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PROFILE ROGER MARTIN

## Pioneer of the big picture

The dean of Rotman School of Management aims to boost its status by introducing 'integrative thinking', a new, holistic approach to studying business writes **Edward Alden**



Roger Martin, dean of the University of Toronto's Rotman School of Management, has never quite recovered from the privilege of attending Harvard Business School.

After four years at Harvard College that he calls "magnificent", his introduction in 1981 to the world's most prestigious business school "was a shock to the system".

"I did not like Harvard Business School at all," he says. "I felt it was anti-intellectual; it had too much of a trade school feeling."

The pedagogy was based on rote-learning centred around a steady diet of case studies. "If anyone wanted to get 'meta' they would be hissed at and brought down to the level of 'let's be totally practical and let's look for the one answer to this case'," he says.

Since his appointment as Toronto's business school dean in 1998, Prof Martin has rarely missed an opportunity to jab at his alma mater. In the process, he has taken aim at a way of teaching business students that, he says, is at best outdated and at worst an obstacle to creating effective business leaders.

Prof Martin's goal is to vault the University of Toronto into the elite top 10 of international business schools. Some of that he is doing the old-fashioned way: soliciting new donations, bumping up inordinately low tuition fees, raising salaries to hire talented new professors and encouraging new companies to recruit at the school.

But he also wants the

school recognised for pioneering what he believes will be a more effective way to teach the next generation of business students. The shorthand for this new approach is called "integrative thinking", which is defined roughly as the ability to see complex business problems as a whole and to make strategic decisions accordingly.

In his most ambitious moments, Prof Martin calls it "Business School 2.0", the new paradigm that will replace the model developed by Harvard almost a century ago.

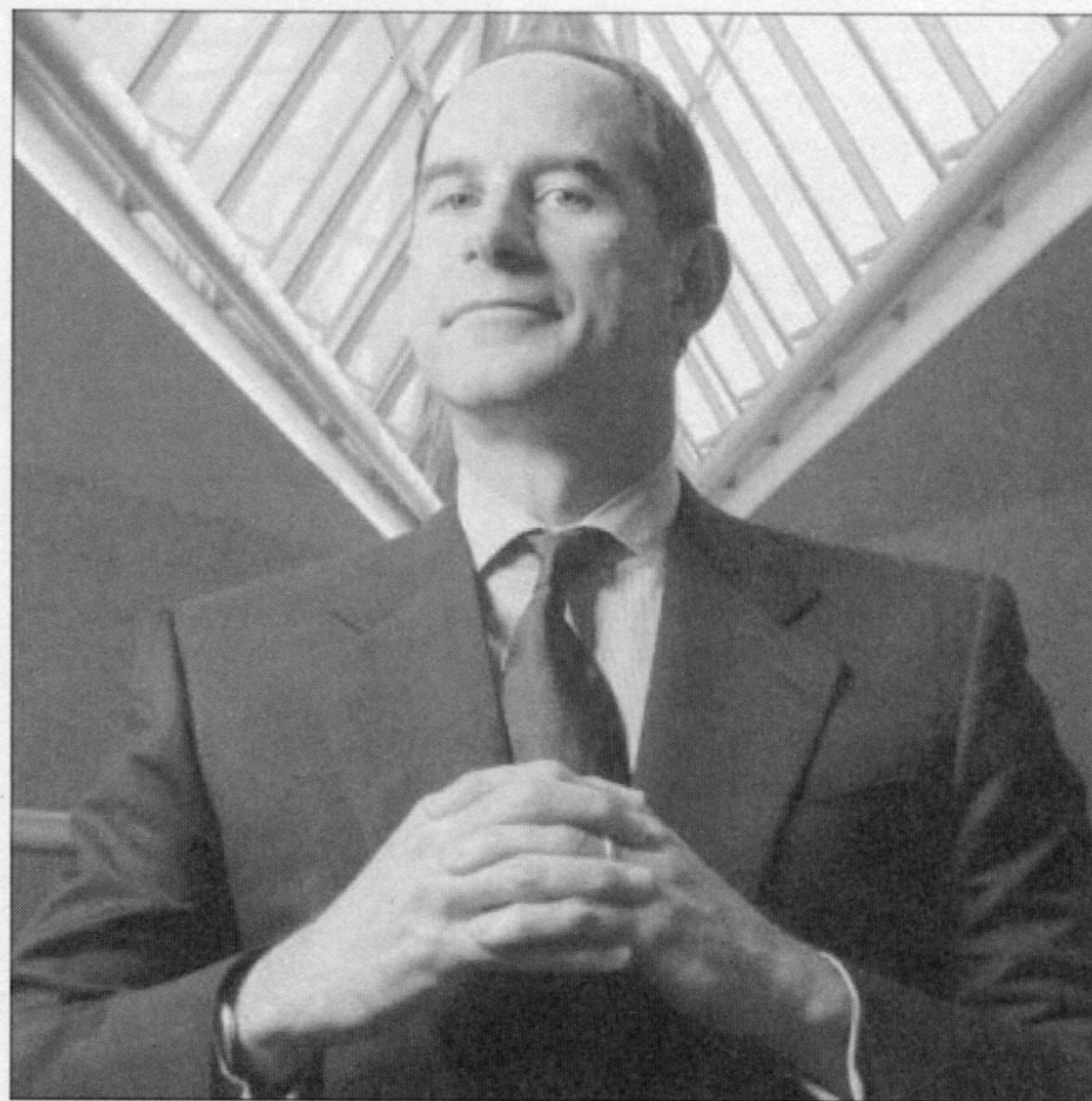
It is a lofty goal for the 43-year-old Canadian, raised in a small town in Ontario, who came home after spending much of 20 years in the US. In the latest Financial Times ranking of business schools worldwide, the University of Toronto ranked 41st, an evaluation he considers fair. That was well behind even the top Canadian business school, the Ivey School at the University of Western

### Despite the challenge to traditional academic boundaries, there has been little opposition from the Rotman School faculty

Ontario, which ranked 19th; and only slightly ahead of rivals York and McGill.

By championing an integrative approach to business education, Prof Martin is hoping to distinguish the Rotman School's curriculum from the traditional case-study method developed at Harvard and followed by many of the top business schools, including the Ivey School.

Most business schools



**Rebel with a cause: Roger Martin did not enjoy Harvard Business School. "I felt it was anti-intellectual"** John A. Hryniuk

encourage students to master isolated areas such as finance and marketing, but do not teach them how to think strategically, he

argues. The theory, which he calls "demonstrably false", is that by teaching enough of these specialties, the students will graduate with the rounded skills necessary to run businesses.

The Rotman School received a C\$10m (£4.7m) donation in May to establish a new centre for integrative thinking, with two endowed chairs, a visiting scholars' programme and a new academic journal.

The donor, Marcel Desautel, a Winnipeg financier, said the new centre "is expected to revolutionise business education worldwide and will place Canada and the University of Toronto at the centre of modern management thought".

While Prof Martin is not opposed to case studies as a teaching method, he argues that the method "has become subverted", devolving into a narrow tool that advances particular academic interests.

"Business school professors don't write business cases," he says. "Marketing professors write marketing cases, organisational behaviour professors write OB cases and finance professors write finance cases." Academic careers became organised around these specialties,



with career advancement dependent on writing for "really, really narrow journals. The whole system just causes them to narrow and narrow. Nobody is looking at how businesses work holistically."

Prof Martin's critique of contemporary business education was shaped by his 12 years as a partner at the Monitor Company, the US management consultancy. While there, he worked with Michael Porter, the Harvard Business School professor who revolutionised thinking about how to create competitive advantage in industries, and who co wrote an important study of Canada's competitive weaknesses.

Monitor is a heavy recruiter of the best US business students. In 1991, he says, the firm "officially gave up on the notion that graduates of Harvard Business School or Stanford knew anything more about thinking integratively about busi-

ness problems than a Swarthmore or Amherst or Williams undergrad in philosophy". Monitor's mandate is to help troubled companies, particularly those that are failing because they cannot grasp how broad forces shaping the competitive environment are affecting their particular businesses. That requires consultants who can create models that take into account such factors as consumers, competitors, and the regulatory environment to determine the best strategic responses.

Graduates of elite business schools were simply not capable of this, he says, and needed to be taught how to look at business problems as a whole.

Surprisingly, given the challenge the integrative approach poses to traditional academic boundaries, there has been little opposition from the Rotman School faculty. The professors voted unanimously in a recent

secret ballot to endorse curriculum changes that will emphasise integrative thinking.

So far the actual changes have been modest, however. There is a new required course on organisational strategy, and optional courses and lectures on integrative thinking.

Prof Martin has been careful not to take resources from the existing disciplines, instead raising new money to devote additional resources to developing the new curriculum. "If it were a zero-sum game they probably would have rejected it," he says.

Over time there will be more cross-cutting courses dealing with holistic responses to business problems, while the traditional courses in finance, marketing and other specialties will be influenced by the integrative approach.

It is too early in the school's evolution to deter-

mine whether the new approach will pay off by attracting higher calibre students and encouraging the best North American companies to recruit at Rotman. Prof Martin acknowledges that the main function of business schools is to pool talented young people as a service to the companies that want to hire them. But so far he has not tried to sell companies on the virtues of an integrative approach.

"I would rather just produce people for them who mysteriously do better than their compatriots, so when the Rotman MBA shows at McKinsey, he is just a little more insightful and has a perspective that's a little more useful," he says. "They don't have to know why that's the case, just that it is."

*This is the third in a series of interviews with deans from leading business schools.*



Joseph L. Rotman School of Management  
University of Toronto

**Rotman**