

Partnership for Education: Students' Perceptions of A Graduate Cohort Program Conducted Within an Organisational Environment

Robert L. North*

Department of Adult and Career Education
Valdosta State University, USA
rlnorth@valdosta.edu

Reynaldo L. Martinez

Department of Adult and Career Education
Valdosta State University, USA
rlmartinez@valdosta.edu

Abstract

The term “cohort” in academic and non-academic settings refers to a group of students who begin a program of study at the same time and progress through a specified sequence of courses until completion. In recent years, academic institutions have begun to offer customised courses and degree programs in the cohort format at a client organisation’s facilities. Although these educational partnerships provide convenience and appear to offer advantages not available in traditional formats, there is little research-based guidance on how to improve the effectiveness of these programs from the learner’s perspective. This study describes and analyses the perceptions of U. S. adult students in an educational partnership between a State of Georgia university (GU) and a State of Georgia Health System (GHS) that awarded a Masters in Business Administration with a specialisation in Healthcare Management Degree program. This investigation led to a set of recommendations for improving the program design for future cohorts.

A descriptive, case study approach was used, including evaluations, surveys, focus groups, individual interviews, and standardised test scores. Routine, end-of-course

*Corresponding Author

evaluations and special cohort-only surveys were analysed to develop focus group interview questions and individual participant interviews. Major Field Test (MFT) scores were used to compare cohort students with other non-cohort GU majors and national score averages. The primary conclusions reached in this study were that the cohort students believed that the program design was good but that there were problems that needed to be addressed in future cohort programs. Major recommendations for improvement addressed the issues of curriculum focus, course scheduling, group dynamics, communications, organisational involvement, and recognition of graduates.

Keywords: cohort, education, healthcare, MBA, partnership

Introduction

This mixed-method, descriptive case study described and analysed the experiences and perceptions of a cohort of twelve 12 Master of Business Administration in Healthcare Management (MBA-HC) students in an educational partnership program between a U.S. State of Georgia University (GU) and a private U.S. State of Georgia Health System (GHS). All twelve of the students completed the program. The experiences and perceptions of the program instructors and GHS stakeholders were also collected and analysed and will be reported in another publication. Eleven of the twelve students in the cohort were employees of the health system and all courses were taught in a classroom provided by the health system for the convenience of the students. Additionally, at their request, the program curriculum was customised to match the GHS strategic initiatives.

One purpose of this study was to develop a set of recommendations based on the results of this study for improving the program design for future cohorts. The importance of this study is that it provided greater insight into educational partnerships within organisational environments and attempted to answer questions regarding the perceived effectiveness and outcomes of this non-traditional format. This article focuses specifically on the analysis, conclusions, and recommendations based on student data.

Historical Context

Cohort learning in the form of collaborative or community learning groups dates back to the earliest days of organised learning (Thompson & Ku, 2006). General research on the effectiveness of the cohort learning model was available but little research on the learner's perspective was found and very little research was found regarding cohort programs within organisational environments. In general, cohort research suggested that they were more effective than the traditional format of open enrolment where students attended courses with a different group of classmates each term (e.g., Lawrence, 2002; Maher, 2004; Norris & Barnett, 1994). Gilley et al. (2005) commented that partnership cohorts might offer supplementary benefits as participants took what they learned in the classroom and attempted to apply their learning within the organisation in which they worked. Miller and Irby (1999) found that students believed that the cohort model helped diminish the anxiety they felt about their program of study. According to Chairs et al. (2002), previous research found that students in cohorts reported benefits such as a feeling of belonging and bonding, new chances to work collaboratively and network, a newly found professional confidence, and an improved ability to analyse the application of what had been learned.

GU-GHS Program Design

The customised nature of this program departed significantly from the traditional design of this same degree program taught at the GU campus using the standard curriculum. In this case, the learning facilities were physically located in the students' workplace not on the GU campus (with the exception of one student), and other factors, such as curriculum and teaching methods, were also different from a "traditional" program in that the curriculum was tailored to complement the strategic initiatives of GHS. The program consisted of 12 courses taken in lockstep sequence, usually one at a time over a 2-year period. All but two of the courses were taught in an 8-week format with students meeting one night per week. One course was taught in an 8-week format with students meeting twice each week, and another course was taught in a 4-week format with students meeting twice each week. Six of the courses were healthcare specific, five were general business administration or management courses, and one was a

preparatory course taught early in the sequence. The final course, the “Capstone” course, emphasised the integration of prior coursework. The cohort followed the accelerated schedule used by the GU regional campus in which semesters were divided into two sessions, each of which lasted 8 weeks. The program began in March 2007 and was completed in March 2009.

Research Questions

This study, as it pertains to the students, was guided by the following research questions:

1. What were the perceptions of partnership cohort students regarding the program design?
2. What were the perceptions of the partnership cohort students regarding the outcome of their program?
3. How did Major Field Test (MFT) scores of partnership cohort students compare with the MFT scores of non-partnership cohorts and national MFT scores?
4. What recommendations for improvements of design and outcomes were needed based on the student responses?

Methodology

With the exception of one student, all of the participants in this cohort worked for GHS in various departments. There were seven women and five men in the cohort. All had completed at least a bachelor’s degree, and some had graduate degrees. The research began in March 2007 when courses began and ended in June 2010. This time frame included: courses taken; GU administered cohort surveys and end-of-course evaluations; MFT examination; participant interviews; and the events related to research, data analysis, and the research project’s completion. The Educational Testing Service’s Major Field Test (MFT) is used by U. S. higher education institutions to “measure students’ mastery of their chosen field of study, assess the effectiveness of major programs of study, and improve curricula and student learning outcomes”

(Educational Testing Service, 2010). For this study, the MFT in Business Administration was used.

The descriptive mixed-method case study approach was the method of research chosen because the unit of analysis in this study was a bounded, integrated system. The cohort (unit of analysis) met the definition of a bounded, integrated system as to time, space, and/or components (participants) as explained by Merriam and Associates (2002). Quantitative data in the form of student performance on the MFT were included because they were readily available and timely and provided a comparative metric with students in the traditional environment. Although this study did not fit the conservative or standard definition of mixed-methods research, it met the minimum criterion of including both types of data (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2007).

Student data was collected from the following sources 1) GU cohort surveys, 2) End-of-course surveys, 3) Focus group and individual interviews, and 4) MFT score report. The GU cohort surveys were conducted at the beginning, middle, and end of the program. The end-of-course evaluations were the standard surveys administered to all GU students upon completion of courses. Data from these instruments were used to develop questions for the focus group interviews. Following the completion of all courses, data was collected in focus group interviews to further explore analysis of the cohort surveys and end-of-course surveys. Seven students participated in two separate focus group interviews. Two students were unable to attend a focus group. One of these was interviewed individually and the other responded to the questions in writing. Two students declined to participate and one student had moved to another city and could not be contacted. MFT scores for the cohort students as well as archived MFT data for students in non-partnership GU MBA-HC programs were collected. National MFT testing results were collected from the Educational Testing Service.

Two separate student focus group interviews were conducted. The first focus group was conducted in the same GHS classroom in which most of the cohort classes had been held. The second focus group was held in another similar classroom nearby because the cohort classroom was not available. Both meetings were held from 5:30 p.m. to 7:00

p.m., and both were recorded and transcribed by the same person. Data from all of the interviews were combined for analysis.

Aware of the potential advantages and shortcomings of the focus group method, efforts were made to minimise the disadvantages and create a comfortable environment so that participants were willing to share their thoughts. As a result, there appeared to be a deep level of trust among the participants that enhanced the quality of the data through a healthy group interaction and the open exchange of ideas. There was a natural flow of conversation between the participants, and they discussed issues in-depth, expressed unexpected viewpoints, and built on each other's ideas. The focus group facilitator was able to direct the focus of discussion, and there was no domination of the group by one or a small number of participants. The issue of a possible "groupthink" phenomenon that could limit free expression (Janis, 1972) was not evident during the interview or afterwards upon review of the transcribed data.

As anticipated, students' responses frequently strayed from the specific question asked. However, for the purposes of analysis, it was assumed that the answers related to the question or to a question previously asked or to a question that was asked later in the interview. The criterion of the analysis for each response was either positive or critical. However, on occasion a specific response to a specific question was not relevant, speaking to other topics or issues beyond the question posed. The replies did contain useful information and were later used in developing the conclusions of the study.

Limitations of study

Limitations of the study included the size of the cohort (12 students) and the fact that the interviews were voluntary which could have resulted in a non-response effect. Additionally, most of the participants were employees of GHS, and it is possible that a corporate culture effect may have influenced the participants to respond in a manner that was compliant with GHS cultural norms. The findings may not be generalised to all educational partnership cohort programs.

Data Analysis

The analytical framework for the development of the focus group interviews was based on an analysis of the answers in the three cohort student surveys and the end-of-course evaluations that were pertinent to this study. Cohort surveys were analysed separately using inductive analysis to identify common patterns, categories, and themes upon which to construct a typology. This was accomplished by carefully reading, writing notes, writing comments in the margins and color-coding. The commonalities found in this process were identified and used to develop a typology. This analyst-constructed typology was then used as a basis for generating focus group questions to test the findings of the analysis. Patton stated, "One way of testing analyst-constructed typologies is to present them to people whose world is being analysed to find out if the constructions make sense to them" (Patton, 2002: 460).

The end-of-course evaluations were then analysed to identify themes common to those found in the cohort surveys. The findings were used to support or supplement the typology constructed from the cohort survey analysis. A manual coding scheme was used to analyse the core content of the responses to the cohort surveys and end-of-course evaluations through the same process used to develop the typology. Upon completion of the manual coding process, the notes and comments were used to develop an index of codes with descriptors that were then entered into a spreadsheet table. This table represented a description or summary of the survey data and served as a foundation for analysis of the convergence and divergence of themes, comparison, interpretation, and the generation of questions for the focus group interviews.

Data collected in the focus group interviews underwent a similar process using typed transcripts of the tape-recorded interviews and the single written response. A content analysis using the constant comparative method was performed utilising a quantitatively oriented technique of cross-tabulating categorised responses by theme and key topics with critical, neutral, and positive connotation (Merriam, 1998). The tables generated by this process were used to identify the most frequently occurring themes in the interviews. Merriam (1998) stated, "The number of people who mention something or the frequency with which something arises in the data indicates an important dimension"

(p. 185). However, this does not mean that data with less frequency should be ignored or excluded as it might reveal other areas where additional research was needed. Overall MFT scores and assessment indicators of the cohort were compared with the scores of other MBA in Health Care students at GU from 2005 to 2009. These courses were not taught at a health care organisation's premises but in a traditional classroom setting. Further, the programs were not customised for the health care organisations as the GHS program was. The cohort scores were also compared with scores from all domestic institutions from February 2005 to June 2009 as reported by the Educational Testing Service.

Findings

All twelve students took part in the focus group interviews. Overall, students had a positive perception about the program design but had concerns about unexpected deviations in the format and changes in the class schedule. They also expressed critical feelings about the applicability of some of the courses to their current and future jobs. Typical critical responses included *"There needs to be some type of communication between the hospital HR, our hospital finance, and the course instructor so that they can focus the actual class around what goes on in healthcare."* and *"I was constantly Emailing [another student] I don't understand this . . . this isn't relevant . . . because it was manufacturing."* Another specific concern expressed by students involved the subject of group dynamics. Some of the students in the cohort were seen as *"not pulling their weight"* in assignments and projects (also known as "free riders"). When talking with other people about the program, students would probably make positive comments about the program design but would caution others regarding the actual implementation. Typical critical comments included *"the biggest thing was the two math classes in the same thing (term)"*, *"I would like to have had it (schedule) laid out"* and *"having to squish in that one (course) over the Christmas period was a real big stress to me"*.

Students' perceptions of the short-term and/or long-term personal outcomes of the program were highly positive. Students cited possible promotions, applicability to their jobs, and improved personal marketability as examples of positive personal outcomes. Typical positive comments included *"I got promoted to manager"*, *"it makes you more*

marketable" and "I expected it to help me with the job I'm doing right now and it did". Students also expressed positive feelings about the outcomes for GHS but noted concerns that GHS might not take the actions necessary to realise these outcomes. Because individual data on MFT scores were not available for any of the identified groups, including the GHS cohort students, limited statistical tests could be performed. Inspection of the mean scores of GU non-partnership students, GHS cohort students and ETS means data showed no extreme differences in the scores of these groups. Because the sample size of the GHS cohort was known, a single means test was performed. A two-tailed Student's t-distribution test was calculated to test the null hypothesis that the means of the national ETS MFT mean total scores and the GHS cohort MFT mean total scores were not different from each other.

Table 1. Major Field Test (MFT) Mean Performance Scores of Students in Different MBA Program Approaches

	2005/2006	2006/2007	2007/2008	2008/2009	2008/2009	2005/2009
Assessment Indicator	GU			GU	GHS	ETS National
	Traditional	Traditional	Traditional	Online	HC Cohort	Mean
Marketing	57	51	56	53	52	55
Management	61	57	66	51	61	57
Finance	38	35	46	29	44	45
Managerial Accounting	53	51	58	38	51	51
Strategic Integration	54	48	59	50	53	52
Overall Mean Score	250	245	254	240	249	250
SD	12	17	12	13	13	16

Results of the distribution test using the data presented in Table 1, were as follows: $t = -0.255$. To reject the null hypothesis, the obtained Student-t score had to equal or to exceed $+2.201$ or had to equal or to be smaller than -2.201 . The $t = 00.255$ result indicated there was no significant statistical difference between the ETS MFT mean total scores ($M = 250$, $SD = 16$) and the GHS cohort MFT mean total scores ($M = 249$, $SD = 13$), $t(11) = -0.255$, $p = .05$ (Hays, 1963).

The findings from the adult cohort students' comments revealed that the program could be improved in the following areas: 1) increasing the number of student activities outside of the classroom, 2) creating a greater emphasis on healthcare in courses, 3) establishing specific criteria for feedback from instructors, 4) standardising the grading policy, 5) developing a more consistent instructional strategy, 6) increasing the qualifications of instructors, 7) increasing the level of GHS administrative support, 8) instituting incentives for students such as promotions and increased pay, 9) improving the scheduling process by establishing a course schedule at the beginning of the program and sticking to it, not scheduling courses during the Christmas holiday break, not scheduling more than 1 course at a time, and by having no courses shorter than 8 weeks, and 10) recognising student achievement.

Discussion

In retrospect, and in an ideal world, there are changes that could have been made to this study to improve it with regards to the surveying and interviewing process. First, the questions asked in the GU cohort surveys could be changed to more directly address the questions that guided this research. Second, cohort students could have been interviewed in a single focus group instead of two separate groups in order to take advantage of the benefits of the interaction of a larger group of students. Third, all of the cohort students could have participated in the focus group interviews.

Although due to the small sample size this case study may not be generalisable to all partnership cohort programs, the findings fulfil the stated purpose of the research, which is to develop a set of recommendations for improving the program design for future GU educational partnership cohorts. Further, in reviewing the findings and

recommendations, it is clear that many of them, such as the desire for a firmly established program schedule, the need of an employer to recognise a student's achievement by having a policy that provides at least a pay increase or bonus those earning a degree, and the need for adequate communication between program partners, could be applied in the design of any similar program. For this reason, the recommendations from this case study can be important for other similar cohort programs.

It has been asserted that some practitioners may not read professional journals simply because they do not have the time and that the research reports using multiple cases do not actually provide answers to help improve practice (Jones, n.d.). It has also been argued that the results of single-case studies can be more readily used in actual practice (Jones, n.d.). The findings of this study are definitely useful in improving practice and could be implemented in future cohorts of this kind. It has also been claimed that the results of multiple group comparison studies mask individual differences for the sake of external validity and generalisability (Jones, n.d.). In place of external validity and in the interest of practical applicability, this study sought to discover if substantive significance existed in the findings, thereby establishing consensual, internal validation of the data (Patton, 2002).

Aberrations found in the research included the complaint by students of the existence of "free riders" in the cohort. This issue was not anticipated by program administrators due to the professional nature of the cohort and the fact that all of the students, with one exception, worked within the same organisation. This issue was also unexpected because of the rigorous program entrance screening process and the graduate level of the program. Another unexpected situation was discussion of a confrontation between two students in one of the focus group interviews. A program administrator later stated that the confrontation almost became physical. This behaviour was unexpected for the same reasons as previously stated.

Recommendations for Practice

As a result of student feedback during the course of this program, instructors were advised to increase the amount of individual work and decrease the amount of group work. This was an attempt to reduce the problem of “free riders.” This was the only alteration in the program design implemented during the life of this cohort.

In recommending practice for future cohorts based on the results of this study, it was necessary to consider the specific recommendations of the participants as well as the results of the case study report. The researchers also had to judge the reasonableness and practicality of the recommendations based on their knowledge of the administrative and academic issues involved.

Recommendations for practice in future cohort programs addressed issues with the curriculum, program design, scheduling, instruction, and participant recognition. Suggestions regarding the curriculum included finding the appropriate balance between a general business management and industry specific program curricula and adopting textbooks with complementing content. In addition, there should be additional foundation or preparatory courses to ensure that non-business students have adequate preparation for the masters’ level courses in which they will be enrolled.

Recommendations regarding program design included the establishment of an internship program, inclusion of GHS leaders and external experts as guest speakers, student participation in organisational planning projects, and regularly scheduled meetings between constituents to improve communication.

In regard to scheduling, it was recommended that the course schedule be established at the beginning of the program and changes/additions avoided if at all possible.

Additionally, it was suggested that the schedule should not include more than one course at a time and that no course should be shorter than 8 weeks. It was proposed that instructors be more carefully selected to assure that they are qualified to teach at the graduate level and that they be provided with guidelines for giving timely feedback to students. Lastly, it was suggested that the organisation do more to recognise its graduates, including consideration for promotions and pay increases.

Recommendations for Further Research

The findings and conclusions of this study suggest that further research is needed to improve the design of future educational partnership cohorts. Since this is the first known study of this type, industry based graduate cohort program, it might be best used as a basis for additional research and a guide for improving upon the methods used herein. Specific suggestions for future research include the following:

- Conduct longitudinal research investigating the long-term outcomes for students and stakeholders.
- Conduct qualitative and quantitative studies of partnership programs in other industries to compare with the results of this research for continuous program improvement.
- Examine the degree of commitment that participating institutions have to conduct research to determine the effectiveness of these programs.

The end product of this research is a set of recommendations for improving the design for future educational partnership programs. The findings and recommendations developed in this study will make important contributions to the improvement of the design and implementation of similar programs regardless of the industry or organisation in which they are to be implemented.

Conclusions

Based on the results of this study one can conclude that in general the cohort students perceived the program design to be effective. Another conclusion was that students perceived potential problems regarding the timing, relevancy of course content, and group dynamics imposed by the program design. It can also be concluded that students held positive perceptions of the anticipated short-term and long-term outcomes for themselves and the GHS. Based on the results of the two-tailed Student's t-distribution test, it is concluded that the GHS cohort program was academically comparable to other MBA programs in the United States. A final conclusion was that although the students

perceived the program design to be effective in general, there were specific changes needed for improvement regarding program structure, content, personnel and learning activities.

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