

Expectations Of Incoming MBA Students – Implications For Curriculum Development And Program Promotion

Joseph G. Glynn (Email: glynn@canisius.edu), Canisius College

Abstract

This work presents the results of five years of survey data designed to assess the attitudes and opinions of newly matriculating MBAs with respect to expectations and choice of program. In response to market demands and competition for MBA students, a dynamic business environment, and changes in AACSB accreditation standards, it is becoming more important than ever to know about the expectations of MBA students. It is equally important to understand the issues and program attributes that motivated their choice of graduate business program.

1. Introduction

The study herein reported was undertaken at a comprehensive mid-size private college in an urban area of the northeastern United States. The primary motivations for the survey research include: (a) a commitment to providing a quality graduate business education that delivers current material over appropriate topics, (b) the institution operates in a highly competitive environment for attracting MBA students, and (c) maintenance of AACSB accreditation. The business school engages in a variety of activities to meet these goals. We have a strong and active relationship with our Business Council, which is comprised of about three dozen local business leaders. Faculty and the Dean regularly attend AACSB and other curriculum development conferences. Our Graduate Business Programs Director is extremely active in the local business community. We have close and beneficial ties with our active MBA Alumni Association. We also conduct extensive surveys of our (a) new MBA matriculates, (b) graduating MBAs, and (c) MBA alumni. This work reports on the first of those survey projects – newly matriculating MBA students. The terms “MBA” and “Graduate Business Program” will be used interchangeably in this work.

2. Background

The host institution has had a part-time evening MBA program since about 1970, and it has been accredited by the AACSB since 1982. Recently, a full-time one-year MBA program has been successfully launched. This work focuses solely upon the part-time evening MBA program, which is by far the larger program.

Over the last decade, demand for this MBA degree has vacillated. Competition for MBA students has become increasingly intense. The local metropolitan area supports several other MBA programs, two of which are AACSB accredited. Our main competition appears to come from two sources. The first is a large public university with both AACSB accredited full-time day and part-time evening MBA programs and a deserved national reputation. The second is a recent upstart program with an enviable advertising budget promoting a shorter (fewer credit hours) and highly flexible program that is not AACSB accredited. Since we are a private institution with, except for a few adjunct faculty, nearly 100 percent terminally qualified faculty, our program is more costly to students than either of these programs, or any of the several other MBA programs in the area.

Our average graduate business program enrollment has been about 350 over the last ten years. Most of the students are local, full-time professionally employed people. Many factors affect demand for the MBA degree, but none is more important than the overall job market. Interestingly, it has become apparent that either significant

upturns or downturns in economic activity appear to have some positive impacts upon graduate business program enrollment. Though we cannot support the following conclusions with certainty, responses to open-end questions and responses gleaned from other target groups we survey seem to indicate the following:

- In periods of “good” economic activity, professionally employed managers (and others employed in non-business arenas) feel more optimistic about their futures. Motivated by that optimism, many of these people seek to enhance or change their career position by beginning studies in an MBA program.
- Likewise, in good economic times, companies are more likely to make tuition reimbursement programs and incentives for continued education available to employees. Since we are a tuition-driven private institution, employer-based tuition reimbursement programs are significant factors affecting our MBA enrollments.
- In times of weaker economic conditions, companies do curtail tuition reimbursement programs, and this has the expected negative effect upon enrollments. At the same time, MBA enrollments may be boosted somewhat as some workers experience uncertainties with respect to their professional futures, and this often translates into a desire to enhance their education in order to make a vertical or lateral career move.
- Also, a weaker economic environment means that the job market for recent undergraduate program grads is depressed. Some of these young people will begin graduate business program studies immediately upon graduation from their undergraduate programs.

3. The Survey Instrument

We have been surveying our newly matriculating graduate business programs students since about 1990. For the first half dozen years, the survey instrument was revised on a regular basis – kind of like an extended pilot study. We learned a lot about our students. We used their inputs and responses to open-end questions, as well as small group interviews, focus groups, inputs from MBA class representative committees (comprised of currently enrolled students), and ideas from our MBA alumni to improve the survey instrument. The survey instrument has, with few exceptions, remained fixed since the fall of 1996. There have been minor additions and deletions to the survey items as conditions warranted – i.e., demand for a new area of concentration or elective, or an influx of new students from the field of telecommunications, and other similar phenomena.

3.1. Survey Goals

In general terms, we wished to learn more about our incoming MBA students. We wanted to understand what motivated them to pursue a graduate business degree, and what factors influenced the decision to select our program. Demographic and descriptive background characteristics were of interest as well. With respect to all of this information, we deemed it of paramount importance to be able to track any changes or trends in these data over time.

3.2. Survey Content

The primary areas of important information collected are the following.

- Reasons the student chose our program. Listed items are rated from 1 (Not Important) to 7 (Very Important). There are eight items on the survey. These items were derived from open-end responses on earlier surveys administered between 1990 and 1995. An “other” choice also allows the respondent to write in any reason or factor which led him/her to our program.
- Rate the importance of specific skills to your professional goals. Listed items are rated from 1 (Not Important) to 7 (Very Important). The list of nine skills provided on the survey was motivated by language in the AACSB standards.
- Rate the importance of specific areas of business-related knowledge. Listed items are rated from 1 (Not Important) to 7 (Very Important). The six areas identified on this part of the survey instrument were also motivated by language in the AACSB standards.

- Identify desired elective course(s). One or two may be selected from a list of 22 possible elective courses provided. The list was derived from responses to open-end questions on earlier surveys. An “other” category allows the respondent to write in any elective of interest.
- The amount of company sponsored tuition reimbursement available to the student.
- Descriptive profile/demographics – undergraduate major, employment status, industry of employment, years of experience in this industry, size of company of employment, position in the company, gender, age, home and work zip codes

4. Results

Survey results will be reported for the most recent five years of 1998 – 2002.

4.1. Reasons Respondents Chose Our Program

Eight items representing reasons students may have chosen our MBA Program were listed and student respondents were asked to rate the importance of each on a scale from 1 (Not Important) to 7 (Very Important). Each cell of Table 1 contains four statistics: mean or average rating on the seven-point scale, number of respondents *n*, standard deviation of the rating on the seven-point scale, and the percent of respondents who rated the item as the most important reason they chose our MBA Program. The items in Table 1 have been ordered in descending order by total mean value. Thus, on the basis of total average score over the five year period, the items are listed in the table from the highest rated reason these students chose our program to the lowest rated of the eight reasons offered.

Program Reputation was the highest rated attribute with an overall average of 5.98, and was closely followed by Flexibility Taking Courses (5.97). The high ratings for Program Reputation were extremely consistent, especially over the years of 1999 – 2002 wherein the average rating varied from a low of 6.02 in 1999 to a high of 6.08 in 2001. Flexibility Taking Courses was also rated consistently high over the same years, ranging from a low of 5.98 in 1999 to a high of 6.14 in 2002. The third most important reason in attracting our students was AACSB Accreditation with an overall average rating of 5.65.

Student respondents were also posed with a question requesting that they identify the most important reason they chose our program. These data are reported in Table 1 as “Most Impt. %.” The results are expectedly quite consistent with the overall average ratings of the attributes. We see that Program Reputation received an overall average of 39.9 percent, meaning that 39.9 percent of student respondents named Program Reputation as the most important reason they chose our MBA Program. Flexibility Taking Courses garnered an overall average of 26.2 percent, and AACSB Accreditation tallied 14.5 percent. On the basis of aggregate average score and total mentions as the most important reason for choice of our program, it is clear that these first three attributes – Program Reputation, Flexibility Taking Courses, and AACSB Accreditation – dominated.

The importance of Individual Attention, Small Class Size, and Diversity of Course Offerings should not be minimized. The aggregate averages for these three attributes are, respectively, 5.45, 5.27, and 5.22 on a seven-point scale of importance. With respect to the percent who rated these items as the most important reason for having chosen our MBA Program, these three items fared less well. Individual Attention generated an overall average of 2.0 percent, and Small Class Size and Diversity of Course Offerings received overall averages of 4.0 percent and 3.2 percent respectively.

The location of classes, city main campus or suburban satellite campus seemed to be of less import to our students. We are comforted by the fact that the satellite campus was more highly rated than the city campus as this suburban campus facility is relatively new and represents a significant investment.

Table 1
Ratings Of Attributes Concerning Choice Of Program [1=Not Important ... 7=Very Important]

Attribute		1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Totals
Program Reputation	Mean	5.61	6.02	6.05	6.08	6.03	5.98
	n	38	44	42	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.33	1.15	1.01	0.93	1.09	1.09
	Most Impt. %	40.5%	33.3%	40.5%	39.3%	44.4%	39.9%
Flexibility Taking Courses	Mean	5.42	5.98	6.07	6.05	6.14	5.97
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.31	1.18	1.05	0.95	0.95	1.09
	Most Impt. %	32.2%	20.0%	26.2%	23.0%	30.2%	26.2%
AACSB Accreditation	Mean	5.50	5.55	5.45	5.82	5.79	5.65
	n	38	44	42	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.52	1.73	1.78	1.37	1.59	1.58
	Most Impt. %	13.5%	20.0%	14.3%	16.4%	9.5%	14.5%
Individual Attention	Mean	4.68	5.45	5.55	5.73	5.59	5.45
	n	38	44	42	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.53	1.19	1.31	1.09	1.12	1.26
	Most Impt. %	0.0%	4.4%	2.4%	3.3%	0.0%	2.0%
Small Class Size	Mean	4.84	5.18	5.36	5.44	5.37	5.27
	n	38	44	42	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.79	1.28	1.27	1.26	1.48	1.42
	Most Impt. %	5.4%	4.4%	0.0%	4.9%	4.8%	4.0%
Diversity Of Course Offerings	Mean	4.89	4.80	5.40	5.52	5.30	5.22
	n	37	44	42	62	63	248
	Std. Dev.	1.37	1.29	1.17	1.11	1.12	1.22
	Most Impt. %	0.0%	0.0%	4.8%	4.9%	4.8%	3.2%
Convenience Of Satellite Campus	Mean	5.03	4.86	4.90	5.21	4.92	5.00
	n	37	44	42	61	63	247
	Std. Dev.	2.12	2.09	2.18	1.78	1.98	2.00
	Most Impt. %	2.7%	8.9%	2.4%	1.6%	3.2%	3.6%
Convenience Of Main Campus	Mean	3.71	4.23	4.52	4.60	4.68	4.40
	n	38	44	42	60	63	247
	Std. Dev.	2.09	1.93	1.99	1.89	1.48	1.87
	Most Impt. %	0.0%	2.2%	0.0%	1.6%	0.0%	0.8%

4.2. Importance Of Specific Skills

This section of the survey is so important that the item will be listed verbatim: “Concerning your professional goals and expectations with respect to your Graduate Business Programs studies, how important is it to develop your skills in the following areas?” Each of nine skills was rated on a seven-point scale, and the respondent was then asked to identify the most important skill. The nine skills areas and results are summarized in Table 2. As in Table 1, the skills are listed in descending order according to aggregate or total average response over the five year time horizon 1998 – 2002. The percents of respondents who rated the skill as the most important are also reported. There are clearly three distinct tiers with respect to the skills deemed to be most important by our newly matriculating MBA respondents.

Tier 1: Critical Thinking earned an average total rating of 6.18 making this skill the highest rated on a scale of importance according to our new MBA students. It is noteworthy that Critical Thinking also had the smallest standard deviation (1.02). The smallest standard deviation depicts relatively little variation, signifying that students were consistent in their high rating of the importance of Critical Thinking. Another way of interpreting this smallest standard deviation is to state that there is less dispersion in responses, less uncertainty or more conviction in the responses of students with respect to the perceived importance of Critical Thinking. Problem-solving had a total average response of 6.02, and earned the only other spot on tier 1. These two skills also dominated with respect to the

overall percent of respondents who identified them as the most important skill. Critical Thinking was chosen by 20.1 percent, and Problem-solving by 17.3 percent of respondents.

Table 2
Ratings Of Specific Skills [1=Not Important ... 7=Very Important]

Skill		1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Totals
Critical Thinking	Mean	6.26	6.24	6.07	6.34	6.00	6.18
	n	38	45	41	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	0.95	1.11	0.91	0.87	1.19	1.02
	Most Impt. %	10.8%	15.6%	16.7%	29.0%	22.2%	20.1%
Problem-solving	Mean	6.05	6.27	6.02	6.10	5.75	6.02
	n	38	45	42	61	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.18	1.12	1.28	1.12	1.27	1.20
	Most Impt. %	21.6%	15.6%	28.6%	17.7%	7.9%	17.3%
Presentation	Mean	5.87	5.86	5.71	5.77	5.84	5.81
	n	38	44	42	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.12	1.09	1.22	1.22	1.10	1.14
	Most Impt. %	2.7%	6.7%	11.9%	9.7%	19.0%	10.8%
Team Building	Mean	5.97	5.84	5.57	5.79	5.75	5.78
	n	38	45	42	61	63	249
	Std. Dev.	0.94	1.17	1.13	1.13	1.28	1.15
	Most Impt. %	13.5%	8.9%	4.8%	11.3%	6.3%	8.8%
Interpersonal	Mean	5.95	5.82	5.43	5.69	5.73	5.72
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	0.96	1.28	1.15	1.29	1.23	1.21
	Most Impt. %	18.9%	17.8%	11.9%	12.9%	12.7%	14.5%
Quantitative	Mean	5.63	5.64	5.74	5.68	5.63	5.66
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.24	1.40	1.13	1.28	1.08	1.22
	Most Impt. %	16.2%	13.3%	11.9%	9.7%	17.5%	13.7%
Writing	Mean	5.13	5.67	5.44	5.42	5.27	5.39
	n	38	45	41	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.36	1.15	1.32	1.47	1.42	1.36
	Most Impt. %	5.4%	4.4%	4.8%	3.2%	1.6%	3.6%
Work Independently	Mean	5.43	5.64	4.95	5.23	5.48	5.35
	n	37	45	42	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.61	1.43	1.48	1.68	1.28	1.50
	Most Impt. %	5.4%	8.9%	4.8%	4.8%	9.5%	6.8%
Computer	Mean	5.21	5.36	5.20	5.23	5.22	5.24
	n	38	45	41	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.82	1.75	1.72	1.66	1.55	1.67
	Most Impt. %	5.4%	8.9%	4.8%	1.6%	3.2%	4.4%

Tier 2: Four skills were identified as very important, and occupy the second tier of Table 2. These skills and their average ratings over the five year period are: Presentation (5.81), Team Building (5.78), Interpersonal (5.72), and Quantitative (5.66). In assessing importance of these skills to our new MBA matriculates, the reader should note that within this tier, Presentation and Team Building had slightly higher average scores than did Interpersonal and Quantitative, but Interpersonal and Quantitative scored significantly higher on the basis of mentions as the most important skill.

Tier 3: Tier 3 is represented by the following three skills: Writing (5.39), Work Independently (5.35), and Computer (5.24). Again, standard deviations are enlightening. The standard deviations for the tier 3 items are larger than for the tier 1 or tier 2 items. The larger standard deviations for the tier 3 items that also have smaller averages does appear to divulge that the respondents had relatively less conviction or less consistency in their ratings of

these items. Perhaps most importantly, the lowest average rating in Table 2 is 5.24 for Computer, and this is still on the high or important end of the seven-point scale. With respect to the overall percent naming these skills as being most important, the totals are relatively low ranging from 3.6 percent for Writing to 6.8 percent for Work Independently.

The value and importance of these nine skills are integral to both the design and implementation of an MBA curriculum. Knowledge of how newly matriculating MBA students rate the importance of these skills should also provide direction for promotional campaigns and advertisements designed to attract new students. Further analysis of the percents of respondents who named each skill as being the most important is warranted. In Table 3, the nine skills from Table 2 are ordered by the overall percent of mentions as the most important skill (these data also appear in the final column of Table 2). Table 3 is a table of rankings. For example, in 1998 Problem-solving received the most mentions as the most important skill and is therefore ranked as number 1. Interpersonal received the second most mentions as the most important skill, followed by Quantitative in third position, Team Building in fourth, and so on.

Table 3
Rankings Of Skills Identified As Most Important

Skill [Overall %]	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Overall Rank
Critical Thinking [20.1]	5	2	2	1	1	1
Problem-solving [17.3]	1	2	1	2	6	2
Interpersonal [14.5]	2	1	3	3	4	3
Quantitative [13.7]	3	4	3	5	3	4
Presentation [10.8]	9	8	3	5	2	5
Team Building [8.8]	4	5	6	4	7	6
Work Independently [6.8]	6	5	6	7	5	7
Computer [4.4]	6	5	6	9	8	8
Writing [3.6]	6	9	6	8	9	9

The ranking data are quite consistent with a few exceptions:

- Presentation Skills displayed the most variation in rankings. Presentation ranked ninth in 1998, eighth the next year, then rose to third in 2000, and finished fifth and second in 2001 and 2002 respectively.
- Critical Thinking and Problem-solving dominated the rankings (just as they dominated on the basis of average total rating in Table 2). Each was ranked first or second every year but one – Critical Thinking ranked fifth in 1998, and Problem-solving ranked sixth in 2002.

Interpersonal and Quantitative were in third and fourth positions overall, and were ranked fairly consistently over the five-year time horizon. Note that the four highest ranked skills (Critical Thinking, Problem-solving, Interpersonal, and Quantitative) were identified as being most important by a total of 65.6 percent of respondents. The four lowest ranked skills – Team Building, Work Independently, Computer, and Writing – displayed moderate conformity of rankings over time, and were named as being most important by a total of only 23.6 percent of the MBA student respondents.

4.3. Importance Of Specific Areas Of Knowledge

With respect to professional goals and expectations concerning graduate business programs studies, respondents were asked to rate the importance of expanding knowledge in the following areas. Table 4 represents a compilation of the results. Once again, the areas to expand knowledge have been ordered on the basis of total mean from most important on down, and once again as in Table 2, three tiers are clearly evident in the results.

Tier 1: The Specific Functional Areas of Business (the survey listed accounting, operations, marketing, finance, and management) had the highest average of 6.42 and the smallest standard deviation of 0.86. In combination, these data display a consistent and very high rating of the importance of expanding knowledge in the functional areas of business. General Business is kind of an innocuous term – on the survey the item was “General Understanding of Business.” General Business had a total average of 6.00 gaining a position on tier 1 along side the functional areas.

Tier 2: Business Ethics (5.45) and Global/International (5.44) have almost identical average ratings. Note that Global/International received significantly more mentions as the most important area as reflected in the overall most important percent of 11.6 percent compared to only 2.4 percent for Business Ethics.

Tier 3: Cultural Diversity (4.80) and Environmental Issues (4.74) comprise tier 3. These average ratings are on the positive side of the seven-point scale of importance. Nonetheless, these, and the rating of the importance of Convenience of Main Campus in Table 1, are the lowest average ratings in any of the three tables, and the only average ratings less than 5.00. Of the 249 respondents who identified the most important area in which to expand knowledge, only 2.8 percent named Cultural Diversity and 1.6 percent named Environmental Issues.

Table 4
Ratings Of Areas Of Knowledge [1=Not Important ... 7=Very Important]

Areas To Expand Knowledge		1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Totals
Business Functional Areas	Mean	6.21	6.49	6.36	6.60	6.37	6.42
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.07	0.92	0.93	0.64	0.79	0.86
	Most Impt. %	44.7%	51.1%	54.8%	58.1%	44.4%	50.8%
General Business	Mean	5.97	5.93	5.95	6.13	5.97	6.00
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.10	1.32	0.99	0.93	1.15	1.09
	Most Impt. %	39.5%	31.1%	26.2%	27.4%	30.2%	30.4%
Business Ethics	Mean	5.21	5.16	5.52	5.63	5.57	5.45
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.32	1.30	1.22	1.03	1.06	1.17
	Most Impt. %	0.0%	2.2%	2.4%	1.6%	4.8%	2.4%
Global/International	Mean	5.11	5.44	5.43	5.56	5.52	5.44
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.49	1.50	1.11	1.21	1.39	1.34
	Most Impt. %	7.9%	13.3%	9.5%	11.3%	14.3%	11.6%
Cultural Diversity	Mean	4.34	4.62	4.81	5.21	4.81	4.80
	n	38	45	42	62	63	250
	Std. Dev.	1.60	1.57	1.33	1.30	1.46	1.46
	Most Impt. %	5.3%	2.2%	4.8%	1.6%	1.6%	2.8%
Environment Issues	Mean	4.58	4.38	4.80	5.00	4.79	4.74
	n	38	45	41	62	63	249
	Std. Dev.	1.61	1.56	1.10	1.36	1.22	1.37
	Most Impt. %	2.6%	0.0%	2.4%	0.0%	3.2%	1.6%

4.4. Descriptive Student Profiles

Table 5, below, summarizes some pertinent data with respect to demographic and professional profiles of our MBA students. There do not appear to be any startling trends in the data. The Age variable shows that the 25 and under age group is more strongly represented in recent years. This would be even more pronounced if we looked back earlier than 1998. In 1996 and 1997, only 27% of new MBAs were 25 or less years of age. Most of the

data are quite stable over the five year time horizon reported. It is very important to keep a close eye on any trends that may be developing on any of these items. One way we do that at the college is to plot results of these variables over time. Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand frequency tables!

Table 5
Descriptive Student Profiles

Student Characteristic		1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	Total
Gender	Female	31.6%	54.8%	52.4%	46.8%	42.9%	45.7%
	Male	68.4%	45.2%	47.6%	53.2%	57.1%	54.3%
Age	≤ 25	31.6%	34.9%	40.5%	38.7%	42.6%	38.2%
	26 – 35	55.3%	55.8%	45.3%	40.3%	45.9%	47.5%
	≥ 36	13.2%	9.3%	14.3%	21.0%	11.5%	14.2%
UG Major	Business/Econ	54.0%	65.9%	47.7%	56.3%	50.8%	54.7%
	Math/Engr/Comptr/Phys. Sci.	35.1%	9.0%	30.9%	23.8%	28.6%	25.3%
	Other	10.9%	25.1%	21.4%	19.9%	20.6%	20.0%
Tuition Reimbursement Available From	None	23.3%	18.2%	25.0%	21.3%	20.8%	21.5%
	About 25%	0	6.1%	12.5%	6.4%	11.3%	7.7%
Employer	About 50%	3.3%	15.2%	0	10.6%	5.7%	7.2%
	About 75%	10.0%	9.1%	28.1%	14.9%	9.4%	13.8%
	About 100%	63.3%	51.5%	34.4%	46.8%	52.8%	49.7%
Employment Status	Full-Time	86.5%	81.8%	78.0%	77.4%	88.7%	82.5%
	Part-Time	5.4%	13.6%	2.4%	9.7%	1.6%	6.5%
	Unemployed	8.1%	4.5%	19.5%	13.0%	9.6%	11.0%
Level In Organization	Upper Management	6.3%	2.9%	7.1%	4.4%	3.8%	4.7%
	Middle Management	25.0%	17.1%	25.0%	20.0%	17.3%	20.3%
	Supervisory	21.9%	20.0%	14.3%	13.3%	9.6%	15.1%
	Non-Management	46.9%	60.0%	53.6%	62.2%	69.2%	59.9%

5. Conclusions: Implications For Curriculum Development And Program Promotion

5.1. Table 1 – Reasons For Choosing Our Program

The factors guiding the choice of our program (Table 1) tell us that our students appear to put more weight on standards or quality than on “hand-holding” and comfort. The high ratings of the importance of Program Reputation and AACSB Accreditation divulge a respect for rigor and quality of programs, and thus will be referred to as quality factors. Though also rated as important factors, Individual Attention, Small Class Size, and Diversity of Course Offerings, which may be interpreted as “comfort factors,” are rated significantly lower than the quality of program factors.

One item, Flexibility Taking Courses, refers to the ability to schedule courses as needed. From the responses over the years, it is clear that to our students this item is basically the antithesis of a lock-step program or a program with iron-clad sequencing of prerequisites. Flexibility Taking Courses would certainly seem to belong with the comfort factors as described above. To some extent, it certainly does belong with them, but it has its own uniqueness as well. Most of our MBA students are full-time employed professionals who have families, travel schedules, and projects that arise suddenly at work. Flexibility Taking Courses is much more than a matter of comfort to our students – it is a matter of necessity. Our students rate this item very highly, just a notch below Program Reputation.

With respect to the two campuses, courses are offered at both, but students cannot complete an entire program at either campus – trips to both campuses are required. The site location items, Convenience of Satellite Campus and Convenience of Main Campus, are rated as less important than either the quality factors or the comfort factors.

Leaving the Flexibility Taking Courses factor aside for the moment, there is a hierarchy evident in this data. Our students are stating very clearly that:

- More important than anything else, they want us to deliver a quality program.
- They also tell us that the individual attention that goes hand-in-hand with small class size is very important, but clearly secondary to a quality program.
- Finally, the relatively lower ratings of the convenience of site items divulge that the students are willing to drive to either campus, as long as the quality factors and the comfort factors have been satisfied.
- As stated above, Flexibility Taking Courses is a stand-alone requirement, and a must in the minds of our students.

In summary, to satisfy the wishes of our current students, we should focus on a quality program, and work diligently to maintain standards. We should not move towards a more rigid prerequisite structure – if anything, we should attempt to provide more flexibility in course selection and sequencing. We should also maintain our small class sizes, and continue and enhance our practices of providing personal attention – i.e., providing home phone numbers on syllabi, mentoring sessions, help sessions, extended office hours, software training sessions, internship programs, new student orientation programs, etc.

We have just completed a several-year curriculum review and are in the process of launching a brand new and significantly different MBA curriculum. The new curriculum offers two new concentrations in finance, one in marketing, two in management, and one in information technology (in addition to the three concentrations previously supported). Further, there are fewer required courses, and many more electives to choose from.

Concerning program promotion themes, we should focus on quality, more than 20 years of AACSB accreditation, reputation, presence in the business community, flexibility in course selection and sequencing, and the availability of several areas of concentration.

5.2. Tables 2 And 3 – Importance Of Specific Skills

Recall that three tiers were evident in the data, with tier 1 representing the highest ratings of importance to our students.

Tier 1 – Critical Thinking and Problem-solving Skills

Tier 2 – Presentation, Team Building, Interpersonal, and Quantitative Skills

Tier 3 – Writing, Work Independently, and Computer Skills

These results comport extremely well with those of Table 1 that showed students wanted a quality program. Table 2 results show that these students are going for an MBA that will develop skills requisite for upper management. They appear to be very cognizant of the “big picture” as they express a desire to get in there and solve real problems and enhance their ability to think. With the exception of Quantitative Skills, the tier 2 skills fit well together. Most of these students are professionally employed and know the value and importance of working well with others, getting along, being a team player, and being able to communicate and present ideas. Still, they rate these skill as secondary to the more rigorous Critical Thinking and Problem-solving skills of tier 1. The tier 3 Writing, Computer, and Working Independently skills are the least important to our students.

The knowledge that our students expect and want Critical Thinking and Problem-solving skills to be emphasized is very useful to us. The implications for program promotion and curriculum development are clear. The college should be emphasizing group Problem-solving activities, perhaps case studies and/or business simulation games, integration of material both within and across courses, and real world problems. Promotion campaigns should probably not depict students working at computer terminals or socializing on the quad. Rather, promotions should include local business leader alumni relating real world business successes to their MBA program experiences, and descriptions of the coursework described above.

5.3. Table 4 – Importance Of Specific Areas Of Knowledge

As in Table 2, three tiers were also evident in Table 3.

Tier 1 – Functional Areas of Business, General Understanding of Business

Tier 2 – Business Ethics, Global/International

Tier 3 – Cultural Diversity, Environmental Issues

The three tiers in Table 4 are very distinct and significantly different on the basis of average ratings by our students. Tier 1 items were very dominant. This is not at all surprising – students are seeking an MBA to learn about business. Tiers 2 and 3 provide some important information though. Coming up with descriptive names for tiers 2 and 3 is somewhat problematic. There appears to be significant overlap or commonality between the items on the two tiers. For example, people who are concerned about Cultural Diversity issues and Environmental Issues are generally considered to be ethical. Certainly those who consider Business Ethics as important must be ethical people.

This author sees a distinct difference between tiers 2 and 3 – a difference that appears to be supported by earlier findings from Tables 1 and 2. Tier 2 may be viewed as concern for the big picture. It is reasonable to conclude that Tier 2 item Business Ethics means corporate ethics to our student respondents. The Global/International theme is clearly “big picture” in nature. Tier 3 may be viewed as more socially conscious personal concerns. It may be that tier 2 is more macro in nature, and tier 3 more micro. Recall that in Table 1 students were more concerned with overall quality of the program than with the individual components of comfort. Likewise, Table 2 divulged that for our students the rigorous activities of Critical Thinking and Problem-solving are more important than social, group, or presentation skills.

Cultural Diversity and Environmental Issues are most certainly worthy concerns, yet the data tell us clearly that we should not go overboard in incorporating these themes into our curriculum or our promotion campaigns. Curriculum development should focus on the old standards – the functional areas of business. Program promotions should focus on opportunities to develop a career in marketing, accounting, finance, operations, human resource management, or information technology. Concerns for ethics in business and globalization should be important components of our promotion campaigns.

6. Caveats

The descriptive statistical results reported describe the students in the part-time evening MBA program at the host college. It is not possible to assess the degree to which the results may be generalizable to other colleges or other parts of the country. Further, though the host college is pleased with the assessment of the attitudes, opinions, and expectations of its new MBA matriculates, it must be emphasized that these results came from students who have selected our program. An area of investigation that is not addressed by this work is an assessment of the attitudes, opinions, and expectations of students who chose other MBA programs in the area. This is most important information and it is far more costly and difficult to gather than the data reported in this work.

In summary, the college is pleased with the research effort and the results. Our interpretations of the data leave us very satisfied with what we consider to be the mature views of our students and their commitment to skills improvement and career enhancement through our MBA program. The survey results provide us with important information as we seek to continually improve both our curriculum and the vehicles for delivery of course material. ☞

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