that managerial decisions affect employees, consumers, suppliers, communities, future generations, and the natural environment.

They should also introduce students to ethical reasoning, stakeholder theory, sustainability, ESG, CSR, and responsible leadership. These frameworks broaden the horizon of business education and challenge the assumption that business exists solely to maximize private financial return.

Yet the promise of profession-centered education also remains incomplete. In practice, ethical responsibility can become procedural, external, or compliance-oriented. Students may learn codes of conduct, sustainability frameworks, stakeholder maps, and ESG terminology without internalizing the deeper moral orientation that gives these tools life. Even today, despite the emergence of ESG, CSR, and the UN Principles for Responsible Management Education, responsible management education is often fragmented, dependent on isolated faculty champions, and relegated to peripheral curricular add-ons rather than embedded systematically into core curricula, faculty development, and institutional learning outcomes (Russo *et al.*, 2023).

The gap between professional language and professional formation is also evident in the wider business community. Williams and Park (2025) discuss the continuing criticism directed toward contemporary business leaders and the limited practical uptake of stakeholder-oriented commitments. The Conference Board reports that only 24% of businesses actually take stakeholders and ESG issues into account in decision-making (Spierings and Washington, 2023).

The United Nations Global Compact has raised similar concerns about the gap between corporate commitments and substantive action (Kingo and Murphy, 2020). Although the Business Roundtable redefined the purpose of the corporation in 2019 by declaring a commitment to deliver value to all stakeholders, scholars continue to question whether this statement has produced meaningful change in corporate practice (Business Roundtable, 2019; Perman, 2024).

These concerns point to a deeper educational problem. Business schools have made progress in developing specialized knowledge and introducing ethical and social responsibility into their curricula. However, they have often struggled to cultivate the inner dispositions that make professional responsibility durable: moral imagination, empathy, practical wisdom, courage, humility, and an altruistic orientation toward stakeholders and the common good. As Mulligan (1987) observed, the divide between scientific and humanistic cultures in business education is not merely a matter of curricular content; it reflects deeper assumptions about knowledge, human nature, and the purposes of education. When ethics is added to an otherwise technical curriculum, it can easily become a behavioral constraint, a reputational concern, or a compliance requirement rather than a formative process of character and conscience.

Brunnhuber (2024) offers a more hopeful way of imagining this tension. His account of a “third culture” suggests that contemporary developments in AI, big data, and deep learning may create new possibilities for integrating scientific explanation and humanistic understanding. Such integration may help business education move beyond the opposition between analytical rigor and moral imagination. Yet technology alone cannot resolve the formative deficit of business education. The deeper question remains whether business schools can educate students not only to use tools responsibly, but to become persons capable of discerning worthy purposes, serving others, and exercising judgment in the face of complexity.

Toward a formative turn in business education

The limits of occupation- and profession-centered education point toward the need for a formative turn in business education. Occupation-centered education asks what students can do. Profession-centered education asks how students should act responsibly within roles, norms, and obligations that serve society. Vocation-centered education asks who students are called to become and how their work can serve purposes larger than themselves. This does not

mean abandoning competence or professional responsibility. Rather, it means placing them within a deeper educational horizon of identity, purpose, and service.

The movement from occupation to profession to vocation should therefore be understood not as a replacement of one model by another, but as a widening and deepening of business education. Competence remains necessary; responsibility remains necessary; but both must be grounded in the formation of persons who understand business as a meaningful practice oriented toward stakeholders, society, and the common good. This is the point at which the concept of vocation becomes central. Vocation names the inner orientation through which professional responsibility becomes more than external obligation. It becomes part of the learner's identity, purpose, and way of being in the world.

The OPV framework: occupation, profession, vocation

To clarify the argument of this article, we propose the OPV framework—Occupation, Profession, and Vocation—as a heuristic model for rethinking the purpose and development of business education. The framework is intended neither as a rigid historical sequence nor as a simple hierarchy in which one stage replaces the previous one. Rather, it identifies three distinct but overlapping educational paradigms, each of which highlights an important dimension of management education while also revealing its limits.

The occupation paradigm emphasizes technical competence. It asks what students need to know and be able to do in order to function effectively in organizations and markets. This paradigm has historically shaped business education through the teaching of accounting, finance, operations, marketing, data analysis, and administrative technique. Its strength lies in the development of practical and analytical capabilities essential to business performance. Its limitation is that it can leave unaddressed the moral purposes of business and the wider human consequences of managerial action (Taylor, 1911; Witzel, 2012; Mulligan, 1987).

The profession paradigm expands this horizon by asking how business leaders should act responsibly within roles, norms, and obligations that serve society. Here, business education is not only about technical expertise, but also about ethical standards, stakeholder responsibility, public trust, and service to the common good. This paradigm resonates with the argument that management should aspire to become a true profession comparable in some respects to law, medicine, divinity, and academic scholarship (Khurana, 2007; Khurana and Podolny, 2007; Khurana and Nohria, 2008). Its strength lies in broadening business education beyond functional skill to ethical and civic responsibility. Its limitation, however, is that responsibility can remain external, procedural, or compliance-oriented if it is not rooted in the learner's identity and moral formation (Ladd, 1997; Russo *et al.*, 2023).

The vocation paradigm deepens the question further by asking who students are called to become and what purposes ought to guide their work. Vocation, as we use the term, refers not simply to occupation or career choice, but to a deeper orientation of life in which work becomes connected to meaning, service, and the common good. In this paradigm, the focus shifts from competence alone, or even responsibility alone, toward the formation of persons whose professional lives are shaped by identity, purpose, moral imagination, and an internalized altruistic orientation. Vocation-centered education thus seeks to cultivate not merely capable managers or responsible professionals, but reflective and self-transcending persons who understand business as a meaningful form of service to stakeholders, society, and the wider human community (Francis, 2015, 2019; Delors *et al.*, 1996).

The OPV framework should therefore be understood as an expanding educational horizon. Occupation-centered education forms competence. Profession-centered education forms responsibility. Vocation-centered education forms identity, purpose, and service. These paradigms are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, vocation presupposes rather than abolishes the preceding two. A vocation-centered business education must still cultivate technical capability and professional responsibility. Its distinctive contribution is that it integrates these within a deeper process of formation.

This understanding also clarifies the limited but important claim of the present article. We do not argue that vocation replaces profession, nor that vocation-based business education by itself completes the professionalization of business. Rather, we argue that vocation provides the formative depth that the project of professionalization often lacks. If occupation answers the question “What can I do?” and profession answers the question “How should I act responsibly?”, vocation answers the more fundamental question “Who am I called to become, and for whom is my work?” In this way, the OPV framework provides the conceptual bridge between the critique of occupation- and profession-centered business education and the proposal of the Vocation-Based Business Education (VBBE) model developed in the following section. [Table 1](#) summarizes the central questions, educational aims, and core emphases of these three paradigms.

Vocation: theological genealogy and educational meaning

The term vocation is often used loosely in contemporary English to mean occupation, career, or employment. In this article, however, we use the term in a more demanding and formative sense. Vocation refers not simply to the work one performs, but to a calling that shapes one’s identity, purposes, responsibilities, and orientation toward others. In the context of business education, this distinction is crucial. To educate students for business as vocation is not merely to help them choose a career or acquire professional skills. It is to form reflective persons who understand business leadership as a meaningful form of service to stakeholders, society, and the common good.

Contemporary research on calling reinforces this distinction between vocation and employment or career advancement. [Wrzesniewski et al. \(1997\)](#) distinguish among work understood as a job, a career, and a calling, showing that a calling orientation connects work more closely with fulfillment and contribution to the wider good. [Dik and Duffy \(2009\)](#) similarly define calling and vocation in relation to meaning, purpose, and a prosocial orientation toward needs beyond the self. This literature helps translate the language of vocation into contemporary organizational and educational terms while preserving its emphasis on identity, responsibility, and service.

This understanding of vocation has deep roots in Christian thought. In the New Testament, Paul’s language of calling suggests that each person has gifts that are to be exercised within a larger moral and communal horizon. His exhortation that each person remain in the calling in which he or she was called, together with his insistence that each has a particular gift from God, points to a view of life in which human abilities are not merely private possessions but are entrusted for service (I Corinthians 7:7, 7:20). For the purposes of this article, the important educational insight is that vocation connects personal gifts with responsibility for others.

Augustine deepened this understanding by locating vocation within the restlessness of the human heart. In *The Confessions*, Augustine’s famous claim that the heart remains restless until it rests in God expresses more than a theological doctrine. It also names a profound human search for meaning, fulfillment, and rightly ordered desire (Augustine 397/2009). Vocation, in

Table 1. The OPV framework in comparative perspective

Dimension	Occupation	Profession	Vocation
Central question	What can I do?	How should I act responsibly?	Who am I called to become, and for whom is my work?
Primary educational aim	Competence	Responsibility	Formation
Core focus	Skills, knowledge, performance	Ethics, standards, public trust	Identity, purpose, altruistic orientation

this Augustinian sense, is not reducible to external work. It involves the gradual discovery of what one's life is for and how one's talents, loves, and responsibilities can be integrated into a meaningful whole.

The Benedictine tradition further illuminates the formative meaning of vocation. In the Rule of St. Benedict, education and leadership are not primarily matters of technique, status, or control. They involve the lifelong formation of the whole person through stability, humility, hospitality, listening, and conversion of life. In this tradition, the abbot is not merely a manager but a formator, one who accompanies others in their growth toward maturity, wisdom, and service. This model is especially suggestive for management education because it shifts the role of leadership from the exercise of power to the formation of persons and communities (Hisker and Urick, 2019). It also resonates with the idea that business schools should not only transmit knowledge or teach ethical rules, but also help form identity, purpose, and character.

The meaning of vocation was broadened in an especially important way by Martin Luther. Prior to the Reformation, vocation was often associated primarily with priests, monks, nuns, and members of religious communities. Luther extended the language of calling to ordinary secular work, arguing that Christians serve God by serving their neighbors through the concrete tasks of daily life (Luther 1520/1955-1986). This move is important for business education because it affirms the dignity of secular work. Work in the world is not inferior to explicitly religious life; it can become a place where responsibility, service, and love of neighbor are enacted. In this sense, vocation is not simply an occupation. It is an orientation of one's whole life, including civic responsibility and an altruistic concern to make the world better.

Catholic social teaching, especially as articulated by the Second Vatican Council, also affirms that every person has a vocation lived out in the world. The Council emphasized that lay persons are called to engage temporal affairs and order them toward justice, peace, and the common good (Second Vatican Council, 1964, 1965a, b). This tradition does not deny the importance of professional competence. Rather, it places professional life within a broader horizon of human dignity, social responsibility, and service. A profession, viewed through the lens of vocation, is not simply a means of personal advancement or material success. It becomes one way through which persons participate in the transformation of society.

Pope Francis gives this tradition a contemporary expression especially relevant to business education. He writes that one's personal vocation does not consist only in the work one does, although work is an expression of it; vocation is "a path guiding your many efforts and actions toward service to others" (Francis, 2019). He also describes business as "a noble vocation" when it produces wealth, improves the world, and creates jobs as part of its service to the common good (Francis, 2015, para. 255). These statements are important because they connect vocation directly with business, entrepreneurship, work, and social responsibility. They suggest that business can be understood not only as an economic activity or professional practice, but also as a site of human formation and service.

At the heart of this theological genealogy is the idea of conversion, or metanoia. Vocation requires more than choosing an occupation or complying with professional norms. It involves a transformation in how one sees the world, oneself, and one's responsibilities. In Catholic social thought, this transformation includes what Pope Francis calls ecological conversion: a change of heart through which the interdependence of persons, communities, the poor, the marginalized, and the natural environment becomes a summons to action (Francis, 2015). In educational terms, vocation therefore involves the expansion of the heart as well as the formation of the mind. It asks students not only what they can achieve, but what they are called to serve.

The theological genealogy of vocation is important for this article not because all business schools must adopt a religious vision, but because this tradition offers a rich language for naming what is often missing in business education: the formation of persons whose work is guided by meaning, responsibility, and altruistic orientation. The task, then, is to translate this insight into a form that can be meaningful within pluralistic and secular business school

contexts. The following section therefore distinguishes vocation as a theological concept, an existential-ethical concept, and a pedagogical framework for responsible management education.

Translating vocation for pluralistic business schools

The theological genealogy of vocation provides a rich language for understanding work as calling, service, and the formation of the whole person. In Christian thought, vocation has long been associated with the integration of gifts, responsibilities, meaning, and service, from Augustine's account of the restless heart to Luther's extension of calling to ordinary secular work and the Second Vatican Council's emphasis on the lay vocation in temporal affairs (Augustine 397/2009; Luther 1520/1955-1986; Second Vatican Council, 1964, 1965a, b). Yet business schools today are religiously, culturally, and philosophically diverse. Many operate in secular institutional contexts; many serve students who belong to different religious traditions or to no religious tradition at all. For this reason, vocation-based business education cannot simply import a Christian theological vocabulary into the business school classroom. It must translate the insight of vocation into a form that is intellectually rigorous, ethically meaningful, and pedagogically accessible within pluralistic learning communities.

This translation requires distinguishing among three related but different meanings of vocation: theological vocation, existential-ethical vocation, and pedagogical vocation. These three meanings are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they represent different levels at which the idea of vocation can operate in business education. Theological vocation names the concept in its explicitly religious form. Existential-ethical vocation translates its core insight into a broader human language of meaning, purpose, responsibility, and self-transcendence. Pedagogical vocation refers to the educational practices through which students can be invited to reflect on their identity, values, responsibilities, and contribution to the common good. This layered approach is consistent with broader traditions of holistic education that emphasize not only learning to know and learning to do, but also "learning to be" and learning to live responsibly with others (Delors *et al.*, 1996; Palmer *et al.*, 2010).

Theological vocation refers to the understanding of life and work as a calling before God. In Christian thought, this calling is not limited to clergy or religious life, but extends to ordinary work, civic responsibility, and service to one's neighbor. Luther's account of vocation is especially important in this respect because it broadened calling beyond monastic or clerical life and affirmed the dignity of ordinary work as a site of service (Luther 1520/1955-1986). Catholic social teaching also affirms that lay persons are called to engage temporal affairs and order them toward justice, peace, and the common good (Second Vatican Council, 1964, 1965a, b). This theological meaning is important because it preserves the depth of vocation as more than preference, career fit, or personal success. It reminds us that work can be understood in relation to gifts received, responsibilities entrusted, and a purpose larger than the self. In the context of this article, theological vocation provides the historical and normative source from which the educational meaning of vocation is drawn.

Existential-ethical vocation expresses the same insight in a language that can be shared across religious and secular contexts. At this level, vocation refers to the human search for meaning, identity, moral purpose, and self-transcending contribution. It asks students to consider not only what they are good at, or what career they desire, but what kind of persons they hope to become and how their talents might serve others. This meaning of vocation can speak to students from different religious traditions as well as those with humanistic, philosophical, or secular commitments. It does not require agreement on theological doctrine. It requires only the educational willingness to ask deeper questions about purpose, responsibility, interdependence, and the good life. Pope Francis's account of vocation as a path that guides one's efforts and actions toward service to others is helpful here because it connects vocation not only to religious identity, but also to work, responsibility, and social contribution (Francis, 2019). His description of business as a "noble vocation" when it creates

prosperity, improves the world, and contributes to the common good further suggests that vocation can illuminate the moral and social meaning of business activity (Francis, 2015).

Pedagogical vocation refers to the way these questions are brought into business education. It is not a demand that students disclose private beliefs, adopt a particular worldview, or accept a religious interpretation of business. Rather, it is an invitation to engage in disciplined reflection on the moral and social meaning of work. Pedagogically, vocation can be explored through reflective writing, stakeholder dialog, service learning, leadership narratives, ethical dilemma analysis, mentoring, and community-engaged projects. These practices help students connect professional knowledge with personal identity, stakeholder responsibility, and the common good. They are also consistent with formation-centered approaches to higher education that seek to reconnect intellectual rigor with inner life, moral agency, and social responsibility (Palmer *et al.*, 2010). In the context of business education, such practices deepen stakeholder-oriented learning by asking not only who is affected by business decisions, but also what kind of persons students are becoming through those decisions (Sulkowski *et al.*, 2018).

This distinction is essential for avoiding two risks. The first risk is reduction. If vocation is reduced to career choice, personal passion, or employability, it loses its formative depth. It becomes another tool for individual achievement rather than a way of integrating work, responsibility, and service. The second risk is imposition. If vocation is presented only in explicitly religious terms, it may become inaccessible or coercive in pluralistic classrooms. A responsible vocation-based pedagogy must therefore preserve the depth of the theological tradition while translating it into a language that respects freedom of conscience, cultural diversity, and intellectual pluralism. This is why spirituality, when discussed in VBBE, should be understood in a broad educational sense as reflection on meaning, connectedness, purpose, and responsibility, rather than as sectarian instruction or doctrinal formation (Cacioppe, 2000; Neal, 2013).

For this reason, vocation-based business education should be designed around invitation rather than indoctrination. Students should be invited to examine the purposes that guide their work, the stakeholders affected by their decisions, the values they are willing to stand for, and the kind of contribution they hope to make through business. Faculty, likewise, should not function as spiritual authorities who prescribe a single answer to the question of vocation. They should function as educators, mentors, and formators who create spaces for reflection, dialog, discernment, and responsible action. In this respect, VBBE is not a confessional pedagogy but a formation-centered approach to responsible management education.

In pluralistic business schools, then, vocation can be understood as a bridge concept. It connects theological traditions of calling with secular concerns for purpose, meaning, responsibility, and human flourishing. It also connects responsible management education with the deeper formation of the learner. ESG, CSR, stakeholder theory, and PRME provide important languages of responsibility, but vocation asks how such responsibility becomes internalized as part of a student's identity and professional life. This is especially important because responsible management education has often been described as high in principles but uneven in implementation, with ethical and sustainability commitments frequently remaining fragmented across curricula and institutional practices (Russo *et al.*, 2023). In this sense, vocation does not replace existing responsible management frameworks. It deepens them by placing them within a formative process of becoming. Table 2 summarizes three levels of vocation and clarifies how the concept can be translated from its theological origins into pluralistic business school contexts.

The VBBE model

Building on the OPV framework and the preceding translation of vocation for pluralistic business schools, we now propose the Vocation-Based Business Education (VBBE) model. The purpose of the model is to clarify how vocation can be translated into an educational

Table 2. Three levels of vocation for pluralistic business education

Level of vocation	Core meaning	Guiding question	Implication for business education
Theological Vocation	Life and work as a calling before God	What gifts and responsibilities have been entrusted to me?	Preserves the depth of vocation as calling, service, and commitment to the common good
Existential-Ethical Vocation	Meaning, identity, purpose, and self-transcending responsibility	What kind of person am I becoming, and whom does my work serve?	Makes vocation accessible to students across religious, humanistic, and secular traditions
Pedagogical Vocation	Educational practices that cultivate reflection, discernment, and responsible action	How can students connect knowledge, values, identity, and action?	Translates vocation into reflective writing, stakeholder dialog, service learning, mentoring, and formative assessment

framework for responsible management education. VBBE is not intended to replace occupational competence or professional responsibility. Rather, it seeks to integrate them within a deeper process of formation through which students come to understand business as a meaningful practice oriented toward stakeholders, society, and the common good.

The model is organized around three interrelated but distinct elements: ecological ontology, ecological epistemology, and formation-centered learning. These elements should not be treated as interchangeable terms. Each addresses a different question. Ecological ontology asks what kind of reality business inhabits. Ecological epistemology asks how that reality should be known and understood. Formation-centered learning asks what kind of persons business schools should help students become. Together, these three elements provide the conceptual architecture for VBBE.

Ecological ontology: business as relational and interdependent

The first element of VBBE is ecological ontology. By ecological ontology, we mean a view of human beings, organizations, and markets as relational and interdependent rather than isolated and self-contained. In an occupation-centered model, business is often imagined primarily as a system of production, exchange, competition, and performance. In a vocation-based model, business is understood as embedded within a wider ecology of relationships involving employees, customers, suppliers, investors, communities, future generations, and the natural environment. The organization is not an autonomous machine for value extraction, but a participant in a living network of mutual dependence.

This ontological shift is essential because the way students understand the nature of business shapes the way they understand managerial responsibility. If the firm is imagined as an isolated economic actor, responsibility can appear external or optional. If the firm is understood as relational and interdependent, responsibility becomes internal to what business is. Stakeholder responsibility, sustainability, and the common good are therefore not merely ethical add-ons to business activity. They are expressions of the relational reality in which business already exists. This point resonates with stakeholder approaches to business education, which emphasize that firms are constituted through relationships with stakeholders rather than operating apart from them (Sulkowski *et al.*, 2018).

Ecological ontology thus grounds the altruistic orientation that the professionalization of business requires. It helps students see that the flourishing of business cannot be separated from the flourishing of the human and ecological communities that make business possible. It also reflects Palmer *et al.* (2010) call for higher education to awaken learners to the

interdependence of life and to cultivate an integrated awareness of self, others, and the world. In this sense, ecological ontology addresses the limits of both the occupation model and the profession model. It moves beyond technical efficiency while also deepening ethical responsibility by rooting it in an understanding of interdependence.

Ecological epistemology: knowing through systems, dialog, and self-transcendence

The second element of VBBE is ecological epistemology. If ecological ontology concerns the relational nature of business reality, ecological epistemology concerns how that reality is to be known. Much of business education has been shaped by analytical, quantitative, and instrumental forms of knowledge. These forms of knowledge are indispensable. Students need rigorous analytical tools, evidence-based reasoning, and disciplined decision-making. Yet complex stakeholder, social, and ecological problems cannot be adequately understood through technical analysis alone.

Ecological epistemology expands the meaning of managerial knowing. It emphasizes systems thinking, stakeholder dialog, interdisciplinary inquiry, reflective judgment, and moral imagination. It asks students to learn not only from data and models, but also from affected communities, lived experience, ethical traditions, and future-oriented scenarios. In this sense, knowledge becomes not merely a tool for prediction and control, but a practice of responsible understanding. This broader view of knowledge responds to [Mulligan's \(1987\)](#) concern that business education has often privileged the scientific culture of explanation, measurement, and control while marginalizing humanistic questions of meaning, moral agency, and purpose.

This epistemological shift is closely connected to generative learning and self-transcending knowledge. Generative learning goes beyond adaptation and problem solving; it invites learners to examine and transform the assumptions through which they interpret the world ([Chiva et al., 2010](#)). Similarly, [Kaiser and Peschl \(2020\)](#) argue that self-transcending knowledge enables individuals and organizations to access deeper sources of insight, creativity, and transformation. In the VBBE model, these ideas help explain how students can move beyond merely applying existing management tools toward reimagining business in light of stakeholders, sustainability, and the common good.

This expanded understanding of knowing also connects ecological epistemology to formation-centered learning. [Palmer et al. \(2010\)](#) argue that the renewal of higher education requires awakening learners to the interdependence of all life and cultivating integrative modes of knowing that unite intellectual rigor, contemplative awareness, and ethical responsibility. From the perspective of VBBE, this insight suggests that knowing is never merely cognitive or instrumental. It is also formative: the way students come to know business reality shapes the kind of persons they become and the responsibilities they are prepared to assume.

Ecological epistemology therefore helps move responsible management education beyond the transmission of concepts such as ESG, CSR, or stakeholder theory. It asks how students come to know in ways that are dialogical, integrative, and oriented toward the common good. It also resonates with [Scharmer's \(2009\)](#) concept of presencing, which emphasizes deep listening, awareness, and the capacity to act from emerging future possibilities. Such knowing is not anti-analytical; rather, it integrates analysis with reflection, dialog, imagination, and responsibility.

Formation-centered learning: educating persons for purpose and service

The third element of VBBE is formation-centered learning. If ecological ontology clarifies the relational reality of business, and ecological epistemology clarifies how such reality can be known, formation-centered learning concerns the educational process through which students become capable of acting responsibly within that reality. Formation-centered learning shifts the focus from the mere acquisition of knowledge to the formation of identity, purpose, character, and vocation.

This element draws on the broader literature on holistic and formative education. [Palmer et al. \(2010\)](#) argue that the renewal of higher education requires reconnecting intellectual rigor with the inner life of the learner, thereby fostering both personal wholeness and social responsibility. In a similar spirit, the UNESCO report *Learning: The Treasure Within* identifies “learning to be” as one of the central pillars of education, emphasizing the formation of the whole person rather than the mere acquisition of knowledge or skills ([Delors et al., 1996](#)). For VBBE, this means that business education should cultivate not only professional competence, but also the reflective and moral capacities through which students discern the meaning and purpose of their work.

Formation-centered learning does not mean that business schools should attempt to control students’ inner lives or impose a single moral or religious worldview. It must be practiced through invitation rather than indoctrination. It creates educational spaces in which students can reflect on who they are, what they value, whom their work affects, and what kind of contribution they hope to make through business. Such formation may be supported through reflective writing, stakeholder-engaged learning, service learning, mentoring, leadership narratives, ethical dilemma analysis, contemplative or dialogical practice, and community-based projects.

This formative process can also include careful engagement with spirituality, understood not as sectarian instruction but as reflection on ultimate meaning, purpose, connectedness, and responsibility. Prior work on spirituality in organizations suggests that spiritual development can help individuals connect inner resources with community and a larger purpose ([Cacioppe, 2000](#); [Neal, 2013](#)). More recently, [Nolan et al. \(2025\)](#) argue that engaging “ultimate questions” about identity, purpose, the good life, and relationships with others can foster deeper self-awareness and intentionality in both personal and professional life. In VBBE, such questions are not imposed on students; they are invited as part of a pluralistic process of moral and vocational reflection.

Formation-centered learning also reframes the role of the teacher. The teacher is not only an instructor who transmits knowledge, nor only an evaluator of performance. The teacher also becomes, in a modest and pedagogically responsible sense, a formator: one who accompanies students in the development of judgment, responsibility, and purpose. This role must be exercised with humility, pluralistic sensitivity, and respect for students’ freedom of conscience.

The relationship among the three elements

The three elements of VBBE are mutually reinforcing. Ecological ontology provides the worldview: business exists within a web of interdependence. Ecological epistemology provides the way of knowing: business problems must be understood through systems, dialog, reflection, and self-transcending inquiry. Formation-centered learning provides the educational process: students must be formed as persons capable of acting with wisdom, responsibility, and altruistic orientation within that interdependent world.

Put differently, ecological ontology addresses being, ecological epistemology addresses knowing, and formation-centered learning addresses becoming. The first asks what business is. The second asks how business should be understood. The third asks who students are becoming through business education. Together, they form the core of VBBE, as summarized in [Table 3](#).

This model responds directly to the limits of occupation- and profession-centered education. Occupation-centered education often forms competent managers without sufficient attention to purpose. Profession-centered education introduces responsibility, but it may remain external or compliance-oriented if it does not reach the level of identity and formation. VBBE seeks to integrate competence and responsibility within a deeper formative horizon. Its aim is to cultivate business leaders who are technically capable, professionally responsible, and vocationally oriented toward service, sustainability, and the common good.

Table 3. Core elements of the VBBE model

Element	Core question	Main focus	Educational function
Ecological Ontology	What is the nature of business reality?	Human beings, organizations, markets, society, and nature as interdependent	Grounds stakeholder responsibility and the common good in the relational nature of business
Ecological Epistemology	How should business reality be known?	Systems thinking, stakeholder dialog, reflection, interdisciplinary inquiry, moral imagination	Expands knowing beyond analysis and control toward responsible understanding
Formation-Centered Learning	What kind of persons should business education form?	Identity, purpose, character, vocation, altruistic orientation	Translates vocation into educational practices that form responsible and purpose-driven leaders

If the VBBE model clarifies the conceptual architecture of vocation-based business education, the next task is to explain how this model can be translated into curriculum design, learning outcomes, assessment, faculty development, and institutional practice.

Implementation structure

If the VBBE model provides the conceptual architecture for vocation-based business education, its scholarly and practical value depends on how convincingly it can be translated into educational design. Without such translation, vocation risks remaining an evocative but abstract ideal. The implementation of VBBE therefore requires more than the introduction of a single course, retreat, or elective program. It calls for an integrated architecture of formation in which learning outcomes, pedagogy, assessment, faculty roles, safeguards for pluralistic classrooms, and institutional alignment mutually reinforce one another.

This need for implementation is especially important in light of the persistent principles-action gap in responsible management education. Although ethics, sustainability, stakeholder responsibility, and the common good are increasingly visible in the language of business schools, they often remain fragmented in curricula, dependent on isolated faculty champions, or disconnected from measurable learning processes (Russo et al., 2023). VBBE responds to this problem by shifting the focus from the mere presence of responsible management content to the formation of learners who can integrate such content into their identity, judgment, and professional aspirations.

At the level of learning outcomes, VBBE extends but does not replace conventional business competencies. Students still need disciplinary knowledge and analytical skill. However, vocation-based education asks that these competencies be connected to wider capacities: the ability to recognize the interdependence among business, stakeholders, society, and the natural environment; to analyze managerial decisions from multiple stakeholder perspectives; to reflect critically on one’s own values and purposes; to exercise moral imagination in complex business dilemmas; and to articulate how one’s professional aspirations may contribute to the common good. These outcomes resonate with the UNESCO vision of “learning to be,” which emphasizes the formation of the whole person rather than the mere transmission of knowledge or skills (Delors et al., 1996). They also reflect the call by Palmer et al. (2010) to renew higher education by reconnecting intellectual rigor with the inner life of the learner and with responsibility for the wider world.

Pedagogically, VBBE requires learning environments that support formation as well as instruction. Stakeholder ecosystem mapping, service learning, community-based projects, reflective journals, leadership narratives, executive interviews, cross-disciplinary project-based learning, ethical dilemma simulations, and generative dialog can all help students

encounter business not only as an analytical problem but also as a human, social, and ecological practice. These approaches encourage students to connect professional knowledge with questions of identity, purpose, and responsibility. In this sense, VBBE pedagogy is closely related to generative learning, which invites learners to question and transform the assumptions through which they interpret reality rather than merely adapt existing knowledge to new problems (Chiva *et al.*, 2010). It also resonates with Scharmer's notion of presencing, understood as the capacity to act from emerging future possibilities through deep listening and heightened awareness (Scharmer, 2009).

The formative ambition of VBBE also requires careful attention to assessment. The aim is not to grade students' private beliefs, spirituality, or inner conscience. Rather, assessment should focus on observable evidence of learning: the quality of ethical reasoning, the integration of stakeholder perspectives, the depth of reflection, the ability to identify tensions among competing values, and the development of responsible action plans. Reflective portfolios, rubric-based stakeholder analysis, peer feedback, community partner feedback, capstone projects, and longitudinal learning narratives can provide evidence of such learning without reducing vocation to a standardized psychological measure. This approach is consistent with the idea of self-transcending knowledge, which emphasizes movement beyond habitual patterns of thought toward deeper insight, creativity, and responsible action (Kaiser and Peschl, 2020). It also connects with recent work on "ultimate questions," which suggests that structured reflection on identity, purpose, the good life, and relationships with others can foster greater self-awareness and intentionality in both personal and professional life (Nolan *et al.*, 2025).

Such an approach inevitably reshapes the role of faculty. Faculty remain scholars and instructors responsible for disciplinary rigor, but in a vocation-based model they also become mentors and formators who create spaces for reflection, dialog, discernment, and responsible action. This role should not be interpreted as moral control or spiritual authority. It is better understood as a pedagogical responsibility to model intellectual humility, ethical seriousness, openness to pluralism, and commitment to the common good. Faculty development is therefore essential if VBBE is to move beyond isolated initiatives and become part of the broader educational culture of the business school. This concern echoes Russo *et al.*'s (2023) observation that responsible management education remains fragile when it depends primarily on individual faculty commitment rather than institutional structures, curriculum design, and assessable learning processes.

Because vocation has theological roots and may involve questions of meaning, purpose, and spirituality, VBBE must also include safeguards appropriate to pluralistic business schools. Formation should proceed through invitation rather than indoctrination. Students should not be required to adopt a particular religious or philosophical worldview, nor should they be pressured to disclose private beliefs or experiences. A responsible VBBE pedagogy should use inclusive language, welcome multiple religious and secular perspectives, protect freedom of conscience, and evaluate the quality of reflection and reasoning rather than conformity to any predetermined moral or religious conclusion. Where spirituality is addressed, it should be understood in a broad educational sense as reflection on meaning, connectedness, purpose, and responsibility, rather than as sectarian formation (Cacioppe, 2000; Neal, 2013).

Finally, VBBE should be aligned with existing institutional frameworks rather than treated as an additional burden. In AACSB-related contexts, it can support assurance of learning by articulating measurable outcomes related to ethical reasoning, societal impact, stakeholder engagement, reflective judgment, and responsible leadership. It can also strengthen mission-driven societal impact by helping schools demonstrate how their curricula form leaders prepared to address social, ecological, and technological challenges. In PRME-related contexts, VBBE provides a formative interpretation of responsible management education by linking the Principles to the inner development of future business leaders. In this sense, VBBE

RME

can help bridge the gap between principles and action, mission statements and student formation, institutional commitments and lived educational practice (Russo et al., 2023).

The implementation of VBBE should therefore be understood as an architecture of formation rather than as a discrete pedagogical technique. It can be introduced gradually through core courses, integrative modules, co-curricular experiences, mentoring systems, service learning, and capstone projects. Its success should not be evaluated by whether students adopt the language of vocation, but by whether they demonstrate a deeper capacity to connect business knowledge with responsibility, purpose, stakeholder awareness, and service to the common good. Table 4 summarizes how the three elements of the VBBE model can be translated into learning outcomes, pedagogical practices, assessment evidence, and institutional alignment. The table is not intended as a fixed template, but as an implementation matrix that business schools can adapt according to their mission, student population, curriculum structure, and accreditation context.

AI as a supportive but non-substitutive tool for VBBE

The rapid development of artificial intelligence creates new possibilities for vocation-based business education, but it also clarifies why the formative purposes of VBBE are indispensable. AI can support several aspects of the VBBE model, especially ecological epistemology and formation-centered learning. Used carefully, AI tools can help students map stakeholder ecosystems, simulate complex social and ecological consequences of business decisions, compare alternative scenarios, engage diverse perspectives, and receive prompts that deepen reflection on ethical dilemmas. AI may also assist cross-cultural dialog by

Table 4. VBBE implementation matrix: learning outcomes, pedagogies, and assessment evidence

VBBE element	Learning outcome	Pedagogical practices	Assessment evidence	Institutional alignment
Ecological Ontology	Students recognize business as embedded in interdependent stakeholder, social, and ecological systems	Stakeholder ecosystem mapping; sustainability immersion projects; systems thinking simulations; visits to stakeholder-oriented firms	Stakeholder maps; systems analysis reports; reflective essays on interdependence; sustainability case analysis	Societal impact; stakeholder engagement; PRME values; mission-driven responsible management education
Ecological Epistemology	Students develop integrative, dialogical, and self-transcending ways of knowing business reality	Cross-disciplinary project-based learning; generative dialog; AI-supported scenario planning; social innovation projects	Reflective journals; scenario analysis; peer feedback; interdisciplinary project evaluation; moral imagination exercises	Assurance of learning; ethics and analytical thinking; innovation learning goals; responsible decision-making outcomes
Formation-Centered Learning	Students connect business knowledge with identity, purpose, moral imagination, and service to the common good	Service learning; leadership retreats; Reflected Best Self exercises; ethics-in-action labs; mentoring and executive interviews	Reflective portfolios; ethical reasoning rubrics; community partner feedback; capstone learning narratives; responsible action plans	Responsible leadership; mission alignment; PRME implementation; AACSB societal impact; faculty development

enabling students to engage sources, cases, and stakeholder voices across linguistic and geographical boundaries. In these ways, AI can make certain dimensions of responsible management education more accessible, interactive, and experiential.

This potential is consistent with emerging work on ethical and human-centered AI. [Floridi et al. \(2018\)](#) argue that AI development should be guided by principles such as beneficence, non-maleficence, autonomy, justice, and explicability. Similarly, the OECD AI Principles emphasize trustworthy AI that respects human rights and democratic values ([OECD, 2024](#)), while UNESCO's Recommendation on the Ethics of Artificial Intelligence places human rights, human dignity, transparency, fairness, and human oversight at the center of AI governance ([UNESCO, 2021](#)). The NIST Artificial Intelligence Risk Management Framework likewise defines trustworthy AI in terms of validity and reliability, safety, security and resilience, accountability and transparency, explainability and interpretability, privacy enhancement, and fairness with harmful bias managed ([NIST, 2023](#)). These frameworks are useful for business education because they provide a language through which students can evaluate AI not merely as a technical tool, but as a socio-technical system with ethical, organizational, and societal consequences.

Yet AI should be understood as supportive rather than substitutive. It can generate information, patterns, scenarios, and prompts, but it cannot itself form conscience, exercise moral responsibility, or discern vocation. The central aim of VBBE is not simply to improve the processing of information, but to cultivate persons capable of wisdom, judgment, self-transcendence, and service to the common good. This distinction is especially important in light of Pope Francis's warning that contemporary society may become "rich in technology but poor in humanity" if technological development is not guided by the wisdom of the heart ([Francis, 2024](#)). It also resonates with [Coeckelbergh's \(2020\)](#) argument that AI ethics is not only about technical design, but also about how technologies mediate human relations, responsibility, and forms of life.

Pope Leo XIV's encyclical *Magnifica Humanitas* offers a further and timely theological foundation for this argument. Addressing the safeguarding of the human person in the time of artificial intelligence, Leo XIV insists that technology must be judged according to whether it serves human dignity, the dignity of work, solidarity, social justice, and the common good ([Leo XIV, 2026](#)). This insight directly reinforces the VBBE claim that the decisive educational question is not simply what AI can do, but what kind of persons, purposes, and responsibilities guide its use. In the context of business education, the issue is therefore not only technological literacy, but also moral and vocational formation.

The educational implications of *Magnifica Humanitas* are especially relevant for business schools. If AI intensifies the concentration of power, accelerates decision-making, reshapes work, and mediates social relationships, then management education must prepare students not only to use AI efficiently, but also to evaluate its human, social, and ecological consequences. VBBE provides a framework for such preparation. Ecological ontology helps students see AI systems as embedded in networks of workers, users, firms, communities, regulators, data infrastructures, and natural resources. Ecological epistemology helps students interrogate how algorithmic systems produce, filter, classify, and organize knowledge. Formation-centered learning helps students ask whether their use of AI serves dignity, justice, stakeholder flourishing, and the common good.

At the same time, AI carries serious risks for vocation-based education. Algorithmic systems may reproduce bias, narrow moral imagination, encourage overreliance on automated feedback, or simulate moral dialog without supporting genuine moral formation. [Mittelstadt et al. \(2016\)](#) identify several ethical concerns associated with algorithms, including inconclusive evidence, inscrutable evidence, misguided evidence, unfair outcomes, transformative effects, and traceability problems. [Jobin et al. \(2019\)](#) review of global AI ethics guidelines similarly shows broad convergence around principles such as transparency, justice, non-maleficence, responsibility, and privacy, while also revealing significant variation in how these principles are interpreted and implemented. These concerns suggest that AI ethics

cannot be reduced to the adoption of general principles; it requires ongoing judgment, institutional design, and pedagogical formation.

AI-enabled educational platforms may also intensify surveillance, standardize reflection, or reduce complex questions of identity and purpose to measurable behavioral data. Zuboff (2019) warns that digital systems can transform human experience into behavioral data for prediction and control, while Crawford (2021) shows that AI systems are built upon material infrastructures, labor practices, classification schemes, and power relations that are often hidden from users. These critiques are particularly relevant for VBBE because vocation-based education concerns the inner development of learners, which must be approached with humility, freedom, and respect for conscience. If AI is used in formation-centered learning, it must not convert reflection into data extraction or moral growth into behavioral profiling.

For this reason, AI should be used in VBBE only under clear pedagogical and ethical conditions. It should be designed to expand, not replace, stakeholder dialog; to provoke reflection, not automate judgment; to support faculty mentoring, not displace human accompaniment; and to deepen moral imagination, not produce superficial answers. Binns (2018) reminds us that fairness in machine learning is not only a technical matter but also a question of competing moral and political values. This is why AI-supported learning in business schools must remain embedded in human deliberation, pluralistic dialog, and accountable educational judgment.

AI can therefore strengthen ecological epistemology by helping students see interdependencies more vividly, and it can support formation-centered learning by offering reflective prompts and scenario-based learning experiences. But it cannot replace the human work of discernment, compassion, responsibility, and vocation. The role of AI in VBBE is best understood as that of a pedagogical aid within a larger ecology of human formation. In a vocation-based model of business education, AI must remain ordered to the dignity of persons, the wisdom of the heart, and the common good.

Limitations and directions for future research

This article is conceptual in nature and therefore has several limitations. First, the OPV framework and the VBBE model have not yet been subjected to systematic empirical validation. Although the proposed framework is grounded in literature on management professionalization, vocation, responsible management education, stakeholder theory, and formation-centered pedagogy, its educational effects remain to be examined in actual business school settings. Future research should therefore investigate whether and how VBBE influences students' ethical reasoning, stakeholder awareness, sense of professional purpose, moral imagination, and capacity to connect business knowledge with responsibility for the common good.

Second, the article focuses primarily on the formative dimension of business professionalization. VBBE addresses the cultivation of an internalized altruistic orientation, but it does not by itself establish the institutional conditions required for business to become a true profession. Professional bodies, standards of practice, governance mechanisms, self-regulation, public accountability, and social trust remain essential components of the broader professionalization project. Future research should explore how formative business education interacts with these institutional and structural mechanisms.

Third, the translation and implementation of vocation-based education are likely to vary across institutional, religious, cultural, and national contexts. The language of vocation may carry different meanings in faith-based, secular, and religiously pluralistic business schools, and pedagogical practices that are effective in one setting may not transfer directly to another. Comparative and cross-cultural research is therefore needed to examine how VBBE can be adapted while preserving both its formative depth and its commitment to pluralism and freedom of conscience.

Finally, longitudinal research would be especially valuable. The formation of professional identity, purpose, and altruistic orientation cannot be adequately assessed through a single course or short-term intervention. Future studies should follow students across programs and into their professional lives to examine whether vocation-centered learning contributes to durable patterns of judgment, leadership, stakeholder responsibility, and service.

Conclusion

This article has argued that responsible management education must move beyond the opposition between technical competence and ethical compliance toward a deeper understanding of business education as formation. The central problem facing business schools is not only whether students acquire analytical skills, learn ethical frameworks, or become familiar with ESG, CSR, stakeholder theory, and sustainability. These are all necessary. The deeper question is whether business schools help students internalize an altruistic orientation toward stakeholders, society, and the common good. Without such formation, the language of responsibility may remain external to the learner's identity and professional life.

The OPV framework developed in this article—Occupation, Profession, and Vocation—offers a way to clarify this challenge. Occupation-centered education forms competence. Profession-centered education introduces responsibility, public trust, and ethical standards. Vocation-centered education deepens both by asking how competence and responsibility become rooted in identity, purpose, moral imagination, and service. In this sense, business as vocation does not replace business as profession. Rather, it provides the formative depth that the professionalization of business requires if professional responsibility is to become more than a matter of compliance, reputation, or procedural ethics. This is especially important given the argument that management can become a true profession only when specialized knowledge is joined with altruistic orientation, social trust, and a public-serving purpose (Khurana and Nohria, 2008; Ladd, 1997).

The VBBE model translates this insight into a framework for responsible management education. Its three elements—ecological ontology, ecological epistemology, and formation-centered learning—are intended to show how business schools can educate students to see business as relational, to know business through systems, dialog, and self-transcending inquiry, and to become persons capable of responsible action. In this model, ecological ontology reminds students that firms are embedded in networks of stakeholders, communities, future generations, and the natural environment. Ecological epistemology asks them to move beyond instrumental knowledge toward more integrative and reflective forms of understanding. Formation-centered learning invites them to connect knowledge and skill with identity, purpose, and service.

At the same time, the claim of this article should be understood within clear limits. VBBE is not presented as a sufficient condition for making business a true profession. The professionalization of business also requires institutional reform, professional standards, governance mechanisms, public accountability, and social trust. Rather, VBBE should be understood as a necessary formative condition that can support and deepen the broader project of professionalization. It addresses the inner dimension of professional responsibility: the formation of persons who can inhabit professional norms with integrity, moral imagination, and an altruistic orientation toward the common good.

This contribution is especially relevant to the future of responsible management education. Responsible management education, particularly through PRME, has helped business schools articulate the importance of sustainability, ethics, stakeholder responsibility, and the common good. Yet the field continues to face a principles-action gap, in which responsible management commitments are often visible in mission statements and selected courses but less fully embedded in curricula, assessment, faculty development, and institutional culture (Russo *et al.*, 2023). VBBE contributes to this field by emphasizing that responsible management

education is not only about adding responsible content to business curricula. It is about forming responsible persons who can carry such commitments into professional judgment, organizational practice, and public life.

The language of vocation is useful not because it offers a simple solution, but because it recovers a neglected educational question: What kind of person is being formed through business education? Drawing from Christian and Catholic traditions, as well as broader humanistic and wisdom traditions, vocation names the connection between work, meaning, responsibility, and service. Pope Francis's description of business as a "noble vocation" when it creates prosperity, improves the world, and contributes to the common good gives this insight particular relevance for management education (Francis, 2015). Pope Leo XIV's Magnifica Humanitas further sharpens the urgency of this task in the age of artificial intelligence by insisting that technological and economic development must be judged according to whether it safeguards human dignity, the dignity of work, solidarity, and the common good (Leo XIV, 2026).

Future research should further examine how vocation-based business education can be translated across diverse cultural, religious, and secular contexts; how formation can be assessed without grading students' private beliefs or conscience; how VBBE can be embedded in core curricula and institutional culture rather than remaining dependent on isolated faculty champions; and how AI can support ecological epistemology and formation-centered learning without replacing human discernment. These questions are important because the promise of VBBE depends not only on its conceptual clarity, but also on its responsible implementation in pluralistic business schools.

The future of responsible management education will therefore depend not only on better frameworks, stronger metrics, or more sophisticated technologies, but also on the recovery of formation as a central educational task. Business schools must continue to teach analytical rigor, functional expertise, and professional responsibility. Yet they must also create spaces for reflection, dialog, discernment, stakeholder engagement, and service. They must help students ask not only what they can do, or how they should act, but who they are becoming and whom their work is meant to serve. If business education is to prepare leaders for a world marked by ecological fragility, technological disruption, social distrust, and moral uncertainty, it must educate the head, but also form the heart.

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