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Effects of a holistic, experiential curriculum on business students' satisfaction and career confidence

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ABSTRACT

Students' satisfaction with their major curriculum and their perceptions of career readiness are important drivers of recruitment, retention and rankings. As a result, universities, and business schools in particular, are redesigning curricula to be responsive to market-place demands. Curricula are increasingly using holistic and experiential learning tools to foster student satisfaction and career confidence. To connect these practices to the outcomes of satisfaction and confidence, we examined student responses to a newly designed, experiential undergraduate business curriculum. The results indicated that, compared to students who graduated from a traditional, functionally structured curriculum, students graduating from the holistic, experiential curriculum were significantly higher in their satisfaction and career self-efficacy (but not leader self-efficacy). These findings provide evidence that holistic, experiential curricular redesign is related to improved student attitudes and confidence. We conclude by discussing the implications for education and future research.

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1. Introduction

Recruitment, retention and rankings might be considered the 'three Rs' of higher education. Most universities focus on recruiting high quality students and retaining them for reputation and revenue (Bedggood & Donovan, 2012). Rankings have become important for many schools as they compete for top students (Agasisti & Johnes, 2015; Rauhvargers, 2013), making student satisfaction an important consideration (Chong & Ahmed, 2015; Douglas, Douglas, McClelland, & Davies, 2015). In addition, most students expect their degree to offer them good job prospects (Browne, Kaldenberg, Browne, & Brown, 1998; Douglas et al. 2015; Gibson, 2010). Thus, many institutions are concerned with students' satisfaction and career confidence.

Arguably, an important factor influencing these outcomes is the curriculum. However, observers have raised concerns regarding traditional curricula and recommended more holistic and integrated curricula that better prepare graduates to face the complexities of the 'real world' (Barnett, 2000; Moore, 2003). Taking business schools as an example, despite repeated calls for change (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Khurana, 2007), many business school curricula still include courses isolated in traditional disciplines. Most programs adhere closely to a functional-centric curriculum (Navarro, 2008). Critics have called for more integrated and experiential approaches (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011; Weber & Englehart, 2011).

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In support of these calls, the literature describes various pedagogical changes in business schools, including the effects of experiential learning projects (Paulson, 2011), student internships or work-integrated learning (Narayanan, Olk, and Fukami, 2010), simulations (Siewiorek, Saarinen, Lainema, & Lehtinen, 2012), and the use of teams (Boni, Weingart, and Evenson, 2009). The research shows that changing from traditional methods to more active and integrated learning can improve knowledge and skills acquisition (Lengnick-Hall & Sanders, 1997; Reynolds, 2009), as well as student engagement, student retention, and graduation rates (Stowe, von Freymann, & Schwartz, 2011). However, it remains uncertain whether students see the value in these sorts of pedagogies. While it is obviously important to give students the skills they need to succeed, it is equally important to foster students' attitudes and confidence (Paulsen & Betz, 2004). We argue that modern pedagogical reforms will also improve student self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability to accomplish specific goals; Bandura, 1991) and satisfaction by clearly demonstrating the link between their education and their career development (Stowe et al. 2011).

Our research responds to the need for evidence about the effects of curricular reform on students' attitudinal outcomes. In particular, we studied one business school that changed its traditional, functional-centric curriculum to a holistic, experiential curriculum, consistent with recommendations in the literature (described in detail below). We examined the effect of this change on student satisfaction and two aspects of their self-efficacy: leader self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability to lead effectively; Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011), and career self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in one's ability to successfully pursue a career; Taylor & Betz, 1983). We focused on these outcomes because they are among the most important of students' attitudinal responses. Specifically, student satisfaction has been linked to improved student motivation, retention, graduation rates, and alumni giving (Elliott & Shin, 2002); satisfaction is also part of business school rankings (Business Week, 2012). Self-efficacy is associated with better decisions, performance, and persistence (Paulsen & Betz, 2004), and students' confidence regarding leadership and careers are particularly important. Leader self-efficacy shapes how students think about leadership and influences their motivation to engage in leadership (Bandura, 1991; Stage, 1996). Likewise, individuals with high career self-efficacy are more likely to participate fully in their career and less likely to give up when facing career difficulties (Lent, Hackett, & Brown, 1996). As such, student satisfaction and self-efficacy in regard to leadership and careers are important outcomes to consider.

In the following sections, we describe the curriculum we studied and then present hypotheses about the links between holistic, experiential curricula and the student outcomes examined in our study. Our methods and results follow these discussions. We conclude by considering implications and future directions.

2. Conceptual framework

2.1. Holistic, experiential curriculum

Suggestions for improved business school curricula are numerous, including integration with the liberal arts (Colby et al. 2011), integration across traditional business disciplines (Weber & Englehart, 2011), experiential learning (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006) and incorporating soft skills development (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011). Navarro (2008) summarised an 'ideal' business school curriculum as one that provides students with opportunities to solve problems in a way that integrates implications across different functional areas as they affect one another in practice. Experiential education provides students with opportunities to engage in learning through direct, personal encounters (McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006), requiring students to practise making decisions and facing their consequences. As well, the business community has realised that hiring people with strong technical knowledge does not ensure that they will be good employees or leaders, making soft skill development in areas such as leadership and communication crucial (Klimoski & Amos, 2012). Together, functional integration, experiential learning, and soft-skill development are key features of recommended business school curricula, and create what we refer to here as a holistic, experiential curriculum (HEC). Below, we develop hypotheses linking HEC to student outcomes.

2.2. Leader self-efficacy

Business schools routinely assert that they are developing leaders (Caza and Rosch, 2014). In fact, most business schools' missions involve some reference to leadership development (DeRue, Sitkin, and Podolny, 2011), and employers continue to call for business schools to develop leadership skills (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2011). An important part of leadership development concerns students' leader self-efficacy (Paglis & Green, 2002), which is defined as 'a leader's confidence in their abilities, knowledge, and skills in areas needed to lead others effectively' (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011, 460). Before individuals can take on the behaviours required of an effective leader, they must believe in their ability to do so. Leader self-efficacy is a powerful predictor of leadership success in a range of contexts (Anderson, Krajewski, Goffin, & Jackson, 2008; McCormick, 2001; Paglis, 2010). Identifying oneself as a leader and a belief in one's ability to successfully lead set a foundation on which to build leadership skills (Machida & Schaubroeck, 2011).

Social cognitive theory describes four means of developing self-efficacy: performance accomplishments, vicarious learning, emotional arousal, and social persuasion (Bandura, 1991). HEC could support all four of these mechanisms. Experiences in simulations, internships, and efforts to solve real problems that incorporate multi-dimensional issues can provide performance accomplishments, emotional arousal and social persuasion. As well, skill development workshops that focus on leadership and communication provide opportunities for practice, feedback, and vicarious learning. Further, leadership

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