

WHAT MBA STUDENTS WANT AND WHAT THEY GET - A CASE HISTORY

Leon Winer, Pace University, Pace Plaza, New York, NY 10038, lwiner@pace.edu

ABSTRACT

A 1999 survey of graduating MBA students at the author's business school revealed low willingness to recommend the MBA program and low perceived value of core courses and courses in the students' major fields.

When other findings of this exit survey were compared to results of a survey of entering MBA students, it appeared that insufficient learning of valuable and strongly needed skills had caused the low levels of satisfaction. The paper concludes with a suggestion to interested faculty to conduct similar surveys to determine whether changes in teaching and learning might be beneficial.

INTRODUCTION

A pair of surveys were conducted at the author's business school during the Fall 1999 semester. The over-all purpose of these surveys was to obtain information for improving the curriculum with the ultimate objective of increasing the value of the MBA program.

The first survey, conducted in September was administered to entering MBA students. The aim of the survey was to discover students' perceptions of the relative importance of sixteen abilities (See Exhibit 1 for a replica of the questionnaire used):

1. Competence in an important business discipline.
2. Understanding of business areas outside your major.
3. Ability to recognize business opportunities.
4. Ability to solve business problems.
5. Ability to integrate global issues into business decisions.
6. Ability to apply theory to practice.
7. Ability to develop spreadsheet models.
8. Ability to use the Internet.

9. Skill in writing business reports.
10. Skill in giving oral presentations.
11. Ability to work well with people of diverse backgrounds.
12. Skill in directing the work of others.
13. Skill in resolving conflicts.
14. Ability to prioritize activities.
15. Skill in marketing yourself.
16. Skill in starting your own business.

This survey has been described in detail in another paper presented last year. Results only will be summarized in the next section of this paper.

The second survey, conducted during November of 1999, was administered to MBA students completing program. The second survey aimed to measure satisfaction with the MBA program and to obtain some understanding of the causes of the suspected less than complete satisfaction. This survey is reported in detail in this paper. It is expected that this report will enable readers to conduct similar surveys in their own schools and to use the resulting information for increasing the level of satisfaction of their MBA programs.

THE ENTRY SURVEY: WHAT DO MBAS WANT?

In the entry level survey, the 377 entering students received the questionnaire shown in Exhibit 1, which asked them to evaluate the sixteen abilities shown above with respect to their value in helping them to maximize their success in business and with respect to their need for self improvement. There were 310 usable replies, for a response rate of 82.2%. Summary results are presented in Exhibit 2.

Results are ranked by "Composite Index," which is the sum of the "Valuable" and "Need Improvement" average scores. The higher the Composite Index, the stronger the expression of want on the part of the entry level students. For example, "Ability to recognize business oppor-

tunities," "Ability to solve business problems," "Skill in marketing yourself" and "Skill in giving oral presentations" are ranked highest, in terms of value for maximizing success in business and students' need for improvement. At the opposite end, "Ability to develop spreadsheet models" and "Ability to use the Internet" are ranked lowest.

WHAT DO DO MBAS GET: FINDINGS OF THE EXIT SURVEY

The Exit survey was requested by the associate dean responsible for the MBA program. His objective was to obtain information to guide the faculty in developing courses and curricula that would increase student satisfaction with the MBA program. Surveys conducted under guidance of the AACSB, showed that 55% of our graduating students were reporting that they were satisfied with the School's MBA program. This level of satisfaction was similar with the level of satisfaction expressed by exiting students at six comparable schools.

The issues to be investigated were:

1. What percentage of the graduating students were sufficiently well satisfied to recommend the program to a friend?
2. How valuable were the core courses?
3. How valuable were the courses in the students' majors?
4. How did the "Valuable" and "Need Improvement" averages reported on the Exit survey compare with averages reported on the Entry survey?

On the Exit survey, of the 160 students enrolled in the capstone course, 124 submitted usable replies, for a response rate of 77.5%.

Exhibits 3, 4 and 5 show the results of the Exit survey regarding the first three issues listed above and comparisons with similar surveys conducted at the School in 1991 and 1992.

In all instances, while there had been improvement, the 1999 results were not good enough to be used in a marketing program. Considering the substantial amount effort dedicated by faculty and students in bringing the students from entry to exit, this did not seem to be an acceptable outcome. On the other hand, other business schools did not seem to be getting better

results according to data delivered to the school by AACSB-sponsored surveys.

WHY WEREN'T THE OUTCOMES BETTER?

An answer to this question is suggested in Exhibit 6, which compares answers to the "How much improvement do you need?" on the Entry and Exit surveys. While exiting students say that they need less improvement than entering students in all sixteen categories, the differences are small. The exiting students do not appear to have learned enough of what they needed to learn! To improve the outcome measures, the school has to close the gap between what the students want and what they get. See also, the similarity between Exhibits 2 and 7 which show what MBA's want at entry and at exit, taking into account perceived value and need for improvement.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In this case, graduating students of an MBA program did not report a high level of satisfaction. A likely reason was that they did not learn enough of what they needed to learn. The solution to this problem may be to change the curriculum and teaching and learning methods, to help students develop the abilities they need for success in their business careers.

The recommendation to interested readers is to conduct similar research in their schools to determine whether changes are needed and what the nature of those changes might be.

Note. Reviews of the literature were attempted, twice. Nothing was found on either of the following topics:

- a) Asking MBA students views regarding what they should be learning.
- b) Explanation for low levels of satisfaction of graduating MBA students.

Exhibit 1. Survey of Entering and Exiting Students Questionnaire

The purpose of this survey is to obtain your ideas for increasing the value of your learning experience. Please answer candidly and do not sign your name. Thank you for participating. Please circle the numbers that reflect your opinion. Please use a pen in marking your answers.

For maximizing your success in business, how valuable are the following abilities?	Not at all valuable						Extremely valuable								
	↓						↓								
Competence in an important business discipline	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	1
Understanding of business areas outside your major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	2
Ability to recognize business opportunities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	3
Ability to solve business problems	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	4
Ability to integrate global issues into business decisions	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	5
Ability to apply theory to practice	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	6
Ability to develop spreadsheet models	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Ability to use the Internet	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	8
Skill in writing business reports	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	9
Skill in giving oral presentations	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	10
Ability to work well with people of diverse backgrounds	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	11
Skill in directing the work of others	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	12
Skill in resolving conflicts	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	13
Ability to prioritize activities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	14
Skill in marketing yourself	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	15
Skill in starting your own business	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	16

At the present time, how much improvement do you need in your ... ?	I don't need any improvement						I need a lot of improvement								
	↓						↓								
Competence in an important business discipline	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	17
Understanding of business areas outside your major	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	18
Ability to recognize business opportunities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	19
Ability to solve business problems	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	20
Ability to integrate global issues into business decisions	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	21
Ability to apply theory to practice	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	22
Ability to develop spreadsheet models	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	23
Ability to use the Internet	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	24
Skill in writing business reports	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	25
Skill in giving oral presentations	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	26
Ability to work well with people of diverse backgrounds	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	27
Skill in directing the work of others	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	28
Skill in resolving conflicts	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	29
Ability to prioritize activities	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	30
Skill in marketing yourself	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	31
Skill in starting your own business	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	32

Exhibit 2. At Entry, What Do MBAs Want?

Based on answers to questionnaire shown in Exhibit 1
 All 377 students in MBA601 were surveyed in September 1999
 There were 310 respondents, for a response rate of 82.2%

Abilities	How Valuable Are? (0 to 6)	How Much Do You Need? (0 to 6)	Composite Index = Valuable+ Improvement	Composite Index As A % of Average
3. Ability to recognize business opportunities	5.40	4.02	9.43	110%
4. Ability to solve business problems	5.48	3.89	9.37	109%
15. Skill in marketing yourself	5.31	4.01	9.32	109%
10. Skill in giving oral presentations	5.08	4.08	9.16	107%
1. Competence in an important business discipline	5.16	3.79	8.94	104%
6. Ability to apply theory to practice	5.07	3.87	8.93	104%
5. Ability to integrate global issues into business decisions	4.73	3.94	8.67	101%
13. Skill in resolving conflicts	5.17	3.46	8.63	101%
9. Skill in writing business reports	4.98	3.60	8.58	100%
12. Skill in directing the work of others	5.15	3.39	8.53	100%
2. Understanding of business areas outside your major	4.45	4.02	8.47	99%
16. Skill in starting your own business	4.28	4.11	8.39	98%
14. Ability to prioritize activities	5.26	3.00	8.26	96%
11. Ability to work well with people of diverse backgrounds	5.29	2.52	7.81	91%
7. Ability to develop spreadsheet models	4.31	3.25	7.56	88%
8. Ability to use the Internet	4.70	2.25	6.95	81%
Averages	4.99	3.57	8.56	100%

Exhibit 3. At Exit: What Would You Say to A Friend?

Exit Survey, November 1999. Surveyed all 160 Capstone students, 77.5 response rate.

<i>If a friend asked you whether to enroll in the MBA program, what would you say?</i> (Percent of respondents)	1991	1999
	Exit	Exit
	Study	Study
Go to the School for an MBA degree	50%	57%
Go to the School only if you are majoring in Accounting	13%	19%
Go to another school for an MBA	28%	21%
Go for another advanced degree	1%	1%
Do not go to graduate school, at all	2%	2%
No answer	6%	1%
Total	100%	100%

Exhibit 4. At Exit: Core Courses Helping?

<i>To what extent are each of the core courses helping you maximize your success in business?</i> (0 = Not at all, 10 = To a great extent)	1992	1999
	Exit	Exit
	Study	Study
BUS 501 Financial and Managerial Accounting	6.80	6.67
BUS 502 Statistical Analysis for Business	5.52	5.40
BUS 506 Quantitative Analysis for Business	5.65	5.67
BUS 507 Managerial Marketing	5.74	5.79
BUS 508 Economic Analysis and Policy	6.31	6.17
BUS 510 Managerial Economics	5.80	5.99
BUS 512 Managerial Finance	7.04	7.28
BUS 517 Management Information Systems	3.53	Deleted
BUS 515 Organizational Behavior	4.69	Replaced
MBA 601 Managerial Theory and Skills I		6.40
MBA 602 Managerial Theory and Skills II		6.34
MBA 603 Business in the Global Environment	5.87	6.02
MBA 614 Business and Its Environment	5.07	Deleted
MBA 618 Operations and Quality Management	5.71	5.56
MBA 680/685 Policy Capstone Course	6.59	6.64
Averages	5.72	6.16

Exhibit 5. At Exit: Courses in Major Helping?

<i>To what extent are courses in your Major helping you maximize your success in business?</i> (0 = Not at all, 10 = To a great extent)	1992	1999
	Exit	Exit
	Study	Study
Finance	6.00	6.95
Accounting	8.10	7.98
Marketing	6.30	6.79
Management	7.80	6.81
All others	6.66	7.86
All respondents	6.61	7.14

Exhibit 6. Exit vs. Entry "How Much Improvement Do You Need?"

	<i>At the present time, how much improvement do you need in your . . . ?</i> (0 = I don't need any, 6 = I need a lot)		Remaining Improvement Needed
	Entry	Exit	Exit/Entry
10. Skill in giving oral presentations	4.1	2.8	69%
9. Skill in writing business reports	3.6	2.7	74%
6. Ability to apply theory to practice	3.9	2.9	74%
11. Ability to work well with people of diverse backgrounds	2.5	1.9	75%
5. Ability to integrate global issues into business decisions	3.9	3.0	75%
7. Ability to develop spreadsheet models	3.3	2.5	76%
3. Ability to recognize business opportunities	4.0	3.1	76%
2. Understanding of business areas outside your major	4.0	3.1	77%
15. Skill in marketing yourself	4.0	3.1	77%
12. Skill in directing the work of others	3.4	2.6	77%
8. Ability to use the Internet	2.2	1.7	77%
4. Ability to solve business problems	3.9	3.0	78%
14. Ability to prioritize activities	3.0	2.4	80%
13. Skill in resolving conflicts	3.5	2.8	81%
1. Competence in an important business discipline	3.8	3.1	83%
16. Skill in starting your own business	4.1	3.6	87%
Averages	3.6	2.8	77%