

Focus Group: Webster School of Business and Technology Alumni

St. Louis Campus

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Number of Participants: 20

DRAFT

Table of Contents

Introduction	page 2
General Observations	page 3
Academic Experience	page 4
Skills Transfer	page 6
Support Services	page 8

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 improve as a result of specific changes that might be made regarding curriculum or faculty management.

The first alumni focus group was held at the main Webster campus in St. Louis on March 4, 2004. All 20 participants had received masters degrees, with degree concentrations in Business, Management, Marketing, Computers, and Human Resources. They were evenly distributed over the past 5 years, other than the fact that there were no participants who had graduated as recently as 2003. The group was balanced in terms of gender, race, and age, and represented employment in the fields of education, government, aerospace, health care, banking, and consumer products. Participants had attended the Northwest Plaza, downtown, and main Webster campuses throughout St. Louis.

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. 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 is expected that the feedback gained from the focus groups will be used to guide future curriculum design decisions, specific suggestions regarding course content or instruction, and degree planning support provided to students.

(Note: it may be helpful to include here a list of all the individuals participating in the focus group.)

General Observations:

Participants were pleased to have been provided the opportunity to provide feedback on their Webster experience. One participant expressed the strong opinion that she wished to see Webster succeed and the quality of graduating students remain high, in order to protect the reputation of her Webster degree in the community. All of the participants felt that Webster had delivered value for their money, and offered a campus environment that embraced diversity and open dialogue among students and faculty.

Most of the participants had chosen Webster for career advancement reasons, and most felt that the resulting education had enabled career advancement. However, several individuals remained frustrated that the degree had not resulted in improved employment opportunities, and at least 3 participants were currently unemployed and had been for at least a year.

There was consistent concern expressed that the academic experience was too “hit or miss” in terms of the quality of the instruction, the level of challenge in the course content, and the level of effort required to complete the coursework. Some classes were extremely well taught, where students were expected to complete complex assignments that required a high degree of knowledge and expertise, and yet others were considered a waste of time. Participants perceived that there was no standardization among faculty or courses, and that the sequence of courses was at times inconsistent, e.g., presentation skills taught in the last year rather than in the first year of a degree program. There was also some concern expressed that student evaluations of instructors, when deployed, were not acted upon.

It appeared that the Computer Resource Management curriculum was identified as most in need of review, in terms of making it relevant to the industry, and in terms of offering appropriate challenge as a masters degree program. Some Business classes were also identified as being identical between the undergraduate and graduate degree programs, which was raised as a concern. Some Human Resources classes were also lagging in relevance to current industry issues and content.

Academic Experience:

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 highly successful as well as significantly disappointing courses.

In general, characteristics of successful courses included:

- high degree of student interaction,
- use of tools and resources in class projects (e.g., Excel, Power Point, WSJ, etc.),
- course content linked to current events, and
- faculty connected to “real life” (e.g., business issues faced by the faculty in their work).

Characteristics of ineffective courses included:

- faculty ill-prepared,
- course content not challenging enough,
- faculty not adept at effective communication (“read his notes to the class”)
- course content too dependent on experience level of students (when students were unprepared or ineffective, less learning took place)

Overall, participants were most disappointed with the Computer Resources degree program, where it was expressed that courses and faculty were most inconsistent. Some faculty dismissed their classes early; course content was generally perceived to be unchallenging particularly for a master level degree program; many courses were too theoretical and not up-to-date; and the quality of the faculty varied widely. Participants suggested that there should be some standards set for coursework as well as faculty instruction style, so that there is more consistency in terms of coursework required, the challenge level of the course content, and the appropriateness of the evaluation process (e.g., 150 question multiple choice tests did not seem appropriate at the master degree level).

One participant felt that the Human Resources classes were also “hit or miss” and relied too heavily on reading textbooks for transferring knowledge. In contrast, this individual felt that the Education curriculum was much more rigorous and relevant, where instructors were working in the field and there was a combination of on-line and classroom work.

For some people, the Business degree was too similar as an undergraduate and graduate degree; Marketing, Management, and Organization Behavior were identified as exactly the same classes for undergraduate and graduate.

Highly Effective Courses and Faculty:

(Note: Faculty names need to be edited for accuracy)

Done – Finance: He was on top of the market and assigned class projects that were relevant, e.g., an evaluation of Best Buy's recent company merger decision

Korfeld – Business Ethics: In the years since taking the class I have gained appreciation for the importance of this class in terms of its relevance, e.g., Enron, Tyco

Zia Mahmud – Strategic Planning: Addressed current issues, such as what will happen when jobs go overseas, identified emerging world markets

Guesuele – Operations Research: analyzed the downstream impact of when decisions are wrong; very helpful construct

Hinson – Managerial Economics: assigned a class project where the students had to use Excel to do statistical analysis, e.g., regression; very useful to learn how to do

Business Statistics (taught on a Sat because the teacher worked full-time): this class was taught by someone who does this in real life; he brought his work problems to class and involved students in solving them ("cans of peaches" example); this made the topic feel very real

Marchant – Business Communications: very practical, taught how to use Power Point to make presentations, the difference in communication styles between email, memos and letters; brought real life examples to class (NOTE: see comments later regarding Skills Transfer and need for this class to become a required course)

Corporate Finance: finance professors were strong; they made the students read the Wall Street Journal and then discussed the issues in class

Bob Stroud – Organizational Management: energetic, introduced topic of diversity in terms of different work styles; made the students take Meyers Briggs; made the topic relevant to the work environment

Finance Capstone class: no book for the class, each student had to teach a class which required a lot of research and preparation; the students reflected different countries which made the conversations very rich

Janet O'Halloran – International Business Law: practicing attorney in employment law, made the topic very relevant

Farouk – International Finance: involved the students in projects that required a lot of research, highlighted different countries, e.g., Kenya (NOTE: Another student identified this as one of the most disappointing classes they had taken, see comment below)

Gary Renz – Compensation Management: the instructor took other HR classes and showed how they were related to Comp, e.g., Labor Law; this made the topic more interesting and relevant

Al Marcella – Computer Resources: textbook knowledge was quickly outdated so it was really important to be able to keep up with current technology trends and accomplishments

Terry Trunks –Telecom 5000: made everyone in the class give a presentation and then critiqued it so that the students could learn what was an effective way to give a presentation; in contrast, the Business 5000 class teacher did not critique the presentations and they were less effective

Highly Disappointing Courses and Faculty:

(Note: Faculty names need to be edited for accuracy)

Mr. S. - He was unprepared and wasted people's time in class

Internet course: not enough hands-on, very disappointing, not enough challenge, got more out of a Forest Park College class, not master's level material

Technology in Business course: good concept but poorly executed, not challenging and not current enough

Mr. F – International Money and Marketing: professor did not appear to be knowledgeable on the topic, didn't learn anything

Mr. S: "he spent the entire time talking about his crazy brother"

Managerial Economics (faculty member worked for the government): teacher mumbled, the students had to seek out knowledge from each other

International Business (faculty member was from Peru): teacher read his notes to the class as his teaching style, and the tests were based on these notes; there was no guidance provided regarding outside research, and it would have been more effective if the notes were copied and distributed and then class time was spent discussing the content

Skills Transfer:

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 agreed that although one might think that students entering a masters degree program would enter with basic communication skills, in fact they often do not, and it would be worthwhile to have the academic advising process incorporate some type of skills assessment process, in order to guide students toward specific skills development courses or resources as might be appropriate. Furthermore, it would be helpful if skills transfer courses were coded as first year rather than advanced courses, to encourage the appropriate timing of such courses, and that information regarding these courses or resources be made more readily available to students throughout their course schedules.

Participants also pointed out that faculty tended to be focused more on transfer of content than on critique of written or oral assignments, and perhaps appropriately so, and so it was not clear who should enforce the improvement of such communication skills when the need is identified.

Specific concerns were raised as follows:

Communication Skills:

Group presentations were overused in classes; they were “shabby” and were not critiqued and so they detracted from the ability to learn the content when it was presented by fellow students only

Mr. M taught Business Communications; this was one of the last classes taken, because of the course numbering scheme; it should have been required in the first year

There should be more consistent requirements regarding how a student will be tested, e.g., written paper, oral presentation, etc. so that there is more standardization across classes

The Writing Lab is only available at the main campus, and at the other locations they are not aware of it, so it is an under-utilized resource

Part of the advising process should be to test for written and oral skills, and then students should be advised to take the Writing Lab or Business Communications as needed

Judgment and Decision-Making Skills:

Dr. K taught Critical Thinking; this was the only one who ever emphasized this; taught a methodology to figure out a problem; this should be required as a first year class

Other Career-Critical Skills:

Part of the education should be to address the cultural transition, for example for students moving here from a foreign country; it would have been helpful to have

someone help manage expectations about the value of a degree and how to go about looking for a job

Webster should hold a Job Fair to bring together employers and graduating students

Support Services:

Focus group participants provided feedback on other aspects of their campus experience, regarding the physical campus environment and the resources available to the students. In general, participants felt favorable about their experience. However, some participants expressed that by not coming to the main campus they were not made aware of the resources available to them that were not available at the other campus locations, e.g., Northwest Plaza.

Support Services:

The staff at the Northwest Plaza location were very helpful

Student Orientation was a good idea and should have been required even for graduate students rather than only undergraduate students

Library Tour should be required and arranged even if classes were not taken at the main campus

Computer Lab—would have been helpful to know about resources available to learn various software programs; usually information about this resource is only publicized among undergraduates

The Career Center at the main campus was good

Degree and Career Planning:

The course progression could have been more logical, e.g., skills transfer in the first year

Would have been helpful to have more degree planning advice

Saw academic advisor only at the beginning of the degree program; relied more upon advice from fellow students as to which courses to take

Places too much responsibility on the student to plan courses to be sure of graduation on time; disappointing when told at the “last minute” that more courses were required to graduate

Appreciated the flexibility to pick the classes that mattered in my career progression;
was glad there wasn't too much prescribed ahead of time

Classes with too few students should be cancelled (went to one with only 2 students)

Part of the professional degree should be to expose students to professional societies
relevant to the field (e.g., HR, Management, IT, etc.) and how to connect with them
locally

Other:

The classrooms at the high school were terrible

Some classes directed at a military audience, e.g., procurement, should be offered at
the main campus too

