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A Holistic Education Approach for Assessing Business Programs

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March 30-31, 2017



**Appalachian State University
Boone, NC**



**Edited by:
G. David Shows and Pia A. Albinsson
Appalachian State University
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2017 Appalachian Research in Business Symposium

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It is our pleasure to present the *Proceedings of the 4th Annual Appalachian Research in Business Symposium* from the 2017 conference held March 30-31 hosted by the Walker College of Business at Appalachian State University. The Appalachian Research in Business Symposium provides a venue for presenting new research, discovering contemporary ideas, and building connections among scholars at Appalachian State University, Eastern Kentucky University, East Tennessee State University, and Western Carolina University.

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A HOLISTIC EDUCATION APPROACH FOR ASSESSING BUSINESS PROGRAMS

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Introduction

Providing business students with a holistic education is essential for developing professionals who are equally proficient in their use of hard and soft skills and capable of applying various concepts from different disciplines to create innovative solutions. To understand if students are learning the content that a holistic business education is intended to deliver, a case study of business program assessment was conducted. Specifically, this research is focused on an assessment of business students from a comprehensive regional institution of higher education to determine if the business program has incorporated appropriate assessment strategies in order to meet the expectations of a holistic education including meeting student learning outcomes defined by the AACSB International accredited program.

Literature Overview

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to build understanding of a holistic education approach for addressing business education issues and to design business program assessment in the context of holistic education. The apparent discrepancies in what society expects young business professionals to have learned before entering the workforce and curriculum content are an immediate problem facing business education programs (Waddock & Lozano, 2013). McConnell and colleagues (2008) claimed that many university assessment plans focus on assessing student learning at the end of a program using such methods as standardized tests and focus groups. While the results often provide broad information about student learning, it is not timely information for continuous improvement (Gardiner, et al., 2009).

Ample evidence points to a need for universities to implement a holistic education approach which supports the social, personal, professional, and academic needs of the business student population. A holistic education emphasizes the education beyond the confines of the classroom and moves the concept of a student-centered educational approach to a much more radical program of education (Huitt, 2011). Holistic education facilitates student learning by teaching students to think beyond what is supposedly possible by applying creative solutions to intractable challenges and ultimately developing innovative products, services, systems, and methods to meet those challenges (Liu & Noppe-Brandon, 2009). The inherent importance of holistic education is amplified by the need to train business professionals to lead in a socially constructed world that is focused on global responsibility (Muff, 2013), and this cannot be accomplished while many business education programs too narrowly assess their students based on their comprehension of simple answers to problems (Waddock & Lozano, 2013).

The growing demand for verification that students are learning what they need to learn is driving institutions and programs to develop tools for assessing the level of knowledge and skills of their graduating students. The quest for assurance of learning (AoL) and continuous improvement requires benchmarks, data collection and analysis, and feedback that can highlight students' competencies (Hunt, 2015). More attention has been given to AoL as a result of increasing competitiveness as universities attempt to differentiate themselves locally and globally from others in the market. Business schools are crucial to the development of young business professionals and scholars but are in need of enhancements (Davidson, 2016). While AACSB enforces requirements to obtain accreditation that serve as moderately effective indicators of student learning (Hunt, 2015), business programs as a whole may further develop their students' learning by implementing an assessment system tailored to the characteristics of individual programs (Jalbert, Jalbert, & Furumo, 2011).

Methodology

This study collected data from three separate target populations using three different survey instruments. The survey instruments were developed in 1996, and have been refined over time as we conducted business program assessment and sought feedback from students, faculty members, alumni, and employers. The three survey instruments entail different assessment foci and provide a comparative snapshot of how students accumulate skills as they progress from junior-level to senior-level programs.

The first survey was an external review in which business executives evaluated the performance of 285 students who interviewed executives for a class project. Executives assessed the process of scheduling, conducting and following up with the interview using a 3-point Likert scale. The sample data collected from this population represents top-level managers or executives.

The second survey was a self-assessment from students to evaluate themselves on course learning objectives in research process, critical thinking, writing process, communication strategies, ethical issues, and peer-review process in teamwork after taking the course. The survey was conducted at the end of each semester and the majority of participants were between the ages of 18 to 24 (87%).

The third survey targeted business program's graduating seniors to understand why they elected to attend this university for an undergraduate degree, assess students' goal achievement, and examine students' perception of their development of certain skills while enrolled. For the three datasets, each ranking item was used in calculating weighted averages to respectively determine student performance regarding professionalism, learning objectives, and various graduate progressions. An exit survey was used to collect data from graduating seniors in the spring of 2015. From the sample taken (n=138), 95% of students were full-time, 64% were male and 36% were female. Furthermore, the majority of students reported to have majored in Marketing (40%), while General Business was second (35%), and Management was third (25%).

Results and Implications

In the first assessment measure, external reviewers indicated a high level of satisfaction concerning the 285 students' ability to schedule the interview, conduct the interview, and follow-up the interview. According to the findings, students positively displayed a number of soft skills that include interpersonal skills, people skills, oral communication skills, professionalism in face-to-face settings, responsibility, and courtesy.

In the second assessment measure, Juniors (n=150) in the business program completed a self-assessment of their progress on the course learning objectives including research process, critical thinking, writing process, communication strategies, ethical issues, and peer-review process in teamwork. The findings from the students' self-assessment suggest that the university's business program is successfully developing students' communication skills in areas beyond only public speaking, and employers often deem these types of skills as important.

In the area of critical thinking, students' strongest area of evaluation in the critical thinking process was their ability to analyze data to form conclusions and recommendations. Over all the categories assessed by students, critical thinking was the one where students had the lowest level of confidence.

Students' self-assessment in ethical issues indicated that students lack the ethical considerations of citing sources or are subject to using incomplete source citations; thus, citing sources constituted a weakness in students' research skills. Students completing the self-assessment did possess the knowledge to know why it is important to avoid reporting misleading results in their research, as well as understanding the concept of plagiarism.

In the final section of the self-assessment survey, students compared their own writing skills relative to their peers and evaluated the importance of written communication in their future career. The large majority of students believed that their writing skills were comparable to their peers' writing, and they noted the importance of writing to their future career.

The third assessment measure was an Exit Survey completed by business Seniors to determine the students' perceptions regarding their progress on goal achievement and business learning goals achievement. The findings indicated that business students are achieving their goals and gaining a sense of fulfillment and satisfaction as shown in Table 1 using a Likert scale of 1-5.

Table 1. Senior Exit Survey- Goal Achievement

Goals	Weighted Average
Faculty in my major demonstrated professionalism	4.35
Courses in my major challenged me academically	4.32
I would recommend my major to a prospective student	4.3
Instructors in my major challenged me to think critically	4.28
I am satisfied with the accessibility of faculty in my major	4.28
My major included opportunities to apply skills and knowledge	4.27
Instruction in my major included international topics/ experience	4.26
My major was designed to encourage active student learning	4.25
Faculty in my major demonstrated interest in my individual success	4.24
I am satisfied with my faculty advisor's accessibility	4.18
I developed adequate skills in computer and software applications	4.12
I was encouraged to participate in internships, co-op, field experience, or student teaching	4.1
My coursework provided opportunities to work with students and faculty outside the classroom	4.06
I am satisfied with my faculty advisor's help in making academic and career plans	4.0
Faculty encourage me to participate in professional organizations	3.99
Grading standards for courses were fair	3.95
I am satisfied with academic advising and services provided by the BTC office	3.94
I had opportunities to participate with faculty in activities other than coursework	3.76
I had opportunities to participate in business or community-based projects as part of my coursework	3.73
I was encouraged to participate in a study abroad program	3.42
My coursework provided opportunities for me to work with a faculty member on a research project	3.38
I completed a cooperative education experience	3.14
I completed a service-learning course	3.09
My cooperative education experience led to an employment opportunity	3.03

Students also indicated that they believed they had made progress on the Business Learning Goals established by the business program as shown in Table 2 using a Likert scale of 1-4.

Table 2. Senior Exit Survey- Business Learning Goal Achievement

Goals	Weighted Average
Function effectively as a member of a team	3.54
Writing effective business documents and reports	3.5
Deliver effective business presentations	3.5
Make sound decisions and create/produce effective plans/reports	3.49
Effectively evaluate information and determine alternative courses of action	3.48
Understand global business principles, methods, issues, and technologies	3.46
Critically review, distinguish, and organize business information	3.45
Develop an awareness of social problems and moral issues/make ethically sound decisions	3.45
Work with people of different backgrounds	3.43
Lead and supervise task and groups of people	3.42
Use quantitative tools	3.31

Scholars have repeatedly suggested that business graduates are not competent at identifying a problem, leading diverse teams, understanding international issues, and recognizing ethical dilemmas (e.g., Herrington & Arnold, 2013), but these findings indicate that the business graduates in this study believe that their skills in those areas are indeed competent.

Based on the data collection, the findings suggest that this study holistically assessed the quality of the business program. Respondents indicated that they perceive the business program is one that delivers curricula that allow students to develop several multidisciplinary skills. Additionally, respondents claim that they were provided with multiple methods to enhance their development as people, as well as students.

The three data collections reveal that the business students in this study believe they have acquired the necessary hard and soft skills needed to lead successful careers. It can be concluded that the business program in this study is successfully emphasizing the importance of both hard and soft skills.

By using three different data collections from varying samples of respondents, this study is holistically assessing the quality of the business program. By assessing multiple sets of responses from different samples, the business faculty can more easily identify areas of improvement in terms of the curriculum provided to students. Based on the results from the data collections, it can be inferred that the business program is in fact delivering a holistic education in terms of students' professionalism, hard and soft skill development, and goal achievement.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, business programs should explore a holistic education approach of developing students' professionalism, hard and soft skill development, and goal achievement and devise educational policies and practices that will promote students' success. The following practical implications for business educators in terms of enhancing learning, teaching, curriculum structure, and program assessment are provided below.

1. In order to enhance business graduates employability within an increasingly competitive and global business environment, business schools need to shift to the new teaching paradigm that emphasizes both soft skills and hard business knowledge, redefine what may be termed 'core components' of the business curriculum, and develop programs where teaching of such skills should form part of the curriculum. One innovative approach is to create cross-disciplinary curricula that help students expand their scope of knowledge and skills beyond the confines of their own major and assist students in developing multidisciplinary skills sets. Additional elective courses should also be explored to help students gain sufficient expertise or experience relevant to those skill components while in higher education.
2. To generate awareness of ethical issues, business educators should include case studies of ethical and unethical scenarios where students are exposed to a decision-making process to make informed decisions. By using real-life examples, current events and other lively sources of knowledge in place of textbook information, business educators help students develop a legitimate understanding of what is to be expected when entering the workplace.
3. Business schools should consider implementing a holistic assessment system to examine students' attainment of knowledge specific to the field while providing a framework to reflect upon how the degree education has fostered students' attitudes toward learning, their future profession, and their fellow colleagues.
4. Finally, professional development opportunities should be provided to plan and prepare business educators to progress to a holistic business education approach.

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