

Chapter 8

Undergraduate Programs in the U.S: A Contextual and Content-Based Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Given the importance of human resource management skills both in management education and business in general, an empirical review of undergraduate human resource (HR) curricula and programs is needed. In this study, the authors provide an investigative analysis of the content taught across HR programs in the U.S. and the context in which HR programs operate. Specifically, data across 179 undergraduate “SHRM-aligned” HR programs were collected and analyzed to identify common as well as unique content and contextual attributes at the university, business school, and program levels. Against the backdrop of the study’s findings, the authors step back and purposefully comment on how they believe HR education can best be moved forward. In total, this study seeks to inform stakeholders in HR education through a clearer picture of the current and potential future states of HR curricula within U.S.-based undergraduate management programs.

INTRODUCTION

Various stakeholders (e.g., incumbent managers, policy-makers, business faculty, MBA alumni) have urged business schools to recognize the importance of human resource management skills that are needed by business graduates to operate effectively in the workplace (see Dierdorff & Rubin, 2006;

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Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). Yet, one discipline that remains under-studied within the broad umbrella of business education is human resource (HR) management. Program administrators, faculty, and advisory boards need current knowledge of program attributes and advancements to help design curricula that will produce “workplace ready” graduates via the transfer of relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) from the classroom to professional employment. While it is important for stakeholders to have a clear understanding of the HR education landscape, prior studies of undergraduate HR programs in the U.S. (e.g., Kaufman, 1999; Kuchinke, 2002; Sincoff & Owen, 2004) are either out dated (leaving decision makers ill-equipped to propose change), or utilize narrow samples or self-report data (limiting their generalizability). Additionally, recent research indicates that only a small percentage of HR job advertisements in the U.S. require professional certifications (Lyons, Mueller, Gruys, & Meyers, 2012), suggesting that many American companies rely on traditional educational credentials as an important selection criterion for HR professionals. In total, there appears to be a need for a detailed investigation of undergraduate HR programs that will help evaluate the status of HR education more broadly and provide recommendations for continued improvement.

In this study, the authors attempt to provide such an investigation, focusing on the current state of undergraduate HR education in the U.S. with an eye toward identifying program attributes that will help prepare future HR professionals for the workplace. The chapter begins with a description of existing studies of HR education, followed by an articulation of the research agenda, and a description of the method used to conduct the present study. The authors then review the findings and comment on how to advance HR education at the undergraduate level. Ultimately, the authors seek to inform HR faculty, program and school administrators, advisory boards, and HR professionals through a clearer picture of the current state and potential future of HR curricula within U.S.-based undergraduate business programs.

BACKGROUND

HR education has almost century-old origins that stemmed largely from the formalization of industrial relations as an area of practice and study (Kaufman, 1999). In the 1960s and 1970s, HR education and the field experienced increased professionalization, the establishment of a professional association (The American Society of Personnel Administration, forerunner of today’s Society for Human Resource Management [SHRM]), and more concentrations and degrees in HR (Kaufman, 1999)¹. However, HR education has suffered from several problems during its evolution. The field of HR has often lacked prestige or respect, especially within business schools (Foulkes, 1975; Gordon & Howell, 1959). It has been viewed as fragmented, vocational, atheoretical, and highly administrative (Kaufman, 1999). Once unions declined, employment laws became more complex, and as the behavioral sciences arose in the 1950s and 1960s, HR prominence improved. Subsequently, HR degree programs largely moved from industrial relations or labor economics schools into business schools. In the 1990s, HR education began embracing a more strategic lens, as well as an international perspective, stemming in part from works by scholars who impacted HR research and general HR thought. Other criticisms of the HR field and undergraduate degree have included the siloed approach, insufficient attention to international issues, a failure to leverage technology, and lack of gender diversity among the student base (cf. American Institutes of Research, 2013a; Roehling et al., 2005; Shapiro, Kirkman, & Courtney, 2003).

Looking at more specific characteristics of degree programs, studies have found “a large degree of heterogeneity among program names, departmental affiliations, and specializations” (Kuchinke, 2002,

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