A Case Study of Management Skills Comparison in Online and On-Campus MBA Programs

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ABSTRACT

This paper is unique in its comparison of full programs, rather than a comparison of courses, as previously documented in Web-based education literature. Two similar MBA programs utilizing two different delivery formats (i.e., online MBA and on-campus MBA) were studied. The Learning Skills Profile (LSP) was used to assess the managerial skills when entering and graduating the programs. A comparison of pre-MBA and post-MBA managerial skills was conducted for both MBA programs. Results show that both on-campus and online MBA programs provide positive enhancement of managerial skills; however, the online MBA program appears to provide greater enhancement of such skills.

Keywords: learning outcomes; learning skills profile (LSP); managerial skills; online MBA; online program assessments; Web-based education

SUMMARY

The great Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote that “learning is the outcome of both teaching and practice.” The purpose of an MBA program is to provide individuals with practical and managerial skills, or the combination of both teaching and the experience to perform well in business. Research suggests that assessing students’ abilities, in particular after graduation, is relevant for measuring the outcomes of an MBA program. Results indicate that attending an on-campus MBA program adds value to students by increasing their managerial skills. Since the primary learning outcome of an MBA program is to provide enhancement of managerial skills, it is the purpose of this study to assess and compare such enhancement for on-campus and online MBA programs. The increased use of online learning in higher education provides opportunities for universities to reach new markets and attract busy business professionals. In spite of or perhaps in response to this trend, concerns about the educational advantages online MBA programs provide students have been raised. These concerns prompted the following questions for ac-
creditation bodies (e.g., AACSB) and administrators: Should the learning goals or learning outcomes of an MBA be the same for on-campus and online programs? Does an online MBA program provide greater, less, or similar enhancement of learning outcomes as a traditional program?

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INTRODUCTION

Historically, the practice of management grew out of years of practice in large and complex organizations and accumulation of business knowledge. With the proliferation of businesses came a growing demand for general managers who are skilled in achieving results through the integration of work in a changing environment (Hilgert, 1995).

The great Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote in his book *Nicomachean Ethics* that “learning is the outcome of teaching and practice.” He also noted:

Practical wisdom is the ability to organize and use these different intellectual abilities and thus to select the right means for the attainment of the appropriate goals and to issue commands for action.” (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics, Book VI, 1138b*)

In other words, skill also includes a component of practical wisdom. It is that practical wisdom that managers need to acquire in order to competently perform in business.

The purpose of an MBA program is to provide individuals with managerial skills, the combination of knowledge and experience, to perform well in business (Boyatzis & Kolb, 1991). Baruch and Peiperl (2000) suggested that “the aims of an MBA education would seem to ‘add value’ to graduates, giving them business-related knowledge and managerial skills” (p. 70).

Hunter (1986) suggested that knowledge of an individual’s abilities profile is highly relevant for employers. He also suggested that “cognitive ability predicts job performance in all jobs…including so called ‘manual’ jobs as well as ‘mental’ jobs” (p. 340). He concluded that “cognitive ability predicts job performance in large part because it predicts learning and job mastery. Ability is highly correlated with job knowledge, and job knowledge is highly correlated with job performance” (p. 354). Moreover, estimates of the benefits gained after attending MBA programs are mainly based on the “informal subjective views of supervisors” (Hilgert, 1995, p. 64). This leads to the research questions: How do we assess the learning outcomes of an MBA (or “learning goals,” as AACSB call them, 2002b, p. 57)? What do MBA students learn? What should MBA students learn? How do we measure the learning outcomes of an MBA program? This paper is aimed at addressing such questions.

Looking at the learning outcomes of several MBA programs (see Appendix A), all programs suggest an emphasis on enhancing managerial knowledge and skills.
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