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Jennifer Mencl
University of Minnesota - Duluth

Scott W. Lester
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire

Kristina A. Bourne
University of Wisconsin - Eau Claire

Cheryl Maranto
Marquette University

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"Brick & Mortar" Education and "Real World" Experience: Assessing HRM Alumni Perceptions of their Early Professional Development

Jennifer Mencl
University of Minnesota Duluth

Scott W. Lester and Kristina A. Bourne
University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire

Cheryl L. Maranto
Marquette University

ABSTRACT

In this research we examined the extent to which three distinct human resource management (HRM) undergraduate programs provide coverage of the 13 core content areas specified by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) and explored the usefulness of various ways of learning including their undergraduate coursework, an internship, and previous work experience as related to early professional development. Based on perceptions of HRM alumni, the findings reveal that the three curricula provided significant differences in levels of proficiency in seven of the core areas and in perceived usefulness of the learning methods. Implications for HRM curriculum development and students' professional development are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, human resource management (HRM) professionals have been given increased responsibilities in managing organizational change and have been invited to play an active role in strategic decision-making within organizations (Baill, 1999; Giannantonio & Hurley, 2002; Kaufman, 1999). These activities require HRM professionals to possess core *content* competencies in the functional areas of HRM and business in general. This HRM content knowledge is often acquired through formal study or classroom training. In addition, HRM professionals need *personal* competencies, including communication skills, problem-solving skills, technical abilities, interpersonal skills (managing relationships), and integrity, which are often developed through practicing related skills and behaviors, to operate effectively in a dynamic business environment (Johnson & King, 2002; Sincoff & Owen, 2004). Because organizations often recruit graduates who received a bachelor's degree with an HRM major or area of emphasis for HRM jobs, it is important that these individuals possess the right combination of content and personal competencies to contribute to their organizations.

In terms of HRM content competencies, recent HRM graduates are expected to have gained a good foundation of knowledge from their undergraduate coursework. However, one traditional downfall noted with respect to HRM education is that no common body of knowledge

existed (Sincoff & Owen, 2004). Researchers have addressed this concern by collecting data from HRM professionals through interviews and surveys to determine what knowledge is needed by HRM graduates for entry-level jobs (e.g., Johnson & King, 2002; Sincoff & Owen, 2004). Recently, the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), the largest organization representing the profession and the development of its members worldwide, conducted focus groups and administered surveys to HRM professionals, academics, and undergraduate students regarding HRM curricula (Kluttz & Cohen, 2003). This information was used to develop recommendations for educational programs as specified in *SHRM's Human Resource Curriculum Guidebook and Templates for Undergraduate and Graduate Programs* (SHRM, 2006). While the *Guidebook* does not offer one standard curriculum structure for all schools, SHRM recommends that any HRM educational program should, at a minimum, cover 13 core content areas (see Table 1).

Table 1. *SHRM's 13 HR Content Areas*

HR Content Areas that "HR Students Must Master"
1. Employee and Labor Relations
2. Employment Law
3.Compensation, Benefits, and Total Rewards
4. History and Role of HR
5. HR and Organizational Strategy
6. Human Resource Information Systems
7. Measuring HR Outcomes and the Bottom Line
8. Performance Appraisal and Feedback
9. Recruitment and Selection
10. Workforce Planning and Talent Management
11. HR and Mergers and Acquisitions
12. HR and Globalization
13. Occupational Health, Safety, and Security

Note. From *SHRM Human Resource Curriculum Guidebook and Templates for Undergraduate and Graduate Programs*, p. 11.

Although these guidelines exist, situational factors such as school requirements and available resources dictate that class offerings will vary by university. Therefore, SHRM analyzes the content of "brick-and-mortar" university HRM-degree programs through proposals submitted by the schools to determine whether they align with the recommended guidelines. As of April 2010, more than 100 undergraduate programs offering a major or emphasis in HRM meet the SHRM criteria (SHRM, 2010). This figure suggests that a common body of HRM knowledge has been accepted. However, to date, no empirical study has examined the effectiveness of various undergraduate programs in addressing these content areas. Thus, the first goal of this research is to address this need by exploring the perceptions of graduates of three different HRM undergraduate programs about their level of proficiency in SHRM's 13 core content areas.

As noted previously, beyond having a good foundation of HRM knowledge, college graduates are also expected to possess strong personal competencies (Johnson & King, 2002). Entry-level professionals, however, often lack communication, leadership, negotiating, team, and analytical skills (Giannantonio & Hurley, 2002; Johnson & King, 2002; Kaufman, 1999; Sincoff & Owen, 2004). Developing these competencies requires both education *and* experience (Losey, 1999; Thacker, 2002). In fact, recruiters who held interviews for HRM positions at one of the universities included in the present research (N = 30) rated previous work experience and internships as more important than students' major/HRM curriculum (Lester & Bourne, 2006). Since organizations are interested in how students obtain "real-world" experiences, undergraduate HRM students may benefit a great deal professionally from activities such as internships and previous work experiences that provide opportunities for practice (Kaufman, 1999). Research suggests that recent college graduates prefer these types of active learning methods compared to more passive learning methods such as classroom-based lecture. In particular, on-the-job experiences and networks were found to be two primary means of development among young employees that led to their perceptions of career success (McDonald & Hite, 2008).

These types of opportunities allow students to complement their classroom studies by developing their interpersonal and analytical skills in actual business settings. Therefore, while we recognize the importance of the HRM content knowledge, a second goal of this research is to address HRM alumni perceptions of the usefulness of various learning methods beyond traditional classroom training. Specifically, we explore HRM alumni perceptions of the relative impact of internships and previous work experiences compared to coursework on the following career outcomes: obtaining a job in HR, starting salary, raises, promotions, earning respect from co-workers, and resolving HR-related issues.

METHODOLOGY

Faculty members from three Midwestern, AACSB-accredited business schools with HRM undergraduate programs contacted their respective HRM alumni from 1997-2008 to solicit participation in the study. The programs (which we refer to here as Universities A, B, and C), the sample, and the measures are described in greater detail in the following paragraphs.

The HRM Programs

All of the programs are similar in that all HRM majors must complete general business courses as part of their graduation requirements. The three programs are also similar in that each one includes courses in compensation and benefits, training/human resource development, and labor relations. However, these classes are required for HRM majors at University A, while at Universities B and C, the classes are electives that comprise the primary HR-specific classes (e.g., students must take three out of four that are offered in that category of classes).

Additional unique differences among these programs provide an ideal opportunity for comparative research. Specifically, University A's program has required all HRM majors to take a capstone HR course that serves as preparation for the PHR certification exam. Thus, this course focuses on health and safety, management practices, training and development, labor

relations, selection and placement, and compensation and benefits. University B's program also offers a capstone HR course, which had been a required class for all HRM majors until 2006 when it became an elective class. In contrast to University A's capstone course, University B's capstone class focuses on employment law for half the semester and the remaining half of the semester targets current issues in the HR field, such as the future state of HRM, training, and unions. University C has had no capstone HR course.

Further, University A has *required* that HRM students pass the PHR certification exam in order to receive their bachelor's degree with a major in HRM (this will remain in effect until students are no longer able to sit for the PHR exam without having met the test requirements). Students who do not pass the exam typically graduate with a major in general management. In contrast, Universities B and C do not require students to take and pass the PHR exam to graduate with a major in HRM. University B's faculty encourage students to take the PHR, and they facilitate PHR study groups for students who plan to sit for the exam (approximately one-quarter to one-third of HRM seniors do so each year). Students at University C are not encouraged to take the exam; their faculty promote internships and HR-related work opportunities instead. Other distinctions related to course offerings can be seen between the universities' programs that are outlined in Table 2.

Table 2. ***A Comparison of the Participating Universities' HRM Programs***

University A	University B	University C
Required HR Courses	Required HR Courses	Required HR Courses
Intro to HRM	Intro to HRM	Intro to HRM
Compensation	HR Capstone	
Labor Relations		Elective HR Courses (9 credits)
Managing Organizational Change	Elective HR Courses (12 credits)	Compensation of Human Resources
Quantitative Methods	Compensation	Employee Benefits Systems
Training and Development	Labor Economics	Staffing Work Organizations
HR Capstone	Labor Relations	Training & Development
	Managing Organizational Change	
Elective HR Courses (5 credits)	Staffing Work Organizations	Additional Elective HR Courses
Advanced Business	Training & Development	(6 credits)
Communications		Diversity in Organizations
Advanced Topics in Leadership	Additional Elective HR Courses	HR Information Technology
HR Internship	(6 credits)	HR Internship
Independent Studies in HR	HR Internship	HR Strategy and Planning
International Management	Management of Community Projects	Labor Relations
Leadership	One HR elective listed above	Leadership & Motivation
Production Planning and Control	Pre-approved HR-oriented course	
Quality Management	from another discipline	Four Business Electives
Small Business Consulting	Upper-division Org Mgmt course	

Note. The delivery of courses for each program for the alumni who participated in this research may have varied.

Sample

The sample used in this study is a subset of data that were collected by the researchers from the three universities as part of a comprehensive research project. The researchers from Universities A and B sent an initial notification letter to their respective HRM alumni who had

graduated in the 10-year period, describing the intent of the study and asking them to provide updated email addresses. Those who responded were emailed a link to a web-based survey. Two weeks after the initial email, a follow-up email was sent asking those who had not yet completed the survey to please do so. One year later, University C was added to the research project and followed this protocol for HRM alumni based on the previous 11-year period. Also at that time, HRM alumni from the most recent year at Universities A and B were contacted in the same manner. A total of 230 alumni from across the three universities completed the online survey (see Lester, Mencl, Maranto, Bourne, & Keaveny, in press, for the description of the full sample).

The final sample used in the analyses described here includes only the respondents who held one or more HR jobs since graduation, $N = 176$, so that findings are specific to alumni who have worked in the HR field. The total sample was comprised of 86 percent females and was 94 percent white/non-Hispanic. The average GPA reported was 3.23/4.00 (*S.D.* = .36). On average, the alumni had been out of school for 5.60 years (*S.D.* = 2.98), and 57 percent had passed the PHR exam. University statistics are reported in Table 3.

Table 3. ***Descriptive Statistics of the Sample by University***

	University A	**University B**	**University C**
	(n = 72)	**(n = 56)**	**(n = 48)**
Gender (% female)	92%	73%	90%
Race (% white/non-Hispanic)	97%	95%	89%
GPA: 4.00 scale (*M, S.D.*)	3.30, .34	3.17, .40	3.18, .33
Number of Years out of School (*M, S.D.*)	6.04, 2.89	5.44, 3.24	5.13, 2.77
Passed PHR Exam (%)	90%*	41%	25%

Note. All alumni at University A took the PHR exam as a program requirement; however, some students did not pass the exam and thus graduated as general management majors but still entered the HRM field.

Measures

Alumni perceptions of SHRM core content expertise. For each of the 13 core content areas recommended by SHRM, alumni were asked: "To what extent did your undergraduate coursework provide you with proficiency in the following areas?" (1 = "no extent" to 5 = "great extent").

Usefulness of curriculum and experience-based learning methods. Respondents were asked a series of questions regarding their perceptions of the impact of their 1) undergraduate coursework, 2) an internship, and 3) previous work experience on the following career outcomes: finding a job in Human Resources, receiving a higher starting salary, receiving a salary increase, receiving a promotion, earning respect from co-workers, and resolving HR-related issues (using

the same scale as the previously described measure). A factor analysis of the 18 items resulted in the extraction of three factors that represented the learning methods, explaining 65.95 percent of the total variance. The six career outcome items for each learning method loaded together as expected, and therefore, composite variables for each learning method were computed. All scales had high reliabilities (Cronbach alphas): coursework (α = .80), internship (α = .93), and previous work experience (α = .91).

Control Variables. In the analysis, number of years after graduation was used as a control variable since time is likely to affect the respondents' ability to recall information specific to their undergraduate coursework. Furthermore, this controls for the marginal changes in programs that occurred over time. We also controlled for whether the respondent passed the PHR exam because it is possible passing the PHR exam could bias responses related to coursework. (Note: although school A required students to take a course to study for the exam as part of the major, this subgroup of respondents accounts for only 59 percent of the total sample who passed the exam).

RESULTS

Alumni Perceptions of Core Content Proficiency

Multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was used to determine group differences in perceptions of proficiency in SHRM's recommended 13 core content areas between the three universities. The main effect of university on the 13 core areas was statistically significant based on the Wilks' Lamba statistic, $F(26, 294) = 2.86$, $p < .01.$, $\eta^2 = .20$. Univariate tests with the Bonferroni adjustment for multiple comparisons showed group differences existed on 7 of the 13 core content areas between two or more of the schools. These results are presented in Table 4, along with the mean differences for each group.

Table 4. ***Group Differences on Perceptions of Expertise of the 13 Core Content Areas***

Core Content Area	*F*(2, 159)	Mean (Univ. A)	Pairwise Comparisons Mean Differences		
			Univ. A-B	Univ. A-C	Univ. B-C
1. Employee and Labor Relations	4.43**	3.43	.29	.59**	.30
2. Employment Law	4.78**	3.66	-.18	.37	.55**
3. Compensation, Benefits, and Total Rewards	.08	3.44	.05	.08	.03
4. History and Role of HR	2.13	3.53	.38	.03	-.34
5. HR and Organizational Strategy	1.93	3.84	.35	.32†	-.04
6. Human Resource Information Systems	2.96	2.67	.51**	.26	-.25
7. Measuring HR Outcomes and the Bottom Line	3.28*	2.91	.41*	-.02	-.43*
8. Performance Appraisal and Feedback	8.46**	3.77	.71**	.29	-.42*
9. Recruitment and Selection	.07	3.61	.06	.08	.03
10. Workforce Planning and Talent Management	1.98	3.15	.38*	.27	-.11
11. HR and Mergers and Acquisitions	9.81**	2.92	.90**	.64**	-.25
12. HR and Globalization	3.24*	2.99	.55**	.45	-.10
13. Occupational Health, Safety, and Security	11.32**	3.43	.81**	1.10**	.29

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

Alumni Perceptions of Learning Methods in Facilitating Career Outcomes

A second MANCOVA evaluated group differences in the usefulness of the three learning methods. The multivariate test indicated statistically significant group differences among the learning methods overall, $F(6, 316) = 4.30$, $p < .01$., $\eta^2 = .08$. Univariate tests (with Bonferroni adjustment) showed significant differences between two or more groups for the usefulness of internships and previous work experience, but no differences between groups for the overall usefulness of coursework. These statistics and mean differences are listed in Table 5.

Table 5. ***Group Differences on Perceptions of Usefulness of Learning Methods***

Learning Method	*F*(2, 160)	Mean (Univ. A)	Pairwise Comparisons Mean Differences		
			Univ. A-B	Univ. A-C	Univ. B-C
Coursework	.40	3.30	.12	.13	.01
Internship	6.15**	2.89	.46	-.38	-.85**
Previous Work Experience	7.26**	3.41	.05	-.73*	-.77**

Note. *$p < .05$, **$p < .01$

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this research was to extend existing work related to the design of undergraduate HRM programs (e.g., Sincoff & Owen, 2004). Examining the perceived proficiency attained in the 13 core areas recommended by SHRM within the context of existing HRM curricula along with the perceived usefulness of non-classroom learning experiences provides for a better understanding of how to effectively build, organize, and deliver the content and personal competencies entry-level HRM professionals need to succeed in today's business environment. Our study took an initial step in this direction by comparing three existing undergraduate HRM programs based on the perceptions of their HRM alumni who entered the HR field.

Core Content Proficiency

First, we compared the extent to which alumni of the three HRM curricula perceive their respective coursework provided a foundation of knowledge based on SHRM's 13 core content areas. As shown in Table 3, statistically significant differences existed among groups of alumni in the following seven core content areas: employee and labor relations; employment law; measuring HR outcomes and the bottom line; performance appraisal and feedback; HR and mergers and acquisitions; HR and globalization; and occupational health, safety, and security. Most of the significant differences existed between Universities A and B, with alumni of University A reporting significantly higher proficiency scores in the core content areas of measuring HR outcomes and the bottom line; performance appraisal and feedback; HR and mergers and acquisition; HR and globalization; and occupational health, safety, and security. The significant differences that existed between Universities A and C were in the core content areas of employee and labor relations; HR and mergers and acquisitions; and occupational health, safety, and security. Universities B and C were significantly different in the measuring HR outcomes and the bottom line; employment law; and performance appraisal and feedback core content areas.

These content proficiency findings can be logically explained by the differences in courses offered in each university's program. The most obvious explanation is that the universities differ in course offerings that focus on certain content area and differences in the frequency with which a university offers a course (e.g., every year vs. every third year). Consistent with these differences in course offerings, alumni from University A reported greater perceived labor relations proficiency than University C; University A has a required course on labor relations while Universities B and C offer this course as an elective, and University C has only offered this course once every other year for the past decade. Differences in perceived competence in the area of HR and mergers and acquisitions are also consistent with the fact that University A has a required course on "Managing Organizational Change" whereas University B had an elective class on organizational change offered every third year until 2006, and University C does not offer a class that is focused specifically on this content area. These statistically significant differences provide evidence that program course offerings greatly impact the extent to which HR alumni are proficient in core content areas.

Differences among the alumni's perceptions of proficiency may also be explained by major differences among the three curricula in the existence and treatment of a capstone HR course and its content. As mentioned previously, University A requires a capstone HR course, University B required a capstone HR course until recently when it was changed to an elective, and University C has had no capstone HR course. The higher means for University B on employment law is likely attributable to the fact that employment law is the focus of at least half of this class, while it comprises only about 20 percent of University A's capstone class, and no specific class or portion of a class addresses this topic at University C.

University A's capstone HR class is modeled after the content areas covered by the PHR certification exam (i.e., risk management, strategic management, human resource development, employee and labor relations, workforce planning and employment, and total rewards), which provides students with strong foundations in those recommended core content areas. This is evident in the results, since University A scored higher than University B on measuring HR outcomes and the bottom line. This topic is addressed and evaluated within the strategic management section of the PHR exam and likely receives more coverage at University A. Furthermore, the occupational health, safety, and security content area accounts for most of the questions in the risk management section of the PHR exam. As a result, University A provides detailed instruction on this area in the capstone HR class whereas this content area is not emphasized at Universities B and C. These findings suggest that using the PHR exam or modeling an advanced HR class after the topics covered on the exam, like University A's program, can be a relatively effective means of reinforcing several of SHRM's recommended core content areas that may not be addressed in more common HR function-specific classes (e.g., courses are generally not offered in performance appraisal and feedback; or occupational health, safety, and security).

Our results also showed that alumni from the three universities did not perceive different levels of expertise in several core content areas: compensation, benefits, and total rewards; history and role of HR; HR and organizational strategy; human resources information systems; recruitment and selection; and workforce planning and talent management. There may be two reasons for similar proficiencies in these areas. First, areas such as compensation and recruitment represent traditional HR functions that have historically been a cornerstone of the field and thus widely covered in most programs through both introductory HR courses and functional area course offerings. Moreover, most introductory HR classes begin with a discussion of the history of the HR field and its evolving role in the organization, and all three schools require an introductory HR course for HRM majors. As for the similarities in perceived expertise for HR and organizational strategy, it may be due to the fact that all three programs require all HRM undergraduates (as well as all other undergraduate business majors) to take a strategic management class as the capstone business course.

Lastly, it is important to note the average level of perceived proficiency in each of the core content areas by university. On our scale of 1-5, "3" was the midpoint anchored by "to some extent." The means of several core areas were below this midpoint. For example, human resource information systems had a mean below 3.00 for all three programs. Measuring HR outcomes and the bottom line; HR and mergers and acquisitions; HR and globalization; and

occupational health, safety, and security scored below a mean of 3.00 for one or two of the universities. These findings suggest areas for improvement in HR curricula at each school.

Overall, our results provide valuable information for existing and new HRM programs that want to better align with SHRM's recommendations. Future research could extend these findings by examining how well graduating HRM students perform on standardized types of knowledge-based tests of these core content areas.

Usefulness of Alternative Learning Methods in Facilitating Career Outcomes

We also examined the perceived usefulness of undergraduate coursework, an internship, and previous work experience in advancing the career outcomes of finding a job in Human Resources, receiving a higher starting salary, receiving a salary increase, receiving a promotion, earning respect from co-workers, and resolving HR-related issues. Although previous work experience had the highest mean of the three learning methods for all three universities, University C alumni reported a statistically significant higher mean (M = 4.14) compared to alumni from University A (M = 3.41) and University B (M = 3.36). In addition, only the alumni at University C reported that the usefulness of their internships was above the scale midpoint (M = 3.27), which was significantly more influential in facilitating career success outcomes than alumni from University B (M = 2.43); University B's mean of the usefulness of internships was not significantly different from either of the other two universities (M = 2.89).

Location may explain University C alumni's belief that their work experiences and internships had a much greater impact on career success. University A and University B are located in suburban "college towns" while University C is located in a large metropolitan area. Therefore, students who attend University C have a greater number of job and internship opportunities from which to choose compared to the students attending Universities A and B. In addition, a majority of students at Universities A and B relocate to large metropolitan areas following graduation, whereas a higher percentage of University C graduates stay in the same location to begin their careers. Students at University C may perceive a greater impact of their work experiences and internships because they were able to take a full-time job with the company for which they worked/interned and remain in their preferred geographical area. Although location may limit the availability of part-time employment for students in college towns, the findings suggest that schools not located in metropolitan areas should be advised to extend the geographical reach of their internship programs so can students can have greater access to this "real world" learning method.

In contrast to the differences explained above, we found that perceived usefulness of "brick-and-mortar" curricula did not vary among the three schools (University A: M = 3.30; University B: M = 3.18; University C: M = 3.17), despite a number of significant differences in the perceived content competency provided in the core content areas. This is consistent with Losey's (1999) statement that education and experience are both required to develop HR competence, and it supports Sincoff and Owen's (2004) research advocating that HRM curricula should include one or more internships. Schools should continually monitor and modify their HR programs to tailor courses to their students' needs and professional standards in addition to ensuring students obtain experience through work and internships. Because HR is integral to the

business world, and because business decisions and situations are unique, practice through actual work experiences is essential for professional development (Bennis & O'Toole, 2005).

CONCLUSION

Overall, this research suggests that HRM faculty should continually review the structure of their existing curricula to ensure that students are provided adequate knowledge of the core content areas that SHRM recommends for all HR professionals. Surveying the alumni of their programs provides valuable information to assist them in updating or redesigning their coursework. And although "brick-and-mortar" learning is important, it is not sufficient by itself for the adequate development of entry-level HR professionals. HRM programs should continue to incorporate more active learning into the classes they offer, and work to form partnerships with various stakeholders to develop opportunities for students to gain practical experience outside of the classroom. This may include, but is not limited to, engaging students in the field through projects with local organizations, networking with professionals in local SHRM-affiliated chapters, and helping students take better advantage of their part- and full-time work experiences and internships. The right combination of education and experience driven by a holistic approach to undergraduate HRM programs can help to develop both the content and personal competencies organizations required for entry-level HR professionals.

Jennifer Mencl (Ph.D. University of Nebraska-Lincoln) is an assistant professor of management at the University of Minnesota Duluth where she teaches upper-division HR and organizational management courses. One of her primary research interests is the preparation of undergraduate management students to facilitate their career success. Contact: jmencl@d.umn.edu.

Scott W. Lester (Ph.D. University of South Carolina) is a professor of management at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire and the director of its Center for Leadership. He also serves as the faculty advisor to the student SHRM organization. His current research interests include HRM curriculum, dyadic trust, and other-oriented work values. Contact: lestersw@uwec.edu.

Kristina A. Bourne (Ph.D. University of Massachusetts-Amherst) is an assistant professor of management at the University of Wisconsin – Eau Claire. She teaches Organizational Behavior, Gender and Leadership, and International Management at the undergraduate level, as well as Contemporary Issues in Work and Family at the graduate level. Among her research interests are pedagogy and curriculum development. Contact: bourneka@uwec.edu.

Cheryl L. Maranto (Ph.D. Michigan State University) is an associate professor and Chair of the Management Department at Marquette University. She has published in the areas of union growth and decline, productivity determinants, wage differentials, and women in the academy. Contact: cheryl.maranto@marquette.edu.

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