Integrating third party-certification with traditional MBA curriculum, defining value and encouraging innovative Programs – a theoretical study

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The decision to pursue an advanced university degree is full of many implications for students. Any decision to pursue a Master's in Business Administration (MBA) shows that there is perceived value in advanced business education. This paper explores how defining value and a culture of innovation in MBA pedagogy work hand-in-hand to establish a valuable master's program. Without innovation in MBA pedagogy, there is decreased value in MBA programs. Through innovation in pedagogy, value is derived from job marketability and the development of critical thinking skills that create managers who excel at making successful strategic decisions. What value lies in developing critical thinking skills, when MBA students do not have the necessary qualifications to meet employer's needs, in the job search process?

Value in this paper is defined as first the ability to compete in the current job market and second the ability to use critical thinking skills to solve strategic problems. A graduate program needs to focus on both the need to create a valuable degree and a valuable graduate. The job market is constantly changing and evolving, without a culture of innovation within the business curriculum and in courses, the value of a MBA program comes into question.

Industry based certifications are becoming a requirement within the hiring process for many industries, especially IT. Without a culture of innovation, it is hard to deliver value to the students that educators serve, especially in terms of job marketability. Technology in the IT industry is constantly evolving and it is becoming increasingly more important for employees to adapt accordingly if they want to remain competitive in the job market. Since certifications are trending in IT employment, should graduate courses adopt this same practice into their pedagogy? How do educators balance objectives in the classroom?

1. Introduction

Defining and delivering value in MBA program design is a critical step to a successful degree program. Overall, the value of an advanced business degree is based on the ability of graduates to become competitive in the job market and to advance the critical thinking skills needed to become strategic decision makers. For educators, does tailoring pedagogy to

advancing job marketability decrease the ability to graduate critical thinkers? How does serving one need affect the other and can a program meet both expectations successfully?

Previous research on this subject spans different aspects of this topic including, value in business/management education (Ainsworth & Morley, 1995), integration of soft skills assessment in MBA programs (Beard, Schwieger & Surendran, 2008), a focus on certifications (Randall & Zirkle, 2005) in IT programs (White, 2006) and how to fill the gap between business employer expectations and a need for technical knowledge (Hadidi, 2014).

There is an ongoing debate on what MBA courses should emphasize. By surveying MBA graduates, Ainsworth and Morley (1995) found that "The graduates' views reflect the wider debate on areas that MBA courses should emphasize. The integrative and practical strategy and policy subjects received the highest rating by the graduates, followed by management skills and organizational behavior areas" (p. 186). The results of their survey showed that many graduates value a mix of both content and process courses along with both "hard" and "soft content skills (Ainsworth & Morley, 1995, p. 187).

Job marketability is constantly evolving as businesses keep up with innovation in their industries and in technology overall. This culture of change impacts education needs as well, "... the typical college student and the corporate environment are continuously changing. Concerns regarding the adequacy of the preparation of graduates for success in their fields are arising both in and outside the university environment" (Beard et. al, 2008, p. 238). Beard et. al (2008) concluded in their research that methods in pedagogy need to utilize technologies and "tools" that are being used by students today (p. 229).

The discussion on adding certifications in MBA course design is a contentious one. Randall & Zirkle (2005) discuss that the effectiveness of an IT certification in course design depends on the level of education of the student. The authors conclude that "A student that has obtained a certification as an addition to a post-secondary education has a strong theoretical foundation to build on, an increased marketability, and better chances for long term career success" (Randall & Zirkle, 2005, p. 287). This research shows that for advanced degrees, such as an MBA program, certifications will give graduates both "increased marketability" and "better chances for long term career success" (Randall & Zirkle, 2005, p. 287).

2. Problem Statement

The goal of any graduate course is to develop a student's intellectual capacity. Is there value in integrating industry certifications into both MBA and IT courses? Does the integration of specific certifications reduce the amount of critical thinking that is necessary to adapt to new advancements in technology that lead to additional certification requirements? Are graduates of MBA programs that do not integrate industry certifications into coursework at a disadvantage in the job market?

Increasing demand for business-applicable graduate degrees is driving many graduate programs to rethink their course offering to meet a broader, more diverse student population. As more working adults seek graduate degrees, factors including cost of degree and convenience of delivery are leading students to seek accelerated, 100% online degrees. Online MBA degrees are growing faster than any other field in education (Bocchi, Eastman & Swift, 2004).

The relationship between fully online MBA programs and professional certifications is a new and developing topic that deserves further exploration. As universities seek to add value to their business programs in a highly-competitive program, many look to various professional certifications, along with other strategies, including accreditation and research and real-world experience. The lack of academic study on how these programs will integrate professional certifications into online programming is relevant for business schools to transfer value from their physical classrooms to their virtual classrooms.

The significance of this problem will only increase as more non-profit schools follow the lead of online MBA programs by increasing their fully-online offerings. Likewise, academic partnerships are likely to increase the tension between academics and for-profit partners who seek to maximize the value of degree programs through student-centric offerings.

Programs that fail to anticipate the needs of the market and the employers that will hire their students risk falling behind their competitors (including not enrolling) and may cease to be relevant in the process of turning untested students into trusted employees.

3. Research Question

By defining value and creating a culture of innovation in MBA pedagogy that integrates industry-based certifications into an MBA curriculum to establish a graduate program that benefits both students and employers alike.

4. Methodology

While the literature review suggests issues facing MBA programs, as well as the value of professional certifications, few have tied the two together directly. This suggests a topic that is deserving of further study in the business field. In an effort to better understand the linkage between professional certifications and MBA programs this paper will synthesize the similarities and differences of several authors and discuss the implications and issues of using IT certifications in teaching practices.

5. Study Significance

The implications for this problem are twofold. On one hand, the value of a college degree is the ability to become competitive in the job market. However, on the other hand, there is value in gaining critical thinking. Educators must produce graduates who are able to adapt to their jobs and effectively use their critical thinking skills to make strategic decisions that further an organization.

Business education must meet employer expectations in order to retain its value. Employers are demanding certifications from new hires and "...four year post-secondary institutions have been slow to offer students the added benefit of pursuing an IT certification as a compliment to their degrees" (Randall & Zirkle, 2005, p. 288). Educators need to address two needs to create value in their degree programs: job marketability and advanced critical thinking Skills.

If adding industry certifications to course designs decreases the ability for graduates to evolve and perfect their ability to think critically, then educators are abandoning their main objective to produce graduates who are competitive within the job market. In contrast, what is

the benefit of an advanced degree for graduates if this will not help them become competitive in the job market?

6. Literature Review

Ainsworth and Morley (1995), surveyed graduates on the value of completing a MBA program; "The MBA is seen as a significant factor in career change and development" (p.175). Beyond the initial perceived value of a MBA program, "Course structures, curricula and the demands made of students are diversifying, becoming more flexible and student centered, in response to perceptions of the needs of students and industry" (Ainsworth & Morley, 1995, p. 175). Ainsworth and Morley (1995) concluded that as students "diversify" the curriculum needs must follow suit (p.175).

Beard et. al (2008) discussed the employer demand for soft skills from business and IT graduates. "The growing demand for verification that students are, indeed, 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" (Beard et. al, 2008, p. 229). The needs of current graduate students will continue to change with innovation in technology. These changes will directly impact job market requirements. Educators need to stay on top of these advancements and integrate assessments based on soft skills into their courses. These assessments will help drive the current job market (Beard, et al., 2008, p. 238).

There is a trend within higher education to offer students IT certification courses (Randall & Zirkle, 2005, p. 287). The authors discuss the implications and issues of using IT certifications in teaching practices. The main issue discussed is the data needed to evaluate the effectiveness of these programs, not just at a university but at a state and national level. When "making informed curriculum decisions about initiating, maintaining, or terminating IT certification programs also requires an understanding of the current IT workforce and future employment projections to ensure the marketability of students and their prolonged success in the IT workforce" (Randall & Zirkle, 2005, p. 287).

Hadidi (2014) explains in his article that in the past decade, education and certifications have become more important in both business and academia (p. 1). "This is partially due to the fact that today's enterprises are much more information driven and, to achieve and maintain competitiveness, more attention must be placed on business processes" (Hadidi, 2014, p. 1). This can be done through industry certifications. Businesses, scholars, and universities are exploring how adding certifications into course designs can produce higher skilled university graduates.

Weinstein and Barrett (2007) point out that value creation is not just important in the stock market. It is the responsibility of educators to create value for their customer, students (p. 329). Not only is this important in terms of the program itself, but Weinstein and Barrett both worked to integrate value creation into their business course curriculum.

Companies are continually listing certifications as prerequisites for their job postings including, "certifications such as MCSE, CNE, Network+, and Security+, in the computer industry are becoming as marketable as college degrees" (White, 2006, p. 3). Many industries will hire prospective employees with certifications over advanced degrees because they're looking for a specialized employee for very technical jobs. White (2006) concludes that adding

certifications into curriculum is a "win-win deal" (p. 6). Certifications can provide a method of assessment for academic departments and also create a graduate who is more marketable.

7. Industry Response

The education industry is directly impacted by changes in the industries their programs serve. More specifically, in business, there are rapid chances in industries that impact education for the position that serve these industries. In order to sustain a valuable program, both education curriculum and educator methods need to adapt with changes in the industries they serve. For example, preparing business IT professionals with an MBA that does not address employer needs significantly decreases the value of the degree. What is a degree without its value?

Randall and Zirkle (2005) discuss the issues for higher education when implementing IT certifications into the curriculum. They discuss that the main issue is that "...for both secondary and post-secondary institutions is that formal education institutions lack available data to determine the effectiveness of certification programs on a district, state, and national level" (p. 287). Beyond simple certifications, Beard et al. (2008) discuss that of all of the skills described in job advertisements, 26 percent include non-technical skills (p. 230). Educators cannot simply abandon their focus on critical thinking skills to teach to certification tests. The changes require a balance of the two to help programs retain their value both actual and perceived.

8. Limitations

This study has several limitations. One limitation is the fact that the literature review was largely from the U.S. and represents a Western perspective. This limitation may hinder the findings to be generalized across more globally diverse MBA programs. A second limitation is the sample was limited to IT-based industry certifications without consideration for other non-IT related professional certifications. This limitation may hinder the findings to be generalized across non-IT based MBA programs. A third limitation is the sample was composed of graduate level program environment. This limitation may hinder the findings to be generalized across undergraduate program environments.

9. Conclusion

This paper explored the implications of assessing value in a MBA program based on competitiveness in the job market and critical thinking skills. With this definition of value, creating a culture of innovation in higher education is critical. Educators need to continually adapt to the expectations of employers in the field they're teaching. Without a culture of innovation in higher education, there is decreased value in the MBA degree.

Research has shown that there is value in integrating industry certifications into business courses. It is important that higher education stay up to date with the needs of employers. As Randall & Zirkle (2005) explain, "In an effort to make informed decisions about IT certification programs, school administrators and IT teachers need adequate information on current IT workforce trends, IT certification programs used in formal education, and performance data on students enrolled in these programs" (p. 301). The curriculum of a MBA program needs to continually evolve to adapt to changes in the industries they prepare students to enter.

However, this integration simply cannot replace the learning of necessary soft skills. The fact is that the job market demands both soft and hard skills from their employees. There is a focus on certifications to meet entry expectations, but employers need their hired employees to succeed and use their critical thinking skills to make strategic decisions that further the company and increase profits.

Education technology will continue to be a major issue for graduate programs, and the key performance indicator will continue to be the outcomes of graduating students. And since technology distinctly democratizes the employment field, a further reliance on professional certifications as a standard of quality might ultimately define value and a create a culture of innovation in MBA pedagogy that works hand-in-hand in establishing a value-added master's program.

In conclusion, without innovation in MBA pedagogy, there is a risk of decreasing the value of a MBA program. Value in MBA programs for graduates depends on job marketability and the development of critical thinking skills that result in success on the job. MBA programs need to teach students both skills. This includes integrating certifications into MBA courses, when applicable, while teaching students the critical thinking skills they need to succeed at making the strategic business decisions that their employers require.

10. Direction for Future Research

Based on the findings of the study, further investigation is however recommended to better understand the role of integrating third party-certification with traditional MBA curriculum, and how doing so defines value and encourages innovative learning/teaching that serves as a win-win for both the students and employers. Evidence exists indicating that universities and colleges may benefit from this study by using an integrative model curriculum as a basis to tailor curricula to better address constituent needs. Furthermore, an integrative model curriculum may enable universities and colleges worldwide to develop and maintain academic programs that are based on the common bodies of knowledge and be consistent both with regional or even international employment needs.

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