

Focus Group: Webster School of Business and Technology Alumni

Vienna Campus

Facilitator: Benjamin Akande

Date: March 26, 2004

Number of Participants: 10

DRAFT

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Introduction

In July 2003 the School of Business and Technology (SBT) surveyed graduates within the most recent five years (1999 – 2003), to solicit feedback regarding their Webster education in the context of their current career experience. As a follow-up to this survey, the SBT Dean decided to conduct focus groups, to explore the issues identified in the survey, and to better understand alumni attitudes regarding the perceived value of their Webster degree. The Dean has also decided to incorporate the survey process into an annual review of alumni perceptions, by surveying each graduating student, and those individuals who are 2 and 5 years post-graduation, using a web-based survey tool. This will facilitate comparisons over time, to see if perceptions change as a result of specific actions taken regarding curriculum, faculty, or support services management.

Three alumni focus groups were held on the European campuses of Geneva, Switzerland; Leiden, Holland; and Vienna, Austria during March 22-26, 2004. The Vienna focus group was held on March 26, 2004 with 10 participants, 4 women and 6 men. Participants were primarily MBA graduates, although one participant had earned a Masters in Marketing, half had graduated in 2003, with the remainder graduating in 2001 or 2002 with the exception of one graduate from 1992 who was currently unemployed. Their positions ranged from marketing to investment banking, financial controller, and bank mergers and acquisitions, and one was a recruiter for Webster. One individual was currently pursuing a PhD in marketing at the University of Vienna. Another participant had recently graduated but was still awaiting his actual diploma.

Dean Akande welcomed the participants and encouraged their open and candid remarks, as part of an overall commitment to continual enhancement of the Webster academic experience. The Dean also provided an overview of Webster University and highlighted the following:

- Webster has 103 campuses world wide, including 40 military campuses, representing 8 countries, with over 30 degree programs
- The SBT has graduated 73,000 alumni, currently has 15,000 students, and 2500 faculty
- The average masters degree alumni earns an annual salary of \$60,000 and the average baccalaureate degree alumni earns \$49,000 annually
- The current student body is 52% male, 42% minority, and 12% international
- There have been 70 serving or retired generals in the U.S. Armed Forces with Webster degrees and 2 astronauts earned Webster MBAs

There was a brief introduction to the July 2003 web based survey, including respondent demographics, and then participants introduced themselves and described their reasons for attending Webster, and how their expectations were or were not met by their academic experience.

The focus group discussion centered around the alumni's perceived value of their Webster degree, and examples were solicited regarding positive and negative aspects of

their education, including specific faculty members, knowledge or course content taught, the extent to which learning took place, and specific career-critical skills that were transferred as a result of the degree program.

It was explained that the feedback gained from the focus groups will be used to guide future curriculum design decisions, specific suggestions regarding course content or instruction, degree planning assistance provided to students, or other campus-specific support services.

Dean Akande also encouraged the focus group participants to consider what Webster can be doing now to continue to build on the value of their degree and their continued association with Webster.

At the conclusion of the focus group, a brief video was shared, "Words to Live By," produced by Cross Cultural Communications in San Diego, California, to inspire the participants as business leaders.

Below is the list of individuals who attended the focus group.

Title	1st name	last name	degree	e-mail	office	Rsvp date
Ms.	Jacqueline	Koshy-Oppel	MA'03	jacqueline_koshy@yahoo.com	Webster	Feb-26
Mr.	Gunther	Ceusters	MBA '02	gunther.ceusters@nextra.at	Wolters Kluwer	Feb-23
Ms.	Stefka	Christodulova	MA '02	christodulova@gmx.at	Erste Bank	Feb-25
Mr.	Charles	Kasdon	MBA '03	charles.kasdon@chello.at		Feb-25
Mr.	Arno	Ronacher	MBA '03	arno.ronacher@chello.at	self employed	Feb-26
Mr.	Maxim	Kouznetsov	MBA '00	office@adeli-method.com	Adeli	March 4
Mr.	Roman	Askari	MBA '02	askari@ifrance.com		March 4
Mr.	Alvin	D'Souza	MA '99 MBA '02	a9005525@unet.univie.ac.at	paternity leave	March 4
Ms.	Martina	Hofer Moreno	MBA '02	martina_moreno@myfaz.net	European Centre	March 5
Mr.	Alexander	Bosak	MBA '02	a.bosak@europolis.at	Europolis	March 5
Mr.	Alexander	Petrovic	MBA '00	alex_p_1040@yahoo.com	Sound of Vienna	March 8
Ms.	Zrinka	Frankovitch	MBA '03	Zrinka.Frankovitch@oracle.com	Oracle	March 5
Mr.	Martin	Spatz	MBA '03	spatz@lifescienceaustria.at	LISA - Life Science Austria	March 15
Mr.	Gernot	Graninger	MBA '03	gernot.graninger@akm.co.at	AKM	March 16
Dr.	Arthur	Hirsh		hirsh@webster.ac.at	Webster	

General Observations – Vienna Campus:

Most of the Vienna campus participants contrasted the Webster experience with that of the local Austrian universities and commented on the difference between the two academic environments. They appreciated the international flavor of the faculty and student body, which was in sharp contrast to Austrian business programs, which are both taught by and attended by Austrian students almost exclusively. They felt that this enriched their personal self confidence and their ability to handle themselves in international business situations.

The participants also spent a great deal of time explaining that an MBA degree is not well understood in the Austrian business community, so they have had to personally educate their potential and current employers as to the curriculum of the MBA program, the objective of a case study approach (i.e., dispelling the myth that it is just reading newspaper articles), and justifying their degree as a valuable business asset even though it does not confer the title of Magister which is what is earned as a result of an Austrian masters degree. They would appreciate Webster spending more time educating the Austrian business community on the value of the MBA degree and the unique reputation of Webster in providing this degree.

Webster was perceived as offering an “American education” which entailed greater classroom discussion and participation, exposure to the more practical aspects of business techniques, and more direct project experience as a result of coursework. However, they expressed the concern that this was more effectively taught by non-Austrian professors, because this type of classroom interaction is not familiar to most Austrian professors.

Regarding the curriculum and faculty, it was generally perceived that Webster was strongest in its “hard science” courses of Finance and Statistics, and not as competent in teaching the “soft science” courses of Human Resources, Conflict Resolution, and Negotiations. However, one professor in Cross Cultural Communications was considered highly effective and of critical importance in the Webster curriculum.

In the area of skills transfer, most participants felt that written, oral, and group presentation skills were definitely taught as a result of how coursework was structured, even if there was not a specific course dedicated to the topic of communication skills. Participants also felt that they learned analytical and synthesis skills as a result of the combination of in-depth subject presentations followed by intense classroom discussions on key business topics. As one participant expressed it, “I learned an analytical approach to solving business problems and that is an incredibly powerful skill.” Skills that were not as effectively taught included negotiation and conflict resolution skills; nor did participants feel that they got sufficient opportunities or exposure to a business community network.

Regarding campus services, the participants expressed extreme dissatisfaction with the library, as it was only open during daytime hours, had limited resources, and was not professional staffed. However, they were very impressed with the customer service attitude of the admissions office and felt that both the admitting process and degree advising process were handled very efficiently and accurately. They were disappointed that there were not more networking opportunities as a result of their association with Webster, either among program alumni or with local areas businesses. They would like to see Webster offer opportunities for continuing education, in the form of workshops, seminars, or other networking opportunities to keep their knowledge base current and enhance their career development.

Academic Experience – Vienna Campus:

Focus group participants were asked to consider several aspects of their academic experience, including the content knowledge received in their courses, faculty credentials and expertise, educational materials and approach used in the classroom, and other aspects of the learning experience. Participants provided specific examples of successful as well as disappointing courses.

In response to the question “did you receive the content knowledge that you expected from your Webster experience?” the response was generally favorable and focused on the opportunity to combine theory with practice in order to be better prepared to handle business situations in their jobs. The most consistent concern mentioned was that, although they chose Webster for the flexibility in designing their course schedules, in actuality courses were offered at limited times, which meant that they could not construct the sequence of courses that they would have wanted to if all courses were available every term.

Another specific comment was that the compressed course format felt too rushed and there was not sufficient class discussion time to absorb and synthesize all of the reading material required by the class.

In general, characteristics of successful courses included:

- high quality dialogue between and among faculty and students,
- “hands on” experience with topics such as conducting focus groups, conducting business discussions with multiple cultures represented, and project management
- faculty with significant practical experience in the subject matter they were teaching, and
- a healthy balance between academic theory and practical experience.

Characteristics of ineffective courses included:

- coursework not challenging enough,
- too much emphasis on only U.S. business examples
- inconsistent standards in assigning student grades, and
- too much dependence on only one text rather than differing viewpoints on a subject.

In response to the question “did your Webster experience advance your career?” participants primarily felt that the coursework enriched their personal understanding of business issues but this did not always translate into material job advancement opportunities. In particular, discussion focused on the fact that an MBA degree is not well understood in Austrian businesses, and therefore the Webster MBA degree was not valued by potential or current employers. Specific comments included:

- “What is an MBA?” was the most common question asked during my job interviews

- When I applied to my PhD program (at the University of Vienna) I had to complete 10 additional courses in order to get accepted because the University did not perceive that my MBA was sufficient for admission
- Fortunately, I got a letter from Webster that explained how my Masters in Marketing degree from Webster was equivalent to an Austrian degree and I used that routinely in my job search process to explain my Webster degree
- The HR departments at Austrian businesses do not understand the value of the MBA degree so they tend to dismiss it or feel threatened by it since they don't understand it; Webster needs to educate HR directors on what an MBA degree is in this market
- In Austria it is easier to advance your career if you have specific Austrian knowledge such as Austrian law, so it would have been helpful to have had this included in my MBA degree program

Participants had these additional comments regarding career advancement:

- One participant expressed the position that because classes were conducted in English and about American business issues, he gained significant self confidence that translated directly into career advancement because he was able to participate with confidence in business discussions.
- Another commented that the American teaching style of respecting the contribution of the students during classroom discussions was also a significant factor in increasing self confidence in the business environment.
- One participant found her job while conducting the research to write her thesis so that the Webster degree directly translated into career advancement for her.

Focus group participants appreciated the small class sizes, which forced them to interact and contribute to group discussions, they liked the fact that there tended to be a greater reliance on U.S. business texts and literature, as this was perceived to be of a higher standard than Austrian business texts, and they liked the case study approach to learning, although they wished there had been more of them and more oriented to European business examples in addition to U.S. ones.

Several participants expressed the opinion that it is difficult to find high quality business faculty in Austria as compared to other European countries because teaching is not considered a prestigious profession, and therefore Webster must compete with the best Austrian universities for a limited supply of high quality Austrian professors. Another comment expressed in the focus group was that he had expected the faculty to have international reputations and they did not, which was a disappointment. Another expressed the concern that there was insufficient emphasis placed on research as a necessary investment in Webster's reputation as an international university.

Effective Courses and Faculty Examples – Vienna Campus:

O'Bannon (Schreiber from Vienna) – from St Louis – taught Business Strategy [only two faculty who have taught this course at Graduate level]

Finance – he made it fun

Wetzel – taught HR, used to teach Budgeting and Capital Finance

Cross Cultural Communications – she knew how to handle a cross cultural class; really drew on her experiences; gained as much from watching her manage class discussions as from the content itself

Project Management – this class taught me well enough that now I teach project management skills to others in my company

Kent Wilson – he taught the capstone class and he added a lot of value to the end of the program because of his own experience

Finance faculty in general were very good and recognized professionals in their fields

Business Law – this class was taught by an Austrian and he did it well so perhaps he could coach other Austrian teachers how to teach in the American style

Marketing – the class itself was boring but it was such a good class project that I learned a lot from the course; it was a very good practical project but the teaching was not very good

Peter Sunley – he was an Austrian teacher with an American education and was a very good example of someone who could speak to the European business environment

Statistics professor – he had an Engineering background and he managed to convey a very difficult subject very effectively in a short period of time

Disappointing Courses and Faculty Examples – Vienna Campus:

Economics – this class was not taught at a university standard level

Communications – the teacher was not a good teacher

Finance – there was an Austrian teacher who did not understand how to teach in the American style and he was not consistent in his grading approach compared to other teachers but he has since left Webster

Marketing – the class wasn't challenging and so I commented in the course evaluation and I could see that the next time it was offered it appeared to be structured so as to be more challenging in content

Statistics – took this course because it was mandatory and didn't learn anything; I tried to convince Webster I didn't need it because of my previous education but I was forced to take it anyway and it was a waste of time

Skills Transfer – Vienna Campus:

Focus group participants were asked to reflect on the skills they rely upon in their job or career, and whether Webster enhanced those skills. Examples of job-skill areas explored included: written and oral communication; analysis and synthesis, facilitation and consensus-building; judgment and decision-making; capability to be an independent, self-directed learner; and comfort using information technology and software.

Overall, participants felt they had improved their skills in these areas:

- Presentation skills – it would have been better if there had been a specific workshop on this but learned it by doing and use it all the time
- Business writing – it was very useful to learn how to write succinct business papers and memos
- Analytical approach to solving business problems
- International culture – this is unique at Webster; at Austrian universities you only interact with other Austrians, and in business it is important to be able to conduct international business deals
- Synthesis – continually applied this skill in classes

Participants were less confident that Webster has improved their skills in these areas:

- Negotiating skills – this is a critical skill in business and it was not taught in an effective manner, there was no opportunity to apply the knowledge and practice the skill
- Conflict resolution – would have liked to learn how to do this
- Storytelling as an effective business communication technique – would have liked to learn this

One participant suggested that an optional class to offer would be regarding assumptions of an American education, in order to prepare students for such things as group work, cross-cultural communications, writing short business papers, conducting classroom debates and discussions, and giving class presentations.

Other specific comments included:

Communication Skills:

Learning to communicate in English, both in written and oral form, regarding business issues was extremely valuable

Having 10-15 nationalities represented in a typical class was extremely valuable as it provided firsthand exposure to how different cultures think and respond in business settings

Presentation skills are used all the time in business and it was really helpful to have the practice doing this in class; it would have been even better if there had been a short course on the basics of how to use the software and how to condense ideas into short bullets

Judgment and Decision-Making Skills:

I learned how to apply an analytical approach to business matters in order to solve business problems – this is the essence of what I gained from my Webster degree and it has been extremely valuable to me

Managing people is an important part of every job and we did not get enough practical experience in issues such as conflict resolution and negotiation as I would have liked

Other Career-Critical Skills:

It would have been better if there had been more opportunity to connect with the local business community, either for class projects or to network with business executives

Support Services – Vienna Campus:

Focus group participants provided feedback on other aspects of their campus experience, regarding the physical campus environment and the resources available to the students.

Participants focused primarily on two issues, the lack of adequate library and computer lab facilities and the excellent customer service attitude of the admissions office.

When asked “what can Webster be doing for you now?” participants were enthusiastic about seeing Webster as an “education center” rather than a university, and would appreciate coming to networking events that included students, alumni, and area business leaders. They would also appreciate periodic seminars on topics such as Negotiation, Conflict Resolution, and Career Development. They appreciate getting emails from Webster on current business issues and topics, and would like to find a way to network more routinely with other Webster alumni beyond their own class.

In response to “what didn’t you get from Webster that you needed?” responses included:

- Project management skills
- Adequate communication skills
- Negotiation skills
- Career advising
- Risk analysis course

In response to “what did you get from Webster that you didn’t need?” responses included:

- Statistics course
- Organizational behavior course
- Cross cultural management course

In response to “would you again choose Webster?” responses included:

- If the Finance teacher were better I would
- Yes, for the international experience
- Yes, to take more Marketing courses

Other specific recommendations for Webster included:

- Test instructors before inserting them into the course schedule
- Market to Austrian HR directors the value of an MBA degree

- Provide more practical case studies, and more examples other than U.S. companies
- Offer alumni workshops and retreats to update our knowledge of current business issues
- Joint venture with Austrian companies to create business partnerships, involving them in coursework
- Organize course schedules for the convenience of the students rather than the convenience of the faculty

Other Specific Comments:

Webster had a very easy and efficient admissions process, which was a real “plus”, people were very customer responsive and helpful, and provided a personal touch

It was a great idea to allow people to take one class to see how it is; I took one and loved it and was amazed that the teacher remembered my name

Webster was very respectful of people’s time; the admissions process was efficient and so was the way that classes were conducted; they started and ended on time and were offered at convenient times for working people

Mitterecker in Admissions and Pamphlett in Advising were two superb examples of the excellent and customized service offered by Webster

The Degree Advising process was very accurate; I had a woman who was excellent

The Library was terrible; it was primarily open only during the day when I was working, it was student-run so there was no one there to consult on a professional basis, and they had very few books on any given subject; I had to do all my research online.

I appreciated the Lexus/Nexus online resource and really miss it now that my student ID no longer provides access to this