



How High is Up? The Rise, Fall, and Redemption of a Sam M. Walton SIFE Fellow

Curtis L. DeBerg. Chico, CA: Memoir
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How High is Up? is a memoir that focuses on the academic career of Curtis (Curt) DeBerg, a Professor of Accounting at California State University Chico, more commonly known as Chico State. DeBerg, an early proponent of service-learning, also served as a SIFE Fellow from 1993-2005. SIFE stands for Students in Free Enterprise and is a club sponsored and administered by Walmart. SIFE's mission is to teach college students about the virtues of free enterprise and to have these students educate the public on the merits of this economic philosophy. DeBerg was the faculty advisor of a SIFE student club at Chico State, and was a SIFE Fellow by virtue of his faculty advisor role. SIFE holds annual regional and national competitions in which SIFE student clubs can compete with each other regarding the activities each club completes in the previous year. The Chico State SIFE team was increasingly successful in SIFE regional and national competitions using service-learning (representing "the rise" part of the subtitle of the book) and won the SIFE national championship in 1999. DeBerg himself was named the national SIFE Fellow the same year. Then, "something happens" between DeBerg and SIFE (particularly one employee of SIFE, Alvin Rohrs, the Chief Executive Officer or CEO), which we are not privy to because legally, DeBerg is not allowed to discuss it as part of settlement terms between SIFE and DeBerg. In the ensuing years, there is a widening gulf between DeBerg and SIFE, primarily because DeBerg has created SAGE, an organization similar to SIFE, but with high school students learning and teaching free enterprise, and college students facilitating this process through service-learning partnership. DeBerg wants SIFE to support and/or to add SAGE to the SIFE umbrella, but SIFE (specifically Rohrs) does not want to. There are more bumps in the road and eventually, DeBerg is no longer welcome at SIFE events and is no

longer a SIFE Fellow (“the fall”). The book ends with brief discussion on humanitarian capitalism and an explanation of where DeBerg stands now in his career and life (“redemption”).

I struggled with this book for several reasons. First, I am not clear of its ultimate purpose. DeBerg calls his book a memoir; while it is a first person account of a story in his life, it reads more like a personal scorecard than a story. The good news is that DeBerg’s students are “on the plus side” of the score sheet. However, many others are not. The people on DeBerg’s “D-list” are subjected to vitriol that I found disconcerting to read; it also made me wonder whether the purpose of this book was to tell an engaging story or to tell the world the author’s opinion on whom he likes and whom he doesn’t. I got the latter from this book, which I find neither enlightening nor professional.

Additionally, disturbing generalizations were included in the book, particularly those about high school teachers:

Not surprisingly, though, I believed there was another reason why many teachers weren’t willing to embrace the concept. An educator who employs service-learning as a teaching strategy necessarily gives up control. Students working on real-world projects face real-world issues, and they are often messy. Teachers who are attracted to this type of teaching—like me—thrive on solving real-world problems. The solutions aren’t nearly as neat as solving a mathematical proof or learning a new computer program.

In general, high school teachers are risk-averse, certainly not entrepreneurial. They eschew risk and enjoy certainty. Though they are subject matter experts in such areas as math, science, economics, social studies, English, and computer science, many teachers have a hard time applying their theoretical expertise to a practical setting.

Though my crusade for service learning and social enterprise was in its nascent stage with many detractors, I was undeterred. (pp. 158-159)

Because most schools don’t teach entrepreneurship, education leaders must do a better job of including it in the curriculum. This requires finding the right courses and the right teachers. The latter is harder than the former. Most high school teachers are risk averse, and many of them have selected education as a career in order to avoid risk—and entrepreneurial thinking. Universities, therefore, must change their teacher credentialing programs to encourage more risk-takers who want to teach entrepreneurship. (p. 352)

These passages seem to suggest that K-12 teachers are “the problem” and that they need “reform.” I strongly disagree; K-12 educators are under tremendous pressure with the fast changing landscape in education, technology, and high-stakes testing. They are on the front lines of issues such as poverty and children who speak English as a Second Language, and are often blamed for the adverse impacts of these issues on high stakes test scores. Unfortunately, K-12 teacher bashing is one of many tactics used to divert us from examining core issues in

education and in society (Kumashiro, 2012). In this landscape, teachers today have to be extremely entrepreneurial just to survive.

The generalizations about high school teachers are also disturbing because one of the cardinal rules of successful service-learning partnerships is for all constituents to work together in a reciprocal, trusting way, where each brings their assets to work toward a common goal. It appears that high school teachers, who should be a key constituency in this partnership, are considered liabilities instead of assets. I wonder how much stronger SAGE might be if DeBerg chose to work with high school teachers as partners instead of barriers.

Finally, the book lacks meaningful reflection. For example, DeBerg is disgusted with the large salaries earned by SIFE administrators, especially when compared to the \$1000 annual stipend that SIFE Fellows receive. I understand the frustration, though SIFE administrators are paid while SIFE Fellows are volunteers. The pay discrepancy between CEOs and the average worker is a well-documented issue, with wage disparities increasing over time (AFL-CIO, 2013). This phenomenon is a hallmark of free enterprise—although DeBerg mentions that there are things about SIFE that he does not support, generally, he appears to support free enterprise as an economic principle. I am very interested in how DeBerg reconciles the principles of free enterprise with his disgust at high SIFE administrator salaries specifically, and with service-learning in business in general. Which parts of free enterprise does he agree with, and which does he not? How can we change free enterprise to better serve humanity? Can it be changed? Do we need to espouse a different economic philosophy? Why? How? Service-learning within the business profession is rich in possibilities for reflection, especially since a lot of service-learning focuses on equality and social justice. In theory, free enterprise is not anti-social justice, but in practice, free enterprise creates and reinforces inequity. Can we change free enterprise to ameliorate its effects on injustice (social, economic, and otherwise), and if so, how? I was hoping that the end section of the book on humanitarian capitalism would shed light on such questions, but it did not. Yes, there is a brief definition of humanitarian capitalism—but there is nothing on what DeBerg thinks, and why or how it connects to service-learning and business or SAGE.

Another area in which reflection is notably lacking is in descriptions of the service-learning partnerships between high school and college students through SAGE. The service component of the partnerships is never clearly described, and there's no focus on partnerships and the impacts based on these partnerships. What businesses were created by high school students? How did the students decide to create such businesses? Have the businesses survived and flourished? How have they impacted the local community? How did the college students support this effort? What are best practices and recommendations that others can use should they be interested in adopting such a model? These details are much more salient to a reader than who's right or wrong in a battle that we can't analyze due to a lack of information, or details about college student travel and SIFE competitions. I felt like this book missed the forest for a few trees—and the trees focused upon were not the important ones.

A book is a tremendous way to share, in depth, a story—a story about engagement should focus on engagement—critiques are fine, but they should be professional, not personal. The problem with slinging dirt is that you can't really take the moral high ground—I understand that when you feel "done wrong," you want to scream your moral outrage from the highest mountain tops. I've felt like that before myself—and I go home and vent—but those vents aren't the kind of thing that one takes public. It may feel cleansing, but it is an approach of questionable professionalism. This book is chock full of vents that should have been left private.

I am an author myself and I know how much work goes into creating a book—a book you've written about a subject close to your heart is an act of love. I have no doubt that Curt DeBerg wrote this book with all his heart. I can appreciate his effort, but the final product falls short of satisfactory. I do not recommend this book.

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