

Holistic Evaluation of Student/Alumni Outcomes

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Abstract

Stakeholders are increasingly scrutinizing institutions of higher education to demonstrate the return on investment. Colleges and schools of business are also under scrutiny. Calls for a tighter connection between the real world and what happens in the classroom continue to cry out. To respond to greater accountability and the calls for greater relevance, this paper explores how to determine the impact of a concentration within an MBA on the career progression and satisfaction of current students/alumni. This paper provides a framework for other business schools to assess the impact of the educational experience beyond traditional outcomes such as learning and student satisfaction.

Key Words: Accountability, Student Outcomes, Career, Job Satisfaction, Life Satisfaction

Introduction

Educating the current and next generation of managers is a responsibility which should not be taken lightly. This responsibility is broader than simply designing, delivering and evaluating individual courses and curricula, but also recognizes the role that management educators play in the wider society. Maples and colleagues (2008) underscore the linkage between management educators and society when they write, “University educators find themselves under increasing pressure to be more accountable for the end results of education and research (page 33).” Rising tuition with an average undergraduate student debt of \$23,186 is hitting the headlines such as *The Wall Street Journal*, “Students Borrow More Than Ever for College: Heavy Debt Loads Means Many Young People Can’t Live Life They Expected (Chaker, 2009).” Grove and Hussey (2014) found in an empirical study of MBA quality that “Individuals consider more than just their prospective earnings when choosing between MBA programs (page 51).”

This paper argues for a more holistic evaluation of outcomes and provides an illustrative example within a concentration housed in an AACSB –accredited MBA program. This holistic evaluation is based upon an educational assessment framework developed by Maple and colleagues (2008). In this framework, there are four perspectives: government; student/family; societal; and institutional. In addition to these four perspectives, this framework categorizes measures into two domains: in-process and out-process. In-process measures reflect what takes place while the student is enrolled in school. In contrast, out-process measures reflect what

occurs after graduation. Finally, this framework identifies two types of measures: performance such as G.P.A. and attitudes such as satisfaction.

Conceptual Framework

This evaluation is framed the student perspective by investigating in-process (i.e. current students) and out-processes (i.e. alumni) measures as well as both performance (i.e. career progression) and attitudinal measures (e.g. job satisfaction). A student perspective is increasingly important given the decline in tuition reimbursement by employers, the increase in the number of self-pay students, and the rising debt levels of students not to mention the perception of a “soft job market” even for newly minted MBA graduates. The American Association of Colleges and Schools of Business International (2011) highlight the need to close the gap between the needs of the “real world” and the preferences of management educators. This holistic evaluation seeks to partially close this gap. The research question asked and answered here is the following:

- What are the outcomes for current students/alumni with respect to effects on career progression, job satisfaction, life satisfaction and personal growth?

This question seeks to assess the value of management education by looking outside of the classroom which is not to discount the importance of measuring learning and student satisfaction. The focus of this article is a Health Sector Management MBA concentration. Other concentrations in different MBA programs and even entire MBA degree programs may benefit from applying a more holistic evaluation model as proposed here. The current students in this MBA program are largely part-time not full-time and none are executive MBA students. Many of the part-time students in this MBA program are employed as reported by others (Edgington & Schoenfeld, 2004b).

Brief Literature Review: Assessing Student Outcomes

The assessment of student outcomes for those who hold an MBA degree is complex and controversial for many reasons. Kooti, Valentine & Valentine (2007) write, “Often, academics are concerned with the process of what is taught in class material and not on what the desired outcome would be (page 49).” The focus here is on the latter not the former.

Past research has found a positive effect of the MBA on salaries and career advancement (Davies & Cline, 2005), on employment and job satisfaction (Zhao et al., 2006), and on working in their chosen field and job satisfaction (Maples et al., 2008). Bruce (2010) found statistically significant differences in the satisfaction among full-time, part-time, and executive MBA students. Others have found that the MBA “does not much effect on graduates’ salaries or career attainment (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002)”. In short, there are mixed results. Moreover, Bruce (2010) concludes from his empirical analysis of MBA satisfaction, “The more satisfied respondents are with their jobs, the higher they rate the value of the MBA (page 43).” Job satisfaction does not automatically translate into life satisfaction. Hence, life satisfaction was also measured.

The instrument used to measure life satisfaction was the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) has been used in previous studies of MBA students. In one study, the mean for the Satisfaction with Life Scale was 3.78 with a standard deviation of .75 (Masuda & Sorthaix, 2012). In another study of MBA students using the SWLS, the mean was 4.88 and the standard deviation was 1.21 (Malka & Chatman, 2003).

Yet, an emerging area of research on MBA student and graduate satisfaction is going beyond the classroom to include not only job satisfaction but family and life satisfaction of MBA graduates (Masuda & Sorthaix, 2012). This paper extends this line of research by focusing upon life satisfaction and personal growth in addition to career progression and job satisfaction.

Methodology

The effectiveness of the MBA concentration was assessed in terms of meeting specific outcomes: current student/alumni survey on career progression; job satisfaction; life satisfaction; and proclivity for personal growth. A survey was designed by the authors to collect the required data.

Current Student/Alumni Survey

The career progression section of this current student/alumni survey was developed by the authors of this paper. For job satisfaction, life satisfaction and personal growth, psychometrically validated scales were used which will be detailed below. A preliminary version of the current student/alumni survey was developed based on initial ideas gathered from multiple sources including past instruments, accreditation requirements, faculty interviews, and a review of the literature. After developing the initial version of the survey, it was refined by soliciting expert opinion and conducting cognitive interview techniques (Jobe & Mingay, 1989) such as concurrent think-aloud interviews and confidence ratings. These techniques established both face and content validity. The survey was not subject to a comprehensive validation study. The purpose of this survey is not to make any predictions or to confirm or disconfirm any existing theories. As such, predictive, construct, and concurrent validity are less of an issue.

The survey was created using Qualtrics, an online survey research software package, and sent to potential respondents on March 15, 2012. The survey consisted of six sections: (1) Competencies and Tasks Covered in Concentration (Likert Scale); (2) Course Selection within Concentration; (3) Career Progression (Effects of Health Sector MBA on Career); (4) Job Satisfaction (Brief Overall Job Satisfaction Measure I Scale); (5) Life Satisfaction (Satisfaction with Life Scale) and (6) Proclivity for Personal Growth (Personal Growth Initiative Scale). The focal point here rotates around four of the six sections: career progression, job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and personal growth. Regarding career progression, this has been operationalized here using both subjective and objective measures as discussed by others (Supangco, 2011).

As indicated previously, all scales included in this survey were psychometrically validated. Each of three scales was selected to measure a different student outcome: job satisfaction; life satisfaction; and personal growth. First, to measure job satisfaction, we selected the Brief Overall Job Satisfaction Measure I Scale (Judge, Boudreau and Bretz, 1994). Second, to measure life satisfaction, we selected the Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 1985). Third, to measure the proclivity to grow and develop, we selected the Personal Growth Initiative Scale (Robitschek, 1998). Each scale will be described briefly below following a brief discussion of Career Progression and some of the items.

Career Progression. This section seeks to detect the impact of the concentration on the careers of the respondents. There were three domains representing career progression. The first domain focused on change in self-reported income as perceived by the respondents. The item asked respondents to report whether they had more income, less income, or no change in income as a result of the concentration. Similar to other studies, change in annual income was self-

reported but not verified (Malka & Chatman, 2003). As such, this information is considered as subjective not objective. The second domain focused on non-pecuniary aspects of career progression. More specifically, respondents were asked to report on whether they had assumed greater responsibility and whether their work was more focused on health management. The third domain focused on self-reported changes in title before and after completing the program.

Brief Overall Job Satisfaction Measure II Scale. Brief Overall Job Satisfaction Measure II Scale: The composite three-question job satisfaction scale used in this study has a coefficient alpha of .85 (Judge, Boudreau and Bretz, 1994). Judge and Klinger believe this composite measure “is a reasonably valid measure of overall job satisfaction and more reliable than a single-item measure” (2007). The items in this measure were:

1. All things considered are you satisfied with your present job (circle) one? YES NO
2. How satisfied are you with your job in general (circle one)?

1	2	3	4	5
Very Dissatisfied	Somewhat Dissatisfied	Neutral	Somewhat Satisfied	Very Satisfied

3. Below, please write down your best estimates on the percent of time you feel satisfied, dissatisfied, and neutral about your present job on average. The three figures should add up to equal 100%. ON THE AVERAGE.

The percent of time I feel satisfied with my present job _____% (score this item)
 The percent of time I feel dissatisfied with my present job _____%.
 The percent of time I feel neutral about my present job _____%.
 TOTAL _____%

Satisfaction with Life Scale. Satisfaction with Life Scale: The five-item Satisfaction with Life Scale provided an average coefficient alpha of .83 during initial administration and upon retest proved reliable with an average coefficient alpha of .85 (Pavot, 1991). “These findings suggest that life satisfaction is a consistent and stable phenomenon; it is not simply constructed at the moment by the subject based on short-term factors” (Pavot, 1991). The items in the measure were:

1. In most ways, my life is ideal.
2. The conditions of my life are excellent.
3. I am satisfied with my life.
4. So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.
5. If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

The scale used is a 7-point agreement scale: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = slightly disagree, 4 = neither agree nor disagree, 5 = slightly agree, 6 = agree, and 7 = strongly agree.

Personal Growth Initiative Scale. Personal Growth Initiative Scale: Robitscheck (1999) provided further validation of the Personal Growth Initiative Scale (PGI) and showed “that PGI

is associated with assertiveness, career exploration, and a problem-focused style of coping, demonstrating that PGI has behavioral as well as cognitive components.” Test-retest reliability was confirmed with coefficient alphas of 1 week (.84), 4 weeks (.73), and 8 weeks (.74) demonstrating long-term stabilization. Also, construct and convergent validities were supported by confirmatory factor analysis and moderate positive correlations (absolute value of $r=.24$ to $.56$), respectively. The items in the measure were:

1. I know how to change specific things that I want to change in my life.
2. I have a good sense of where I am headed I my life.
3. If I want to change something in my life, I initiate the transition process.
4. I can choose the role that I want to have in a group.
5. I know what I need to do to get started toward reaching my goals.
6. I have a specific action plan to help me reach my goal.
7. I take charge of my life.
8. I know what my unique contribution to the world might be.
9. I have a plan for making my life more balanced.

Using the scale below, circle the number which best describes the extent to which you agree or disagree with each statement.

- 1 = Definitely disagree
- 2 = Mostly disagree
- 3 = Somewhat disagree
- 4 = Somewhat agree
- 5 = Mostly agree
- 6 = Definitely agree

Findings

The findings of this exploratory investigation are divided into five sections: survey response rate; career progression; job satisfaction; life satisfaction; and personal growth.

Survey Response Rate. Our survey received 58 responses out of 112 surveys distributed (51.8% response rate), which is in line with most web-delivered surveys. In a meta-analysis of response rates, Anseel (2010) examined response rate trends and found that the surveys analyzed had a response rate of 52.3%. A rate of 49.1% was found in a separate comparison of web-delivered versus mail delivered surveys (Saunders 2011).

Career Progression. This section reports findings about the impact of the concentration on the careers of the respondents. The first area focuses upon the perceptions of the respondents about how the concentration had an impact on their career.

Three specific career impacts were reported by more than half of the survey respondents: (1) greater responsibility (60%); (2) work focusing more on health management (57%); and (3) more income (52%). Another measure of the impact on careers is whether the respondents changed their position or title. Forty six respondents (80%) provided information on their job titles before and after completing the program. Thirty nine of these respondents experienced a title change (84.70%). A title change can represent a promotion (Sales Operations Analyst to

Sales Operations Manager), a change of company or department (CEO to CFO at a larger organization), or a change of career (Assistant Scientist to Senior Healthcare Consultant). Based on the title changes recorded, 45.6 % or 21 out of 46 of the positions represent a promotion at least by examining the title. Moreover, 30% or 14 out of 33 respondents agreed with the statement: I was promoted as a result of the Health Sector MBA Concentration.

Job Satisfaction. Slightly more than eight out of ten (80.7%) of respondents were either ‘Satisfied’ (59.6%) or ‘Very Satisfied’ (21.1%) with their roles. Job satisfaction was also expressed in percentage of time per day on average that the respondents feel satisfied, dissatisfied, or neutral about their current jobs. The results show that 60.5% of the time respondents feel satisfied, 20.6% dissatisfied, and 18.9% neutral each day.

Life Satisfaction Scale. The respondents were given a Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, 1985) with responses ranging from “Strongly Disagree” (1) to “Strongly Agree” (7). The respondents displayed a general satisfaction concerning their overall life. “I am satisfied with life” received the most positive response and the means for the statements ranged from 4.67 to 5.75, with the mean of means at 5.44.

Personal Growth Scale. The respondents were also given a Personal Growth Initiative Scale (Robitschek, 1998), which had a response scale from “Definitely Disagree” (1) to “Definitely Agree” (6). Their responses indicate that most feel capable of creating goals and maintaining control over their life paths. The most positive reaction was in response to “I take charge of my life.” On the other hand, the weakest, yet still positive reaction was in response to “I know what my unique contribution to the world might be.” The means ranged from 4.39 to 5.04. The mean of means was 4.76.

Discussion

Returning to the original research question posed at the beginning of this paper [*What are the outcomes for current students/alumni with respect to effects on career progression, job satisfaction, life satisfaction and personal growth?*], the data suggest that there is the respondents of the survey report career progression as evidenced by changes in title and self-reported income. Furthermore, the respondents self-report that they are experiencing job satisfaction, life satisfaction, and personal growth. This study supports the previous work of Davies & Cline (2005) with regard to the MBA having a positive impact on salary and career progression. This study also supports the findings of Zhao et al. (2006) who found a positive impact of the MBA on job satisfaction. However, the findings in this study do not support the results found by Pfeffer and Fong (2002) who found that the MBA had a negative effect on salaries and career attainment. The findings in this investigation found that compared to other MBA alumni/students (Masuda & Sortheix, 2012; Malka & Chatman, 2003) that the respondents in this investigation reported higher life satisfaction. No conclusions can be drawn as to why that is the case. The findings from this study are difficult to interpret based upon the fact that no benchmarks could be identified which offer comparative or normative data with this particular study population with regard to job and life satisfaction as two examples.

Contribution

This paper contributes to the literature in two specific ways. First, it adds to the extant literature on measuring outcomes outside the classroom as well as evaluating the perception of alumni. Second, it offers a framework to measure a number of student outcomes of importance to diverse stakeholders.

Limitations

This investigation has limitations like all investigations. The first limitation is selection bias. The second limitation is self-report bias and common-methods bias. Others have used alumni surveys to evaluate the career perceptions of MBA graduates, acknowledging the limitations of self-report data and common-method bias (Cocchiara et al., 2010; Glynn & Wood, 2008; Borden, 2005) as we do here. The third limitation is limited external validity or generalizability. The study population consists of MBA students who have selected one MBA concentration. The fourth limitation is experimenter bias because the concentration director for the Health Sector MBA concentration is one of the authors. The fifth limitation is the cross-sectional study design which does not allow for the examination of how these variables of interest relate over time.

Future research may want to study a population consisting of MBA alumni/students from across different concentration in multiple schools/college. This would address the limitation of external validity or generalizability. Another way to assess impact of the MBA on income would be to gather pre-MBA and post-MBA income data as done in other studies (Grove & Hussey, 2014), although the data is still self-reported.

Practical Implications

Future program administrators, career planning professionals, and researchers should replicate this survey to determine the usefulness of this instrument and process in evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of their respective MBA concentrations and entire MBA degree programs to assess and the impact of management education on specific student/alumni outcomes: career progression; job satisfaction; life satisfaction; and personal growth. Moreover, the findings from this study may also enable student recruitment and enrollment offices to revise or refine their recruitment messages beyond the pecuniary benefits of attaining an MBA degree.

Conclusion

Calls for greater transparency and accountability within higher education in general and management education in particular will continue to increase. As the value of MBA programs is put in the spotlight by accreditors, regulators, and customers, management educators need to be prepared to demonstrate value in different ways to different stakeholders. A more holistic evaluation process as presented here is one way of demonstrating value.

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