ON THE EFFICACY OF GENERAL VERSUS SPECIFIC ATTITUDINAL MEASURES TOWARD AN MBA PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

The assessment of student or alumni attitudes toward an academic program may be handled through the use of general measures that use semantic-differential based adjective pairs (e.g., valueless/valuable) or through specific measures (e.g., my marketing program experience fulfilled my expectations) that encompass Likert scale scoring. This study seeks to compare these approaches through an assessment of their covariation with student preferences for teaching methods. Its intent is to reveal whether there is a preferred approach for measuring program attitudes and to establish a framework for future studies using similar and alternative predictors. The results reveal the viability of the use of general measures in the measurement of attitudes toward an academic program and it recommends their inclusion in the development of outcome assessment metrics.

INTRODUCTION

With every AACSB-International accredited business program being faced with outcomes assessment and the need for continuous improvement, refinements in outcome assessments offer great promise. Typically, perceptual and attitudinal outcome metrics may be applied to current students, alumni, recruiters, employees, and the business community at large. Such metrics may encompass gap studies of skill and knowledge emphases (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken 2002), as well as comparisons of perceptions with program expectations (Nordstrom and Sherwood 1997). Other common forms of outcome metrics include assessments of attitudinal affect and self-reports of learning effectiveness (Young, Klemz, and Murphy 2003). While metrics may be applied to external publics, studies of current students and/or alumni are richer in that programmatic variables that directly influence outcome measures may be assessed as to their relationships. In essence, the variables that explain performance, satisfaction, attitude, etc., are revealed and may be emphasized while those without explanatory power are not. As a result,

programs may directly undergo improvement by implementing recommended changes.

ATTITUDE TOWARD A PROGRAM

Within the area of business, global attitude toward the marketing major has been revealed by Davis, Misra, and Van Auken (2000) and by Young, Klemz and Murphy (2003). Such measures, as applied to marketing seniors, permit assessments of the efficacy of various teaching methods and the revelation of those methods that covary with global attitude toward the major. Basically, the revelation of predictor variables that are controllable by faculty and explain attitude are at the heart of programmatic improvement.

Overall, attitude studies are important because the attitude of the student may play a pivotal role in learning. Positive relationships between attitude and learning have also been postulated. (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken, 2000). In fact, attitude toward the course was the second most important variable in predicting achievement in a graduate statistics course (Johnson 1996). Further, students that had a more favorable attitude toward a course evidenced higher achievement (Kuhlemeier, Van Den Bergh, and Melse 1996). Thus, influencing attitude suggests an affect on learning (Glazer, Steckel, and Winer 1987). Further, when attitude is poor, students can experience feelings of insecurity, frustration, anger, alienation, overcompensation, and futility (Gregore and Butler 1984). Research also suggests the utility of matching teaching styles with student learning preferences, as such preferences are viewed as being directly related to student performance (Okebukola 1986).

With the establishment of attitude as an outcome metric, it is recognized that an overall evaluation is being obtained that can range from extremely positive to extremely negative. Thus affect is being revealed or one's feelings. In the area of outcomes assessment, affect has been measured through the use of global attitudinal measures. To illustrate, Davis, Misra, and Van Auken (2000) used Mitchell

and Olsen's (1981) measures to assess attitude toward the marketing major. They used seven-point semantic differential scales, portraying a continuum that included the following: good experience/bad experience, satisfactory/unsatisfactory, useless/useful and ineffective/effective. These measures were also used by Young, Klemz and Murphy (2003) in a marketing context. Given marketing's rich tradition of attitudinal measurement it is not surprising that marketing is influential with respect to new assessment approaches. Further, marketing-based attitudinal measures may be applied to all business disciplines, as well as those external to the field.

STUDY PURPOSE

This study thus seeks to build on existing attitudinal assessment approaches through the addition of idiosyncratic or specific attitudinal assessment measures that have been reported by the AACSB/Educational Benchmark, Inc. study (Newsline, 1998). In this work, the following three "attitudinal" questions were employed:

- To what extent did your undergraduate business experience fulfill your expectations?
- When you compare the total expense to the quality of your education, how do you rate the value of the investment you made in your undergraduate business degree?
- How inclined are you to recommend your undergraduate business program to a friend?

These specific measures can easily be adjusted to a major area of study, undergraduate and/or graduate education. They are unique in that they are idiosyncratic to an audience and they seek to directly measure affect.

This study thus seeks to contrast the efficacy of alternative attitudinal metrics through an assessment of their covariation with student preferences for teaching methods. One of the attitudinal metric approaches will encompass global measures using seven-point semantic differential scales (satisfactory/unsatisfactory, good/bad, etc.), while the other will employ AACSB/EBI attitudinal measures expressed in seven-point Likert scale form. The three prior mentioned idiosyncratic questions now appear as the following statements:

- My major, undergraduate or graduate program fulfilled my expectations.

- When I compare my total program expenses to the quality of my major, undergraduate or graduate education, I rate the value of my investment as high.
- I am very inclined to recommend the (name of institution and major, undergraduate, or graduate program) to a close friend.

In an effort to determine the relative efficacy of the global versus idiosyncratic attitudinal approaches, measures of the effectiveness of eight alternative teaching methods[1] will be statistically compared with each of the two attitudinal-measurement approaches. While using these same predictors, if the resulting goodness-of-fit measures vary substantially between the two dependent variable sets, an attitudinal measurement approach of choice will be revealed.

To date, teaching method variables have explained 38% of the variance in the global attitudinal approach (Davis, Misra, and Van Auken 2000), yet no comparison between the global and idiosyncratic attitudinal measures using a fresh data set of predictors and criterion measures have been made. This study will address that void and provide insights into future questionnaire construction with respect to the attitudinal measurement of business programs.

THE SAMPLE

The population used in this study contained all MBA alumni from a private New England university. The subjects (n=312) were assessed as to course content value, subject matter emphases; teaching method effectiveness, and the two alternative attitudinal measurement formats: global and the more tailored specific approach. The results of this survey produced a sample size of 82 for an effective 26.3% response rate.

STUDY METHOD AND PRELIMINARIES

Since the purpose of the study is to assess how well the two alternative approaches to program attitudinal assessment covary with alumni perceptions of teaching methods, the two attitudinal approaches were separately factor analyzed. The purpose of this was to determine the dimensionality of each. Given the revelation of a single dimension for each

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[1] These teaching method measures will assess effectiveness on a seven-point scale that ranges from poor to excellent with the value of seven denoting excellent.

attitudinal measurement approach, multiple regression and its single dependent variable requirement would be the appropriate methodology for assessing the extent of covariation with teaching methods. This is because all criterion measures have the potential of being collapsed into a single composite score for each respondent for each approach.

Factor Analysis of Global Variables. The results of using a principal component's factor analysis on the eight global variables revealed the presence of a single factor, which explained 57.3% of the variance in the data. This component matrix is presented in Table 1. These semantic differential scaled variables produced sizable loadings and are compatible with the results obtained from the data used by Davis, Misra, and Van Auken (2000).

Factor Analysis of Specific Variables. The factor analysis results on the three idiosyncratic attitudinal measures revealed a single factor, which explained 86.0% of the variance. The resulting component matrix is presented in Table 2.

These seven-point Likert scaled variables evidence striking commonality.

Factor Analysis of Teaching Method Variables. With the establishment of the appropriateness of a multiple regression analysis, the eight-teaching method variables were also subjected to a principal components factor analysis with a varimax rotation. The purpose being to produce orthogonal or uncorrelated factors that will address the issue of multicollinearity among the predictor variables. The results of this application revealed the presence of three factors that explained 64.8% of the variance in the data. These three factors patterns are presented in Table 3.

The first factor loads heavily on group projects and in-class experiences. The second factor weights more on cases and computer simulations or what amounts to analytical and conceptual skill development, while the third factor denotes an emphasis on individual involvements.

MULTIPLE REGRESSION RESULTS

Global Attitudinal Metrics. The results of regressing the overall or global attitudinal factor against the three teaching method factors produced an R^2 value of .32, thus 32% of the variance in global attitude is explained by teaching methodology. The regression evidenced a statistically significant association between the three teaching methods and the global attitudinal measure (F = 12.12, d.f.= 3 and 78, p= .00) thus attesting to the soundness of the R^2 value. Table 4 portrays the nature of the relationships.

As can be seen, each predictor variable is statistically associated with global attitude and judging from the signs of the beta coefficients, all predictors covary directly with attitude. Additionally, the most powerful predictors are the group project, in-class experience factor and the individual experience factor which tie with respect to the highest beta weights. Finally, there is no multicollinearity present due to the use of orthogonal factors as predictors. All in all, the three predictors are explaining global attitude toward the program.

Specific Attitudinal Metrics. The inclusion of the specific or idiosyncratic attitudinal factor was likewise regressed against the same three teaching method factors. In this case, the R^2 equaled .24, which is 8% less than the use of the global attitudinal factor. Still, the three predictors were statistically associated with the specific attitudinal factor (F = 8.36, d.f. = 3 and 78, p = .00). Overall, the results of the multiple regression appear in Table 5.

As can be noted, the three predictors evidence positive beta coefficients, hence they also covary directly with the specific attitudinal factor. The major difference occurs with the first teaching method factor, which is barely associated with the criterion measure (p=.05). Further, the teaching methods with the highest beta weights are the second and third factors with the second factor (cases and computer simulations) possessing the greatest explanatory power. Overall, the use of different criterion measures that are conceptually related has revealed different results.

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown how two different approaches to attitudinal measurement of an MBA program produced different results when regressed against teaching method factors. The two approaches are conceptually related (r=.64, p<.01), yet basically loaded on different factors when both were combined in a principal components factor analysis (explained variance = 66.3%). Given this uniqueness, the results suggest that one of the two is superior with respect to measurement. In this regard, the global attitudinal approach captures a covariation with teaching methodologies that is not seen in the specific attitudinal approach. In essence the R^2 value for global measures equaled 32% while

the R^2 value for specific measures equaled 24%. Thus, global measures may be richer in terms of explanatory power. If faced with a choice, this study would recommend the global approach in lieu of the idiosyncratic.

Of course, other predictor variables such as course content value or skills versus knowledge emphases need to be investigated. In this regard, would the global approach continue to perform? Still, the key is variation. Apparently, global measures evoke superior covariation and this consideration should prompt their inclusion in outcome assessment studies. Further, teaching methods and their preferences by students can and do explain attitudes toward a program. In essence, they tap learning styles and they offer key implications for faculty evaluating outcomes. Thus, they too should be a part of outcome assessment. In this context, general attitudinal measures would seem to be preferred over the specific. However, they can both be included and evaluated as to their efficacy over a variety of predictors. It may be that systematic patterns will be revealed which will add to the theory of attitudinal measurement in outcome studies. Hopefully this study will serve as a catalyst and stimulate further inquiry.

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Tables are available from the first author by request.