Report on Moravian MBA Program Learning Objectives Related to Communication Behaviors of Students

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ACBSP Related Standards: #3 Student and Stakeholder Focus
                                          #4 Measurement and Analysis of Student Learning and Performance

Summary

A set of program learning objectives (PLOs) for the Moravian MBA program were examined using feedback from student observers enrolled in the spring 2012 offering of the capstone course, CCBU 571 Leading Change in Organizations. These are initial results for assessing outcomes for certain PLOs and there are limitations to using the results for decision making. The results, though, do provide a first step toward a more significant assessment of program objectives. The PLOs examined were those associated with problem solving and communication skills.

The results show that students achieved advanced rankings in problem solving skills. Another set of PLOs show rankings between Intermediate and Advanced for communication skills. The results suggest that students at the time of graduation from the MBA program achieved a high, but not highest level of communication skills. However, because there is no pre-test data, it is unknown whether the results of the survey come from students' studies in the program or other influences, such as the workplace. The assessment process needs refinement so that stronger conclusions can be drawn.

Significant Conclusions

- Students are developing their problem solving skills, reaching an advanced level of knowledge in most of those skills.
- More attention to developing students' diagnostic assessment skills appears necessary and would further enhance students' problem solving skills.
- Students' basic communication skills need further attention, including faculty working with students to improve active listening skills, framing messages, and engaging others in generating ideas.

Data Sources and Instrument Information

Students in the Moravian MBA program complete a capstone course, CCBU 571 Leading Change in Organizations. Students enrolled in the course are placed in self-directed work teams and assigned a client organization to work with throughout the semester. In the spring 2012 semester, two teams of five students each worked with two start-up businesses. One member of one team was a student in the MSHRM program; this course is required of those students in addition to the strategic HR course, that programs capstone course.

During the last week of the semester, the students were required to complete the Team Peer Assessment instrument. In that instrument, students were asked to assess the communication and problem solving behaviors of peers on the teams to which they were assigned, as well as themselves. The data was collected online using SurveyMonkey. Follow-up messages were sent to students to assure a 100% response rate which was attained. The instrument was based on the *IABC Communication Skills Assessment Tool* (Young, n.d.); items from that instrument were used to develop items for the assessment instrument.

Items from the instruments were matched to PLOs by comparing the item content with the PLO definition. In some cases there was only a one-to-one correspondence between PLOs and items. In other cases multiple survey items corresponded to the PLO definitions. In the latter cases, Chronbach's coefficient alpha statistics were calculated using IBM® SPSS® Statistics software to determine the internal consistency reliability of the scales (Litwin, 1995). No other reliability or validity checks were made on this set of data.

Items were scaled using a five point structure as follows:

1. Limited, Limited awareness, some idea about application
2. Basic, Participated on a limited basis in planning and implementation, familiarity with application, but limited conceptual knowledge
3. Intermediate, Demonstrated skill in many situations, performed effectively in most situations, provided some assistance to others, general knowledge of skill
4. Advanced, Performed effectively and consistently in all situations without assistance, provided guidance to others and some mentoring, well able to apply knowledge
5. Expert, Gave expert advice and leadership to others in project execution or performance, extensive and/or competitive experience, comprehensive knowledge, demonstrated skill in all areas
9. Behavior not observed being the anchors.

The definition of each anchor was stated at the beginning of the instrument and subsequently on each new page presented to the respondents.

Results

Definitions of MBA PLOs, the items in the survey instrument related to the PLOs, and appropriate descriptive statistics are shown in Appendix Table 1. The Chronbach's coefficient alpha statistic was calculated for the five scales created for the study and also shown in that table. The Chronbach's alpha statistics range from 0.626 to 0.86. The results suggest the scales have internal consistency; four of the five have a Chronbach's alpha of 0.85 or higher. The fifth, a two item scale for 'Generates multiple alternatives,' has a Chronbach's alpha of 0.63, somewhat reliable but in need of improvement.

All 10 students completed the survey creating 50 records. Only the responses that assessed peers' behaviors were used in this study; self-assessments were discarded from the dataset leaving 40 records to examine.

Figure 1 displays the range of responses to scales for the MBA PLOs. The figure provides the median response to each scale as bars. To assist with comparisons both the minimum and maximum values recorded are displayed for each scale and shown as lines.

Table 2 displays the median value for each PLO scale in the survey. Because some PLOs are measured on multi-item scales and others as single items, showing the percent of the scale represented by the median value for each scale provides a basis for comparing one PLO to another. A PLO showing a percent of scale value of 80% or higher is at the (4) Advanced level of skill; a value between 60% and 79% represents an Intermediate level of skill (3).

Six of the PLOs were ranked at an Advanced level of skill. The other five PLOs were ranked at the Intermediate level of skill.

Figure 1. Responses to MBA Program Learning Outcome Scales Showing Medians and the Minimum and Maximum Value for Each Scale
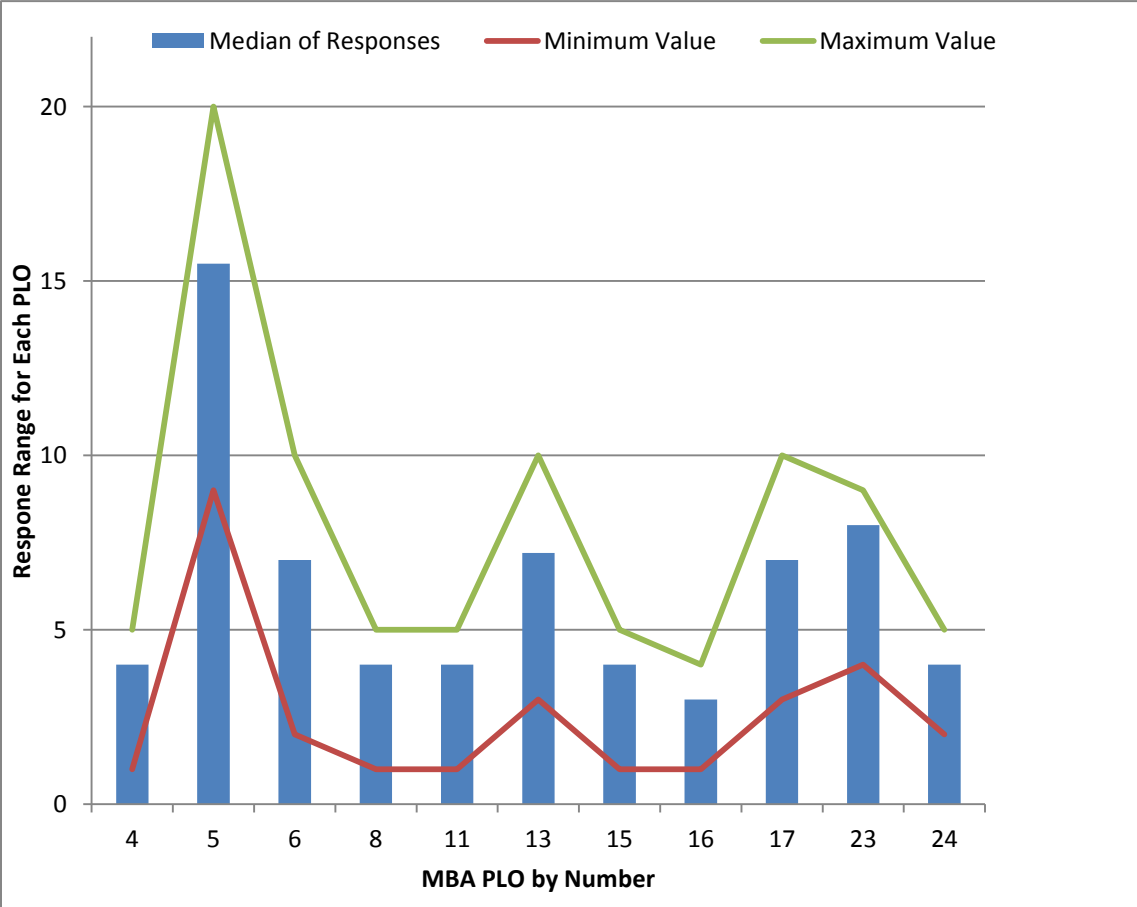
Table 2

The Percent of the Scale Score Represented by the Median for Each MBA PLO

Number	Title of Program Learning Objective	Median	Percent of Scale
23	Generates Multiple Alternatives	8.0	80%
4	Gathers Information	4.0	80%
8	Treats People Fairly	4.0	80%
11	Generates New Collaborative Possibilities	4.0	80%
15	Adjusts Message Content and Delivery	4.0	80%
24	Searches for Innovative Solutions	4.0	80%
5	Conducts Diagnostic Assessments	15.5	78%
13	Delivers Clear Messages	7.2	72%
6	Operates with Integrity	7.0	70%
17	Invites Dialogue	7.0	70%
16	Demonstrates Active Listening	3.0	60%

Takeaways for the MBA Program and Faculty

Taking into account the limitations of this study (see the next section), there is information here that can be useful for the MBA program and for faculty planning their courses.

A strength of this assessment is that the respondents, students in the class, observed and reported on the problem solving and communication skills of their peers in the teams to which they were assigned. The students worked closely over the full semester and had multiple opportunities to observe other students' behaviors. This enabled students to provide informed responses to the survey items.

Graduates of the MBA program who we expect to be successful business leaders should be advanced communicators. Three of the seven communication-related PLOs (numbers 8, 11, and 15) assessed in this study were rated at the advanced level of performance, but four are definitely short of meeting that level of performance (numbers 6, 13, 16, and 17). These results suggest that a change in approach to communication skills may be needed to meet MBA program outcomes. For instance,

- Delivering clear messages (PLO 13) is an important communication skill. Yet that PLO was only ranked at 72%, Intermediate. Faculty may need to focus more on helping students frame their messages as part of writing, presentation, and other assignments. Working to improve students' ability in framing their messages may have payoffs for other PLOs, as well.
- Students' basic communication skills still need work if they are to attain advanced standing. This includes working with students to improve active listening skills, framing messages, and engaging others to generate ideas.

PLOs related to problem solving, (4) Gathers information, (5) Conducts diagnostic assessments, (23) Generates multiple alternatives, and (24) Searches for innovative solutions, are ranked at an advanced level; (5) Conducts diagnostic assessments falls just short of that level. These results suggest students are developing their problem solving skills in the program and reaching an advanced level of knowledge.

Focusing more attention in classes on diagnostic assessments would further improve students' performance in problem solving.

Limitations and Future Directions

A number of limitations frame the ability to use the results of this study.

First, there was no pre-test dataset with which to compare these results. As a result, a conclusion that the students' development was a direct result of their MBA studies cannot be made. A pre-test at the time of a candidate's enrollment in the program to assess communication skills would be the ideal base from which to make judgments about the MBA program's record of improving students' communication behaviors. Efforts need to continue to make this possible.

This was the first use of the survey instrument. While scales did evidence internal consistency, more work is needed to improve the instrument. Single item scales need to be developed into multi-item scales. The scale for PLO 23, "Generates multiple alternatives," needs to be improved. Further reliability and validity testing is needed to improve the instrument, as well.

There were a small number of participants, only ten. Not all were graduating students – one was a MSHRM students, two others will finish in the upcoming summer sessions, and a third will finish in fall. The levels of completion, therefore, varied and there are insufficient data to test the impact of this variance on the results. As the instrument is administered to future capstone course students, the database will grow and will allow for more thorough analysis of program problem solving and communication-related outcomes.

Appendix Table 1: Crosswalk of Scales to Program Learning Objectives

	MBA Program Learning Outcome	Assessment Instrument Item(s)	Chronbach's Alpha	Descriptive Statistics					
				Min	Max	Mean	Median	Mode	n
4	Gathers information -- collects information to better understand the situation, issues, problems, and opportunities; studies organizational systems to better understand the factors affecting the business; integrates information from a variety of sources; asks internal and external partners for input and insight.	20. Identified a variety of sources of critical information	--	1	5	--	4.0	4	36
5	Conducts diagnostic assessments -- determines what data are needed to clarify issues, including stakeholder expectations; collects information to pinpoint initial steps; diagnoses problems as well as perceptions favoring change; assess current reality against business/organization strategy and desired outcomes to define change efforts needed; identifies formal and informal power networks; establishes design requirements for future states.	17. Defined problems clearly and logically 18. Identified solutions to problems 20. Identified a variety of sources of critical information 24. Identified key drives of success and causes of success or failure	0.853	9	20	14.9	15.5	12	36
6	Operates with integrity -- Demonstrates honesty and behaves according to ethical principles; ensures that words and actions are consistent; walks the talk; behaves dependably across situations.	4. Took responsibility and accountability for decisions, actions, and results 5. Dealt effectively with others while developing trust, confidence and building teamwork	0.876	2	10	7.1	7.0	10	40

	MBA Program Learning Outcome	Assessment Instrument Item(s)	Chronbach's Alpha	Descriptive Statistics					
				Min	Max	Mean	Median	Mode	n
8	Treats people fairly -- Treats all stakeholders with dignity, respect, and fairness; listens to others without prejudging; objectively considers others' ideas and opinions, even when they conflict with prescribed policies, procedures, or commonly held beliefs; champions the perspectives of different partners even in the fact of resistance; engages in effective conflict resolution.	15. Adapted to changing environments, people's perspectives and needs	--	1	5	--	4.0	4	37
11	Generates new collaborative possibilities -- Seeks and expands on original ideas, enhances others' ideas, and contributes own ideas about the issues at hand; gains clarity about own thinking; expands options for future collaboration.	12. Created, in one-on-one situations, collaborative environments and achieved lasting commitments	--	1	5	--	4.0	4	37
13	Delivers clear messages -- Uses appropriate vocabulary; understands the material and demonstrates command of the topic; logically and simply conveys ideas.	8. Presents ideas and facts clearly 11. Developed key messages and strategies	0.860	3	10	7.2	8.0	8	40
15	Adjusts message content and delivery -- Monitors audience reactions and adopts alternative strategies to improve overall impact; presents own message in different ways to enhance understanding; responds appropriately to questions and feedback.	14. Effectively managed dialogue between parties to ensure success	--	1	5	--	4.0	4	40
16	Demonstrates active listening -- Listens to others, interprets their message correctly; checks understanding; acknowledges different viewpoints.	6. Understood and interpreted individual concerns, motives and feelings, and recognized strengths and limitations in others	--	1	4	--	3.0	4	40

	MBA Program Learning Outcome	Assessment Instrument Item(s)	Chronbach's Alpha	Descriptive Statistics					
				Min	Max	Mean	Median	Mode	n
17	Invites dialogue -- Engages others in dialogue by using appropriate questioning techniques and involving others in conversations about things that matter; encourages people to express their hopes and fears; welcomes feedback.	26. Determined the needs of client(s) by asking the right questions, listening and confirming before acting 27. Sought input from client(s) to continuously improve performance	0.865	3	10	7.1	7.0	7	36
23	Generates multiple alternatives -- Thinks expansively and brainstorms multiple approaches; generates relevant options for addressing problems/opportunities and achieving desired outcomes; maintains a database or bank of possible solutions and their effectiveness.	22. Generated new and creative ideas to develop new and/or improved approaches 28. Identified potential problem areas and recommended alternative actions to meet goals	0.626	4	9	7.3	8.0	9	36
24	Searches for innovative solutions -- Challenges paradigms and looks for innovative alternatives; draws upon diverse sources for ideas and inspiration in creative problem-solving activities.	2. Envisions creative change	--	2	5	--	4.0	4	40

References

Litwin, M. S. (1995). In The Survey Kit: Vol 7. How to measure survey reliability and validity. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Young, R. (n.d.). IABC Communication Skills Assessment Tool. Viewed 4/26/2012. Retrieved from http://www.iabc.com/education/pdf/IABCSelf-AssessmentTool.pdf