

MBA PROGRAM ATTITUDINAL ORIENTATIONS: A STUDENT POPULATION SEGMENTATION

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the global attitudinal orientation toward one's MBA education among full- versus part-time MBA students residing in the same program. The use of multiple discriminant analysis revealed a discriminant function comprised of four semantic differential attitudinal pairs that could successfully discriminate between the two student groupings. The results indicate that part-time MBA students have stronger attitudinal orientations. Rationales are presented as to why part-time students perceive their education as being more rewarding, and the implications of this in terms of word-of-mouth communication are developed. The study also develops perspectives as to the validity of knowledge operationalism among part-time students (i.e., a more immediate employer return) and suggests that skills may need to be revisited based on MBA program type (i.e., predominantly part-time MBA programs comprised of older and more professionally experienced students).

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An interesting area of inquiry is the extent that global attitudes toward MBA programs vary between part- and full-time MBA program participants. In essence, which group evidences the greater utility with respect to MBA program participation? The question is an intriguing one as the results could suggest the nature of MBA program word-of-mouth communication as well as student expectations. Additionally, the results could help to validate the drivers of MBA program return on investment (ROI) as perceived by MBA alumni.

While program satisfaction has been a common dependent variable along with assessments of the predictor variables that may influence it, Van Auken, Chrysler, and Wells (2005) assessed the instructional area emphases and the teaching methods that influenced perceptions of MBA

program ROI. They found that in a predominant part-time MBA program (78%) that the primary drivers of MBA program ROI, among MBA alumni, were knowledge components and the teaching methods that support their presentation and not skills. Basically, the knowledge components that related to such areas as an understanding of how the functional areas of business relate to each other as well as an understanding of the functional areas of business, yielded a return that was viewed as being quite beneficial to one's current employment. It was further hypothesized that full-time MBA programs with full-time students would find that skills are primary ROI drivers; as skills have been heavily emphasized by MBA program recruiters (Alsop 2004). In essence, different MBA environments may influence the drivers of MBA program ROI as perceived by alumni.

This study thus seeks to assess differences between part-time and full-time MBA program participants in a predominantly part-time MBA program. Given the results of the Van Auken, Chrysler, and Wells (2005) study, one may hypothesize that students who went through their MBA program on a part-time basis while fully employed would derive a greater utility than full-time students. In essence, part-time students would have a greater opportunity to operationalize their acquired knowledge, while full-time students in part-time programs may find lesser interest among recruiters than their counterparts in full-time MBA programs. If this is the case, global attitudes toward one's MBA program would be expected to vary between the two student groups.

METHODOLOGY

The Sample

To expedite the study, MBA alumni from a private New England-based university that was accredited by AACSB-international were surveyed. This involved mailing a survey to 312 alumni that investigated global attitudes, program background

variables, and other variables that could lead to program enhancement. Of this number, 82 alumni responded for a 26.3% return rate.

Global Attitudinal Variables

To assess global attitudes toward the MBA program, semantic-differential pairs were presented to respondents using a seven-point scale. These variables, which contained expressions such as valueless-valuable, ineffective-effective, were varied as to anchor direction and may potentially be aggregated into a common global index. This study reports on four semantic differential pairs and utilizes an individual variable analysis in lieu of aggregation, thus fully capturing each variable's variance.

ANALYSES

Multiple Discriminant Analysis

Since the sample was comprised of 17 full-time MBA participants and 62 part-time students, it was decided to run a multiple discriminant analysis (MDA) using four semantic differential pairs as predictors. In the MDA approach, one can compare the percentage of respondents that were correctly classified with what would be expected through chance alone and one can also assess the most discriminating predictor variables.

The usage of the MDA procedure also reveals a univariate F ratio for each of the variables that is being assessed as to its discriminant power. These values appear in Table 1.

As can be noted, three of the four variables manifest a statistically significant difference between the two student groups. These results reveal that full-time MBA students have poorer attitudinal orientations toward the MBA program. The statistical efficacy of the results also suggests a viable discriminant function. Helping to confirm this is a Wilks' Lambda of .86 and a Chi-square value of 11.12 (4 d.f.), which is significant at the .025 level.

Table 2 reveals the correlations between each of the four semantic differential pairs and the standardized canonical discriminant function.

As can be observed, the highest correlation is with the Valueless-Valuable variable (.84) and the Poor Use of Time – Good Use of Time variable (.70). On balance, these variables denote MBA program utility.

The application of the discriminant function to the sample from which it was drawn reveals that 82.3% of the respondents are correctly classified. These results are seen in the confusion matrix that is presented in Table 3.

Basically, 29.4% of the full-time MBAs were correctly classified, while 96.8% of the part-time students were correctly assigned. The application of the proportional chance criterion (Morrison 1969) reveals that 66.2% of the entire sample would be expected to be classified correctly through chance alone. Despite the 82.3% correct classification rate, the results of applying the function to the sample from which it was drawn is upwardly biased (Morrison 1969). A determination of how well the function can classify based on fresh data is recommended, yet the small sample size associated with the full-time student population prevents such a development. All in all, the two student groups differ with respect to global attitudinal response, yet the shrinkage in assignment value remains unknown. In spite of the latter, a successful discrimination appears to have resulted.

Background Variable Analysis

Additional analyses as to student background variables reveal that full-time MBA students are younger (31.2 years of age) than part-time students (36.1 years of age,) and the observed difference was statistically significant ($t = -2.90$; @ 77 d.f.; $p = .005$). Full-time MBA students also have less professional work experience (2.53 years) than part-time students (6.43) and this difference is likewise statistically significant ($t = -2.60$; @ 76 d.f.; $p = .011$). Analyses of undergraduate grade point average, GMAT scores, MBA program grade average, and length of time from graduation revealed no differences. Performance wise, full-time students do as well academically, yet their lack of experience and their heightened expectations may foster lesser attitudinal orientations toward their MBA education. Additionally, their word-of-mouth communication concerning the viability of their MBA program experience may not be as superlative.

IMPLICATIONS

The overall results help to confirm the efficacy of part-time, fully employed, students as MBA program targets. These are the students that can more readily operationalize their knowledge and the benefit of such operationalism appears to impact one's global attitudinal orientation. Such students, at least in this study, are older and possess more professional work experience than full-time students.

Their more positive attitudinal orientations also suggests more positive word-of-mouth communication concerning their MBA education.

The study results also help to support the findings of Van Auken, Chrysler, and Wells (2005) in that part-time students have their MBA program perceptions of ROI driven by knowledge components in lieu of skills, as the former are more easily integrated into one's current employment. Additionally, older, fully employed MBA students with longer professional work experience may have a lesser need for skill development. Still, skill enhancement is seen as vital in business education (Management Education Task Force 2002), yet the nature of the MBA program (full- versus part-time) may be the key influencer. It is therefore suggested that full- versus part-time student differences be assessed in MBA outcome assessments and that the nature of the MBA program (full-time versus predominantly part-time) be evaluated as to the expected drivers of ROI.

CONCLUSIONS

This study has shown how two MBA student populations (full- versus part-time) differ with respect to one's global MBA program orientation and it has provided insights as to why program satisfaction may vary between them. Hopefully, studies such as this one will reveal a pattern of variables that influence perceptions of MBA program ROI. It may be that predominantly part-time MBA programs have

a utility that has been overlooked in the current quest for skill development among MBAs, as such part-time students may operationalize their knowledge with their employers. At the very least, part-time MBA students manifest stronger attitudinal orientations toward their MBA education and this alone has implications for MBA program marketing viability. All too often such issues have been ignored. Hopefully, this research will stimulate additional thinking about MBA utility and the setting of expectations among MBA candidates.

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TABLE 1

Global Attitudes: A Contrast Between
Part-time and Full-time MBAs

Variables	Means		F ¹	sig.
	Full-time n=17	Part-time n=62		
Poor Use of Time-Good Use of Time	5.06	5.94	5.95	.017
Valueless-Valuable	4.41	5.65	8.67	.004
Useless-Useful	5.29	5.90	3.38	.070
Ineffective-Effective	5.06	5.73	4.90	.030

¹ Degrees of freedom equaled 1 and 77.

TABLE 2

Correlations¹ Between Predictor Variables
And the Standardized Canonical Discriminant
Function

Variables	Correlations
Valueless-Valuable	.84
Poor Use of Time-Good Use of Time	.70
Ineffective-Effective	.63
Useless-Useful	.52

¹ Variables are ordered by absolute size of correlation within the discriminant function.

TABLE 3

Multiple Discriminant Analysis: Confusion Matrix

		Predicted Group Membership		Total
		Part-Time	Full-Time	
Actual Group Membership	Part-time	5	12	17
	Full-time	2	60	62

¹ of 79 respondents, 82.3% were correctly classified.