Developing relevant MBA curriculum: a case study of business community perspective

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Abstract. *Developing relevant curriculum for MBA programs has become increasingly more challenged. At issue is the need to address multiple stakeholder perspectives from varied levels of student preparedness, to institutional pressure to be more efficient in the delivery of course content, to the demands of complex business interest. Thus, effectively identifying specific knowledge and skills in an MBA program that are of value is of importance. Based on an approach which recognizes the contribution of higher education in the development of strong economic industry clusters (Porter & Kramer, 2011), this paper provides a case study of a regional college of business in a large urban area in the southwest United States. Local business community members (n=48) responded to a survey which identifies their perspective of who in an organization would benefit from holding an MBA degree, as well as which course topic categories are of most importance. The result was that the MBA degree becomes significantly more important as one advances in an organization. Secondly, while a significant difference was not found between analytical, functional and soft-skill course topic categories, soft-skills are significantly more important than ethical or global course topics. Finally, when testing for a difference amongst respondent types there was a significant difference between human resource recruiter and manager responses; of note, is that managers placed a significantly higher importance on the soft-skill course categories. The results are compared with the current curriculum offered at the college of business of interest. Recommendations and implications of these results provide a basis for suggesting revisions to the MBA curriculum so as to be more relevant.*

Keywords: *MBA curriculum; business community stakeholders; economic development.*

Introduction

Developing relevant curriculum for MBA programs has become increasingly more challenging. Not only is there concern for the provision of course

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content which meets the demands of increasingly complex business interests, but also a pronounced advocacy to address concerns related to the cost/ benefit of a higher education. The challenge is compounded further with expectations such as incoming students' need for flexibility and interest in programs which are shorter than a traditional 2 year programs (Crisp, 2012; Damast, 2009). Yet, there is concern that students may not be adequately prepared to enroll in an MBA program noting that in the United States MBA applicants undergraduate degrees range vastly with approximately half holding non-business degrees (GMAC, 2012). In short, addressing today's goals from multiple constituents stresses a need to be both effective and efficient in developing relevant MBA programs.

Research and debate in the academic community has long questioned the usefulness of MBA programs addressing a wide range of concerns from courses offered in MBA curriculum to relevant learning outcomes (Rubin andDierdorff, 2013). Divergence exists between what would be offered in an 'ideal' MBA curriculum and what is currently offered. An overweighed focus on functional and analytical course topics offered by top-ranked MBA programs (Navarro, 2008) compliments previously voiced concerns that MBA programs focus too heavily on the development of specialized skills, as opposed to the more essential interpersonal and soft-skills necessary to manage others (Mintzberg, 2004; Porter and McKibbin, 1988). The result is a misalignment between what the business community expects and what is typically taught in a MBA programs (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011). Further, debate ensues that providing a narrow specialized MBA curriculum as opposed to a more general MBA curriculum dampens the ability for one to transfer amongst various industry segments (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). In all, the ability to develop a relevant standardized approach to the development of MBA curriculum is questionable.

Yet, despite these concerns, formal training programs such as found in MBA programs is considered to provide an efficient path to gaining business knowledge and skills (Pfeffer & Fong, 2002). And, research has found that there is a positive relationship between holding an MBA degree and performance outcomes at both the individual and organizational level (e.g. Connolly, 2003). In the end analysis, business schools are perceived by stakeholders to be a legitimate provider of such training (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013). At a societal level, educational institutions are viewed

as viable contributors in creating value for economic clusters. However, the demographic profile of economic clusters varies from region to region (Porter & Kramer, 2011). For example, one economic cluster region may have a concentration of high tech service organizations, while another may be oriented toward the oil and gas organizations.

In all, a well-founded approach in the development of relevant MBA curriculum may be to consider a more nuanced approach which incorporates the influence of specific career contexts on relevant MBA curriculum options (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013). That is, the study of how best to develop relevant MBA curriculum may be best focused at the local university level (Hammond & Moser, 2009). The orientation of a localized view complements Porter and Kramer's recognition that educational institutions play a vital role in creating value by enhancing cluster business environments (2011). Further, the approach may of a particular value for those MBA programs which do not enjoy automatic legitimacy from being a top tier ranked program (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013). Further, the approach aligns with AACSB accreditation standards, which have evolved from a universal application of appropriate standards to a more customized mission driven focus (AACSB, 2012).

A more localized approach in MBA curriculum development suggests input from relevant stakeholder groups; namely, internally from faculty at the local university, and externally from local business community members. While faculty has a long-term view based on expertise in the fields in which they teach, and are the gate keeps of curriculum development, external groups have a nearer view of knowledge and skills needed for the current business environment (Hammond & Moser, 2009; Kleinman & Kass, 2007). The above noted misalignment between the two constituencies (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011), and limitations from both groups with regard to a comprehensive understanding of relevant MBA curriculum suggests that a collaborative approach to facilitate a common understanding of relevant MBA curriculum content would be beneficial. I propose that seeking input from local business community members to identify the importance of holding an MBA degree and the importance of specific MBA courses to their organizations would generate a suitable foundation from which faculty can develop relevant MBA curriculum content. Thus, generating answers to research questions 1) who in the local business

community would be best served by holding an MBA degree, 2) which course topics are most important to include in the MBA curriculum, and 3) what are the differences in assessment between various local business community group would be of interest.

The purpose of this paper is to present a case study which provides the results from the administration of a survey intended to generate information related to the above listed research questions from members of a local business community in a large U.S. metroplex. In the first section, I present a discussion of brief background used to develop support for items included in the survey, as well as testable hypotheses statements to allow for analysis of the survey responses. In the second section, I present a case study application of the survey including a description of the contextual setting and research methodology. I conclude with a discussion of the findings including limitations, as well as recommendation for future research.

Background

Presented in next few pages is a brief discussion of previous research and background related to each of the three research questions posed. Following the discussion of each research question a hypothesis statement is presented to be tested. The intended outcome is to provide objective information from the external stakeholder group, local business community members to be used as a basis for faculty to critique the current MBA curriculum.

Question 1: Who in the local business community would be best served by holding an MBA degree?

The MBA degree was developed to provide knowledge and skills related to managing people for those whose previous training was technically skilled in domains outside of the field of management (Kleiman & Kass, 2007). In a classic sense as one advances within an organization from a doer to a coordinator, the focus on skill set shifts from technical (front-line management level) to human (mid management level) to conceptual (executive management level) (Katz, 1974). The pursuit of an MBA degree

is viewed as a path which allows for one to facilitate career progress; that is, 'climb the corporate ladder" (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013) with "…between 68% and 91% (depending upon the industry) [to] be placed into "midlevel" or "senior-level" positions (GMAC, 2007 in Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009)." Thus, the research question in this paper considers, "who in the local business community would be best served by holding an MBA degree", which is examined by asking local business community members about the relationship between management levels in their organizations and the necessity of holding an MBA degree. The first hypothesis statement to be tested is offered to examine this relationship.

Hypothesis 1: Employers in the local business community place a higher importance on holding an MBA degree as one advances to higher management levels in an organization.

Question 2: Which course topics are most important to include in the MBA degree curriculum?

The determination of which course topics should be included in a general MBA curriculum remains a central issue. Original curriculum focused on the provision of functional skill training (e.g. marketing, corporate finance) for those without a business background. Criticism ensued that these programs were more vocational than academic which prompted revisions to include analytical training (e.g. quantitative analysis, decision analysis). Recent trends have infused the addition of contemporary topics such as globalization, ethics and MIS. A study by Navarro (2008) identified 26 course topics offered at the top 40 MBA programs which included a predominance of specific function and analytic course topics, and minimal exposure to soft-skill, socially responsible and global course topics. The resulting institutionalized profile is that MBA programs are relatively similar (Kleiman & Kass, 2007).

Given the overarching similarity in course topics across MBA programs, the use of these as items in a survey is thought to provide insight to address two concerns in developing effective MBA curriculum. The first address is that use of the 26 MBA course topics would facilitate mapping between the two key stakeholder groups allowing for a more successful collaborative

approach. That is, members of the business community are assumed to be able to adequately convey their assessment of the importance of generally recognized course topic labels. In turn, faculty is provided with commonly understood information to assess differences between current and stakeholder-focused MBA curriculum emphasis.

The second address would allow for consideration of the local business community's assessment of the extent to which there is a difference in importance between five course topic categories. The five course topic categories (Specific function, Analytic, Soft-skill, Socially Responsible and Global) are based on a consolidation of the list of the 26 MBA course topics in the Navarro study (2008). The interest at the course topic category level is to bring to the forefront consideration of long debated issue with centers on the extent to which soft-skills (i.e. leadership, communication, and organizational behavior) are more important that other MBA course topic categories. Research findings reveal that the overall MBA programs emphasis of course offerings continues to be dominated by the functional and analytical course topics (Navarro, 2008). However, studies and discussion suggest that employer interest lies in its managers possessing soft-skill capability and in the ability to manage human capital over the need to manage its task environment, such as logistics and technology (Navarro, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011; Shuayto, 2013). However, there is also evidence that some employers are interested in the "T" professional who possesses both skill sets; variation in an interest in balanced capabilities may be in part, based on variations in an organization's demographic such as size or industry type (CERI, 2012).

Recognizing that industry clusters are varied in their demographic profiles, a localized view of MBA curriculum development would logically assume that there may be distinct needs in the local business community with regard to the importance of soft-skill ability. Thus, the second hypothesis statement to be test is offered to examine the importance placed on each of the five MBA course topic categories with an emphasis on the soft-skill course topic category.

Hypothesis 2: Employers in the local business community place a higher importance on the soft skill topic category offered in an MBA program as compared to other MBA course topic categories.

Question 3: What are the differences in assessment between various local business community groups?

As previously discussed, some of the confusion in the determination of which MBA course topic categories are of greatest importance may rest in the variant demographics of the stakeholder groups surveyed. This assumption prompts not only taking an overall approach of assessing local business community member needs, but also of recognizing that there may be divergence of need within the local business community. Divergence may be especially evident if there are multiple economic clusters within the same geographic region. The Collegiate Employment Research Institute (CERI) which studies U.S. national employment trends has found that although there is a tendency for employers to seek balanced recruits, there is evidence of differences based on industry type, regional location and organization size (2012). For example, hospitality and non-profit organizations tend toward a balance of specific and soft skill ability, while oil and mining, and construction organizations tend toward more specific skill ability. Further, recruiters have been found to offer confusing directive by indicating a higher importance on soft-skills but hiring based on analytic ability (Rynes, Trank, Lawson and Ilies, 2003). Understanding this finer grain view of local community need can be useful in consideration of the extent to which a general MBA curriculum approach is suitable versus a need for the ability to offer specific industry clustered tracks. Thus, the third hypothesis set to be tested is offered to examine differences in assessment of MBA course topic categories by employer demographic in the local business community.

Hypothesis 3: Employers in the local business community with responses differentiated by (3a) size, (3b) type, (3c) location (3d) position are different in the importance placed on specific functional /analytical /soft-skill/ socially responsible, global skill categories offered in a general MBA curriculum.

Application of the survey instrument: a case study

Contextual Setting

Business School Profile. The MBA program of interest is associated with a public university which is part of a large well known state university system. Its campus is located in a large urban metropolitan area in the southwest region of the United States. The focus of the MBA program is noted as "preparing students for executive level career positions". The general MBA program curriculum requires 36 semester credit hours of coursework (i.e. 12 courses) with 24 semester credit hours classified as core (i.e. eight courses). Core courses are similar to those offered at top ranked MBA programs (Navarro, 2008) with a managerial focus on specific functional course topics of Accounting, Finance, Economics, Marketing, IT Applications, Management and Policy; one analytical course, Management Science, and one soft-skill course, Organizational Behavior. The program also offers students the option of participating in various concentrations including international business, international economics, international finance, health administration, project management and supply chain; suggested course sequences are provided for each concentration area. The program which began enrollment in 2008 has grown rapidly with a current enrollment of approximately 400 students. In parallel with the university mission, the college of business attracts first generation and non-traditional student groups; a majority of the students reside and work in the metropolitan area.

Business Community Profile. Information obtained from county and city economic development sources provides a relevant business community profile. The information is based on 2012 to 2013 data; specific reference to sources has been omitted to retain appropriate anonymity of the study. The metropolitan profile reflects a significantly higher level of management, technical and professional employment than both the state and national level at 31.3% of total employment vs. 25.63% and 26.21% respectively. This employment segment typically requires advanced degrees of education. The associated industry clusters include architecture and engineering, lawyers and actuaries, and the physical and life sciences. Overall, employment is led by the industry segments of manufacturing, education and health services, as well as leisure and hospitality. There is a higher employment percentage in the industry segments of health care, and accommodation and food services as compared to both the state

and national levels. The military is recognized as an important industry segment, while the mining/lodging segments are recognized as the fastest growing. Further, the Brookings Institute as 'globally fluent' has recently recognized the metropolitan region.

Research methodology

Sample and sampling procedures. The study reflects responses to a web-based survey instrument to determine the necessity of holding an MBA degree, as well as to identify which general MBA course topics were essential to businesses with a presence in the metropolitan region. The sampling design and procedures included pre-testing the survey by a member of the college's advisory board to determine the clarity of the questions and the extent to which a respondent would be willing to provide the requested information. An email alert provided the potential respondent with a survey link to Surveymonkey, an overview of the purpose of the study, a statement as to why the potential respondent had been selected to participate, and a request to forward the survey to another colleague in his/her organization if the potential respondent did not feel qualified to answer the survey questions. The survey instrument contained an agreement with university contact information to participate in the on-line study, and background for answering the survey questions. Specifically, the background information provided the respondents with an overview of the knowledge and skills typically developed in an MBA program according to AACSB standards (Standard 18, AACSB, 2012). It stated: "A general Master's level degree develops in an integrative, interdisciplinary fashion capacities to 1) lead in organizational situations, 2) apply knowledge in new and unfamiliar circumstances based on a conceptual understanding of relevant disciplines, 3) adapt and innovate to solve problems, and 4) understand management issues from a global perspective".

The email alert was distributed to individuals who were members of three groups associated with the university. Although the three groups are associated in different ways with the university, the overarching demographic of interest is that all individuals are members of the local business community; the primary focus of the research conducted. The first group list was derived from the College of Business' Advisory Board

(n= 14), the second group list was derived from the university's career services contacts (n= 144), and the third group list was derived from a local human resource management association that a business faculty member was associated with (n=633). The association membership consisted of employed and retired members (indistinguishable) and student representatives. Given that the survey was intended to assess desirable MBA skills for an organization, it was assumed that students would not be viable potential respondents and thus were deleted from the list (revised n = 572). The email alert was distributed to potential respondents one time during the month of July, 2013. Approximately, 125 contact email messages were returned because of errors in contact information and/or blocked access. Survey responses submitted were reviewed for completion and those with missing information related to the four demographic questions were eliminated. The number of usable surveys was 48 (6.6% of net potential respondents, 730).

The low response rate may be attributed to a number of reasons. First, the email alert was only sent one time to avoid possible duplicate responses. Second, a majority of potential respondents were in the community at large and did not have a direct association with the university. Despite an introductory message identifying the purpose of the survey, the potential respondent may not have had an interest in participating and/or may have considered the email as junk or spam. Third, those who received the email alert may not have felt comfortable or were unable to provide responses relevant to an organizational level preference. For example, the list from the professional organization contained retirees whose status was not identifiable from the demographic information provided.

Survey and measures. In addition to the consent and background information presented above, the survey contained the following questions used for analysis in this study. The first question set was designed to identify the necessity of holding an MBA degree by management level with choices of (1) Required, (2) Not required by highly desirable, (3) Not required but preferred and (4) Not required; skills not needed. The lower the response, the more important holding an MBA degree becomes. The second question set was designed to identify the importance of 26 MBA course topics and the five MBA course topic categories derived from the study conducted by Navarro (2008) of MBA curriculum. Respondents were asked to select

from three options the extent to which the course topic/category was (1) Essential, (2) Desirable or (3) Little Value. Each option was specifically defined: 1) Essential: "Managers in our organization will not be able to succeed without having the knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) covered in this topic, 2) Desirable: "Although not essential, managers in our organization would benefit having the KSAs covered in this topic, and 3) Little Value: The performance of a manager in our organization would not be enhanced with having the KSAs covered in this topic (Kleiman & Kass, 2007). The lower the response, the more essential the topic category is for those who are managers in the respondent's organization.

As with the design of any survey instrument there was interest to prompt a high response rate while collecting relevant data for the purpose of the research agenda. Given the use of a web-based medium to administer the survey, of particular interest was to design the two question sets to be as clear and convenient to complete as possible (Baatard, 2012). When surveying members of the business community the use of questions presented that allow for a quickly decided response is best. Historically, there has been considerable debate regarding the optimal number of response categories. Research results are mixed ranging in recognition of the ability to use a minimal number of two choices (e.g. agree-disagree) to extremes such as 21-points. The end result is that the selection of scalar granularity becomes a trade-off with low granularity consideration of quickness to answer versus availability of suitable response options, and high granularity inclusiveness of all response options versus respondent impatience. In all, the defining characteristics of a Likert scale is that there is a distinct cut-off points with an assumption of linearity and equal intervals between responses (Pearse, 2011). Thus, use of an instrument with a few response choices or low scale granularity was considered suitable (i.e. a four point scale for the MBA degree necessity question set and a three point scale for the course topic and category question set).

In the third question set, respondents were asked for self-report demographic information to allow for study of differences between industry sector, organization size, organization location and respondent job title. The industry sector question presented a list of 22 industry segments and one option for 'other' based on the state's industry profile list used for economic and public reporting systems. Results were coded to differentiate responses

as either 1) manufacturing/retail, or 2) service/education/government. The organization size question presented a list of six employee levels ranging from less than 20 to greater than 1,000. The results were coded to differentiate responses as either 1) small (less than 500), or 2) medium/large (more than 500). The organization location question presented five options to indicate where the respondent's organization operates distinguishing metropolitan region, state, national and international options. The responses were coded to differentiate responses as either 1) domestic, or 2) global. Finally, the respondents were asked to choose from a list of four options the job title which best reflected employment status at the organization. The responses were coded to differentiate responses as either 1) recruiter/non-manager, or 2) general/ executive manager titles. The coding schemes complement approaches in previous studies and allows for comparison of results to be discussed in the later portion of this paper.

Results

Descriptive Results

Of the 48 usable responses, the frequency of response by the respondent demographics, industry sector was 13 (27%) manufacturing/retail responses, and 35 (73%) service/ education/government responses. For the respondent demographic, organization size, there were 24 (50%) small-sized organizations with less than 500 employees, and 24 (50%) medium/large-sized organizations with more than 500 employees. For the respondent demographic, organization location(s) there were 34 (71%) domestic location only organizations, and 14 (29%) globally located organizations. Finally, for the respondent demographic, job title there were 24 (50%) recruiter/non-manager, and 24 (50%) general/executive manager responses.

Descriptive results of the survey responses to the three question sets are found in Figures 1, 2 and4. In Figure 1, Expectation for MBA Degree by Management Level, responses for the front line/operational management level indicated zero (0%) responded MBA degree required, seven (14.6%) responded MBA degree not required but highly desirable, five (10.4%) responded MBA degree not required but preferred, and 35 (72.9%) responded MBA degree not required; skills not needed; one respondent

(2.1%) did not answer. For the mid-management level three (6.3%) responded MBA degree required, 14 (29.2%) responded MBA degree not required, but highly desirable, 22(45.8%) responded MBA degree not required but preferred, and seven (14.6%) responded MBA degree not required; skills not needed; two respondents (4.2%) did not answer. Finally, for the executive management level 12 (25.0%) responded MBA degree required, 22 (45.8%) responded MBA degree not required but highly desirable, 10(20.8%) responded MBA degree not required but preferred, and zero (0%) responded MBA degree not required; skills not needed; four respondents (8.3%) did not answer.

Figure 2, MBA Course Topic Category Ratings presents descriptive information for the five course topic categories (specific function, analytical, soft-skill, socially responsible and global) which were assessed by the respondents for the importance the organization placed on the KSAs associated with each course topic category. For brevity, only the results which reflect the respondent selection of the 'Essential" response (Managers in our organization would not be able to succeed without having the KSAs associated with this course topic category) are discussed in this section. For the Specific Functional course topic category 19 (39.5%) responded that the category was essential. For the Analytical course topic category 13 (27.1%) responded that the category was essential. For the Soft-Skill course topic category 20 (41.7%) responded that the category was essential. For the Social Responsibility course topic category 13 (27.1%) responded that the category was essential. Finally, for the Global course topic category six (12.5%) responded that the course topic category was essential.

Figure 3, MBA Course Topic Ratings presents descriptive information for the 26 course topics which were assessed by the respondents for the importance the organization placed on the KSAs associated with each course topic category. For brevity, only the results which reflect the respondent selection of "Essential" response (Managers in our organization would not be able to succeed without having the KSAs associated with this course topic category) are discussed in this section. Under the Specific Function course topic category eight courses were presented. For Marketing, seven (14.6%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Finance, 13 (27.1%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Financial Accounting, 15 (31.2%) responded that the course topic

was essential. For Supply Chain, 11 (22.9%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Strategy, 24 (50%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Cost Accounting, 19 (39.5%) responded that the course topic was essential. For MIS, 14 (29.2%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Operations Research, four (8.3%) responded that the course topic was essential.

Under the Analytical course topic category, three courses were presented. For Managerial Economics, 12 (25.0%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Quantitative Analysis, 14 (29.2%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Decision Analysis, 25 (52.1%) responded that the course topic was essential.

Under the Soft-Skill course topic category, nine courses were presented. For Communication, 33 (68.8%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Organization behavior, 22 (45.8%) responded that the course topic was essential. For General Management, 35 (72.9%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Leadership, 38 (79.2%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Human Resources Management, 17 (35.4%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Organization Design, five (10.4%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Negotiations, 14 (29.2%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Career Planning, eight (16.7%) responded that the course topic was essential. Finally for Entrepreneurship, five (10.4%) responded that the course topic was essential.

Under the Socially Responsible course topic category, three courses were presented. For Ethics and Socially Responsible 23 (47.9%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Business and Government Relationships, 14 (29.2%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Business Law, 12 (25%) responded that the course topic was essential.

Under the Global course topic category, three courses were presented. For Macro Economics, five (10.4%) responded that the course topic was essential. For Global Strategy Management, eight (16.7%) responded that the course topic was essential. For International Business, four (8.3%) responded that the course topic was essential.

Table 1, Rank Order of Course Topics presents in rank order the 26 courses considered by the respondents. The course topics of Leadership, General Management, Communication, Decision Analysis and Strategy assumed the top five places. Of note is that three of the courses are Soft-Skill courses (Leadership, General Management and Communication), while Decision Analysis is an Analysis course and Strategy is a Specific Function course. Additional discussion comparing this list with the course offerings by the business college of interest in this case study will be presented in the next section.
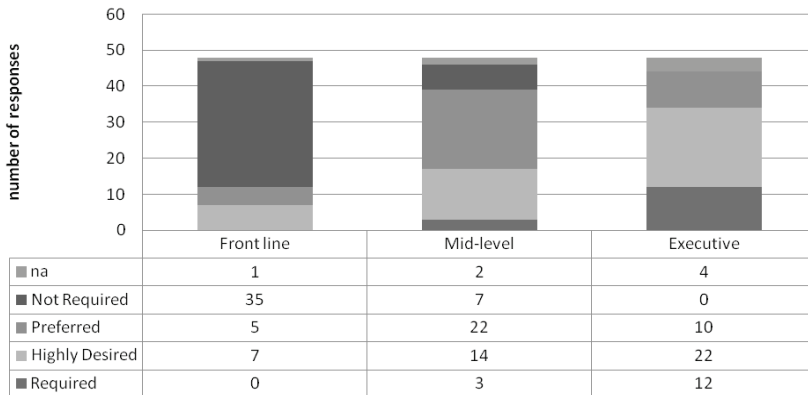
	Front line	Mid-level	Executive
■ na	1	2	4
■ Not Required	35	7	0
■ Preferred	5	22	10
■ Highly Desired	7	14	22
■ Required	0	3	12

Figure 1. Expectation for MBA degree by Management level (N=48)

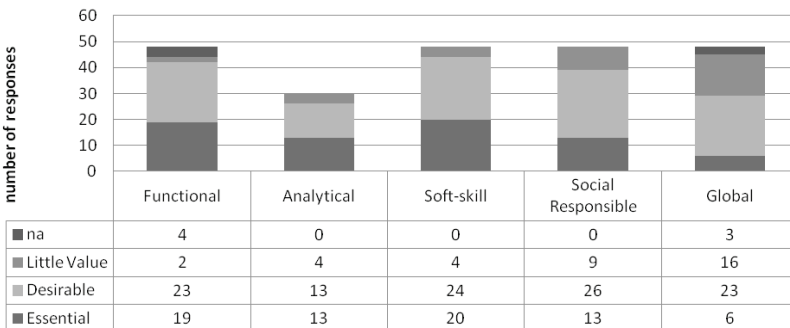|	Functional	Analytical	Soft-skill	Social Responsible	Global
■ na	4	0	0	0	3
■ Little Value	2	4	4	9	16
■ Desirable	23	13	24	26	23
■ Essential	19	13	20	13	6

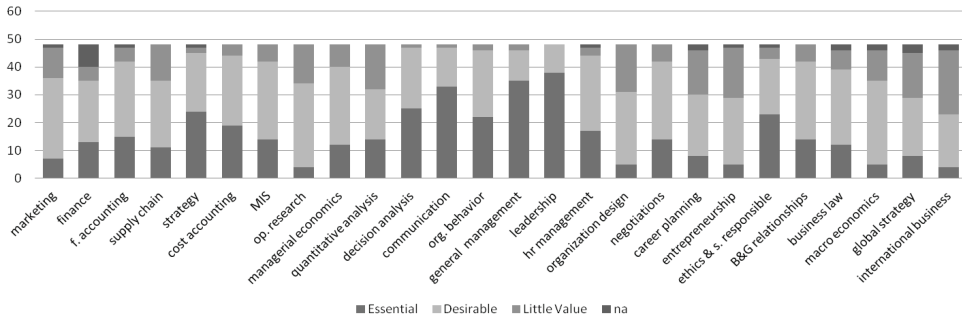**Figure 2. MBA course topic category ratings (N=48)**

Figure 3. MBA course topic ratings all courses (N=48)

Table 1. MBA course topics by rank order

Rank	Course Topic	Category	Rated Essential
1	Leadership	Soft-skill	38
2	General Management	Soft-skill	35
3	Communication	Soft-skill	33
4	Decision Analysis	Analytic	25
5	Strategy	Specific Function	24
6	Ethics and S. Responsible	Socially Responsible	23
7	Organization Behavior	Soft-skill	22
8	Cost Accounting	Specific Function	19
9	HR Management	Soft-skill	17
10	Financial Accounting	Specific Function	15
11	MIS	Specific Function	14
11	Quantitative Analysis	Analytic	14
11	Negotiations	Soft-skill	14
11	Business and Government Relationships	Socially Responsible	14
12	Finance	Specific Function	13
13	Managerial Economics	Analytic	12
13	Business Law	Socially Responsible	12

14	Supply Chain	Specific Function	11
15	Career Planning	Soft-skill	8
15	Global Strategy	Global	8
16	Marketing	Specific Function	7
17	Organization Design	Soft-skill	5
17	Entrepreneurship	Soft-skill	5
17	Macro Economics	Global	5
18	Operations Research	Specific Function	4
18	International Business	Global	4

Hypothesis test results

When testing each of the hypotheses, in cases where there was missing data, the assumption is that the data was missing completely at random (MCAR); a listwise deletion of cases with missing data was elected. Although this approach results in the reduction of the sample size and a loss of power it is the most accurate regardless of the source of data loss (Switzer, Roth and Switzer, 1998). The number of usable respondents will be identified during the presentation of results for each of the three hypotheses.

Hypothesis 1 was tested to examine the necessity of holding an MBA degree at higher managerial levels in an organization. Analysis results are presented in Table 2. The data contained four missing data points for this question (n= 44). The mean responses for executive level managers was 1.98 (range from 1.74 to 2.17 at 95% CI), for mid-level managers was 2.75 (range from 2.50 to 3.00 at 95% CI) and for front line managers was 3.64 (range from 3.42 to 3.85 at 95% CI). Thus, at the executive management level respondents indicated that holding an MBA degree was not required but highly desirable, at the mid-level management level the requirement was relaxed to preferred but not required, and at the front line management level the expectation relaxed to slightly indicate MBA skills were slightly more than needed but not required. Given the assumption of equal variance, a paired t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the three managerial levels. The results of the t-test indicate that there is a significant difference between

all three managerial levels. Overall, the requirement to hold an MBA degree becomes more important as one progress up the managerial career ladder; further there is a significant difference in expectation to hold the degree or associated skills associated with the degree. Thus, Hypothesis 1 is supported, a difference in the value of holding an MBA degree was found in the three managerial levels.

Table 2. MBA degree necessity, paired sample t-test (n= 44)

	Mean	s.d.	t	Df	sign.	
Front Line- Midlevel	0.886	0.618	9.511	43	0.00	**
Midlevel-Executive	0.795	0.701	7.522	43	0.00	**
Executive-Front Line	1.682	0.771	14.474	43	0.00	**

Hypothesis 2 was tested to specifically examine if employers place a different value on the course topic category of soft skills as compared to other course topic categories typically covered in a general MBA course curriculum. Analysis results which compare the Soft-Skill course topic category with the other four course topic categories are presented in Table 3. The data contained six missing data points for this question (n= 42). Results indicate the mean response for each of the five course topic categories; specific function, topic category (1.62), analytical topic category (1.76), soft-skill topic category (1.62), socially responsible topic category (1.88), global topic category (2.17). In order of mean response, the most essential or desirable course topic categories are both the soft-skills and specific function topic categories followed by analytic topics and social responsible topics with the global topic category being viewed as the least important. The mean response is below the mid-point (2) for four of the five categories suggesting that these topic categories are essential or desirable for management success. Given an assumption of equal variance, a paired t-test was conducted to determine if there was a significant difference between the soft-skill topic category and the other four categories. A significant difference was found between the soft-skill and social responsible topic category (p = .047) and the soft-skill and global topic category (p = .002). Further, there was a significant difference between the specific function topic category and these two topic categories (p = .032 and .009 respectively). The results suggest that there is not a significant difference in the extent to which employers consider specific

function topics, soft-skills and analytic topics to be essential or desirable. However, there is a significantly different and higher importance placed on the knowledge and skills related to the soft-skill topics as compared to socially responsible or global topics. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is partially supported. That is, employers place a higher importance on soft-skill topics as compared to socially responsible and global topics but not as compared to specific function and analytic course topic categories.

Table 3. MBA skill categories, soft-skill paired sample t-test (n=42)

	Mean	s.d.	t	df	sign.	
Soft-Skill - Specific Function	0.00	0.671	0.00	41	1.00	
Soft-Skill -Analytical	0.146	0.823	0.14	41	0.26	
Soft-Skill - Social Responsible	-0.268	0.837	-2.05	41	0.05	*
Soft-Skill – Global	-0.512	0.978	-3.35	41	0.00	**

Hypotheses set 3 was tested to examine if differences in responses for the importance of the five course topic categories are evident based on respondent demographics of industry type, organization size, organization location and respondent job title. Given the low response rate to the survey, for examination of this hypotheses set the responses used to determine the extent to which MBA skills/topics were pooled to reflect the difference between 'essential' and 'other' (i.e., desirable or little value). Further, given that some response cells were still below the threshold frequency of five, a Fisher's Exact test was conducted to detect significant differences from expected results. No significant differences were found for industry type, organization size or organization location (range of p-value from .466 to 1.0 for industry type, from .193 to 1.0 for organization size, and from .211 to .750 for organization location). Significant differences were found based on respondent job title (p-value ranged from .039 to 1.0). In the interest of brevity only the results for the respondent job title are presented in Table 4. Significant differences were found between job title groups in responses for the analytical topic category with a frequency of 12.5% by recruiters/non-managers vs. a frequency of 41.7% for general/executive managers (p= .049). That is, recruiters and non-managers rated the analytical topic category as being significantly less essential as compared to managers. Significant differences were also found for the soft-sill topic category with a frequency of 25% by recruiters/non-managers vs. a frequency of 58.3%

for general/executive managers. Again, recruiters/non-mangers rated soft-skill topics as being significantly less essential as compared to managers. Figure 3 presents a graphical illustration accentuating the differences in the responses between the two groups. While there is agreement in the extent to which the specific functional course topic and global topic categories are essential and a somewhat consistent pattern for the social responsible topic category, there is noted divergence for the analytic and soft-skill topic categories. Based on the results of the Fisher Exact Test, Hypotheses set 3 is partially supported. That is, there is a difference in essential rating responses for the MBA course topic categories of analytical and soft-skills by a respondent's job title.

Table 4. MBA skill categories rated essential by job title (n=44 function/48 others)

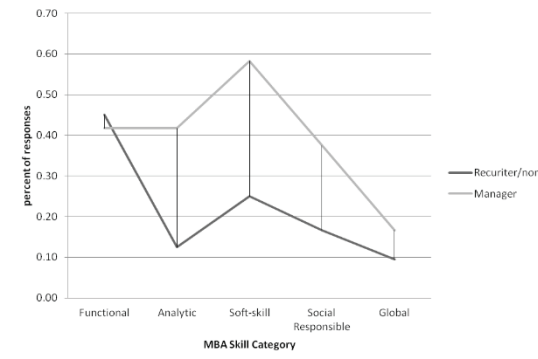| Category	Job Title		Fisher's	
	Recruiter/non (percent)	Manager (percent)	Exact p-value	
Functional	0.45	0.42	1.000	
Analytic	0.13	0.42	0.049	*
Soft-skill	0.25	0.58	0.039	*
Social Responsible	0.17	0.38	0.193	
Global	0.10	0.17	0.670	

Figure 4. MBA skill categories rated essential by job title

Discussion

The development of relevant MBA programs given the multitude of issues related to both the diversity of student educational background and the needs of the business community creates challenges for those responsible for relevant curriculum development. As suggested by Rubin and Dierdorff (2013) approaching the task in a more nuanced fashion with a focus on career development can lead to effective contemporary programs. The presentation of this case study is intended to illustrate how a local level view approach can facilitate the development of a more meaningful approach. The approach complements expectations from accreditation bodies such as AACSB, as well as an orientation of creating value for economic clusters on a local scale (Porter & Kramer, 2011).

The significant results found in testing for Hypothesis 1 implies that for the local business community of interest those in lower levels of the organization do not need to hold the MBA degree. However, as one advances in an organization the expectation shifts notably to the need to have the advanced degree. Thus, the timeliness of pursuing the degree may be to seek it as one becomes ready to advance rather than immediately following the achievement of an undergraduate degree. From a recruitment perspective, the business school may do well to recruit those already in the workplace as opposed to its recent graduates. This stance also displays sound community stewardship in the guidance of its primary constituency who has predominantly first-generation and non-traditional backgrounds. Although not hypothesized for this study of note is the finding of a significant difference for mid-level management by industry type. The service, education, government respondents placed a higher value on holding an MBA degree (mean 2.68) as compared to the manufacturing, retail segment (mean 2.92). Thus, given that the metropolitan region has a higher than average presence of the later industry type holding an MBA degree may be more important than what is needed on average in the national business community. In all, the research findings contribute from local level insight into the question posed by Rubin and Dierdorff (2013, p. 136), "For whom and under what circumstances should an MBA be pursued?"

The results found in testing Hypothesis 2 is that the importance of the soft-skill topic category was not found to be significantly different than functional skill or analytical course topic categories, but is significantly more important than the socially responsible and global course topic categories. While the small sample size may explain the inability to find a significant difference between soft-skill and functional and analytic topic categories, it is possible that there may truly be a similar level of importance for MBA skill ability between the three course topic categories. This interpretation would complement the CERI study results for a balanced or "T" type professional (2012). However, the result as presented in Table 1 that three of the five course topics are soft-skills (i.e. leadership, general management, communication) lends that a definitive conclusion of course content mix is not readily apparent. Nevertheless, when comparing survey results to the course topic category profile offered at the local business school of interest there is enough information to begin a fruitful dialogue to address the gap between research results and what is currently offered.

The predominant focus of the discussion rests in assessing the profile of the core course topics offered in the MBA program. At the very least, there is notable misalignment between the local business community members' assessment of the importance of the functional, analytic and soft-skill course topic categories with the profile of the currently offered core MBA courses. Broadly, of the eight required courses offered, five are from the specific functional course topic category (62.5%), two are from the analytical topic category (25%) and only one is from the soft-skill topic category (12.5%). Not evident from course titles and in need of additional input from MBA faculty is a deliberate and more refined understanding of specific course content. Further, although the socially responsible and global course topic categories were not found to be as important as the other three course topic categories, the recent emphasis by AACSB suggests that course content should be evaluated for inclusion of these topics as well. A suggested approach would be for MBA faculty who teach core courses to calculate a weighted allocation of current content delivery for each of the course topic categories. These proportions can then be compared with the local business community responses to generate a deeper level of discussion.

Finally, the results found in testing Hypotheses set 3 were that a significant difference was not found in responses between organization type, organization size, and organization location. It is assumed that this result is related to the small sample size and that future research efforts to attract a higher response rate would be beneficial. Given the noted differences in skill capability found in the CERI study, it is anticipated that significant differences exist. Of more important consideration with this hypotheses set is that a significant difference was found in the response patterns between recruiter/non-managers, and general/executive managers. The finding suggests that specific respondent agenda may play a role in the assessment of which MBA topic categories are of greatest importance. Of specific interest is in the divergence in responses pertaining to the importance of the soft-skill topic category. Those in managerial positions clearly place higher importance on soft-skills than any other topic category; further, they place a significantly higher importance on this category as compared to those who are not managers. It is possible that recruiter's role to provide an organization with suitable employees is easier to demonstrate with evidence of specific functional capabilities as defined by MBA course topic titles found on formal documents such as transcripts compared with the less easily defined soft-skill capabilities which may be embedded in MBA course content. Managers on the other hand, who are challenged with performing job duties that by definition are oriented to 'getting things done through and with people' (Daft, 2012) are more aware of the importance of having capabilities which afford an ability to lead and communicate. For MBA faculty, bringing attention to this discord in the discussion of developing relevant and effective MBA curriculum would be beneficial.

As with any study there are limitations which need to be noted. At the onset it is duly noted that given the small sample size there is reduced power in establishing significant results. However, generating a suitable sample size at a local level can be a challenging task. Similar studies have been faced with noted limitations (e.g. Shuayto, 2013); even large scale national studies have low response rates by local contribution (e.g. CERI studies). Future research efforts of local stakeholder views which devote specific attention to the generation of larger survey sample responses would help to improve an understanding of specific populations (e.g. industry clusters) of interest. Second, while the list of course topics and course topic categories are commonly found in most MBA curriculum, and the survey instrument

was pre tested for ease of completion and understanding, it is possible that the respondents may have different expectations of specific content contained in each course topic category. The integration of qualitative study methodology such as focus groups and semi-structured interviews to allow for dialogue to more clearly identify course topic content would generate a richer understanding of the local business community's interests (Yin, 2003). Finally, with regard to the overall development of effective MBA curriculum there are a number of additional issues, which were not considered in the study. For example, understanding the role of course delivery methods and the use of experiential learning experiences also play an integral part in the development of MBA programs (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013). Consideration of these issues would likewise benefit from a local view with inclusion of other key stakeholder groups such as currently enrolled MBA students and alum.

Conclusion

Attention to the development of relevant MBA programs will continue to be a challenge as the business world rapidly evolves with advances in technology and global reach. The inclusion of relevant stakeholder groups such as employers in the discussion of how best to address issues related to the development of effective MBA curriculum is vital. A call for the construction of MBA curriculum which complements career development of its constituents is seen as a way to address this challenge (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013). In this regard, the focus of this paper was intended to convey that there is value for business schools to view at the local level the effectiveness of their MBA curriculum. The results presented from the case study illustrate that input from the key stakeholder group; the local business community can be used to prompt an objectively based faculty discussion to critique current curriculum. The localized approach complements not only AACSB guidelines for business schools to be mission driven but also encourages the economic development of local industry clusters. The results clearly indicate that holding an MBA degree in the local business community of interest is recognized as a requirement as one advances in his/her career. On a broader scale, the research results contribute support to the debate position that the MBA degree is an important mechanism from which to secure KSAs to be an effective manager. Further, the results suggest that the continued debate as to which courses would be most

effective depends in part on the perspective of the respondent, but in all, effort to provide more emphasis on soft-skill development is beneficial. The presence of misalignment between the local business community and what is offered in the local MBA curriculum accentuates broader findings and emphasizes the need for continued efforts actively seek key external stakeholder perspective. It is from this approach that the understanding of how best to develop relevant MBA curriculum will advance.

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