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Business-school research
Ideas that work

Should MBA students care about their professors' research?

Jun 7th 2010



MOST MBA students will never read an issue of *Administrative Science Quarterly*, a well-regarded business-research journal published by the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell University. A recent issue included "Forging an Identity: An Insider-Outsider Study of Processes Involved in the Formation of Organisational Identity" and "Socioemotional Wealth and Corporate Responses to Institutional Pressures: Do Family Firms Pollute Less?". If vapid bestsellers like "Who Moved My Cheese?" are at one end of the spectrum of management writing, then the typical *ASQ* article is resolutely at the other. The task of a business-school professor is to meet students somewhere in the middle. Over the last decade, there has been a chorus of critics proclaiming that they have not done a good enough job.

[Web of Knowledge](#), an academic database maintained by Thomson Reuters, ranks 89 management journals and 77 business journals by "impact factor", based on the number times the research they publish is cited by subsequent articles. At present the management journal with the greatest impact factor over five years is *MIS Quarterly*. *Academy of Management Review* is the leading business journal. *Harvard Business Review*, the journal managers outside academia are most likely to have heard of (and perhaps even read), ranks 29th among the management journals and 24th on the list of business journals.

This year's [Sumantra Ghoshal Conference](#), held at London Business School, debated whether strategy research has become irrelevant to the practice of management. The late Mr Ghoshal published a [paper in 2005](#) castigating business schools for heaping "bad theory" on their students. That same year Warren Bennis and James O'Toole, both at the University of Southern California, [published an article](#) in the *Harvard Business Review* criticising MBA programmes for paying too much attention to "scientific" research and not enough to what current and future managers actually needed. Business schools, they argued, would be better off acting more like their professional counterparts, such as medical or law schools, nurturing skilled practitioners as well as frequent publishers.

Business schools have been castigated for heaping "bad theory" on students

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However, business-school professors have an incentive not to change. Since universities take journal rankings into account when awarding tenure, academics are rewarded more when they publish in *MIS Quarterly* rather than *Harvard Business Review*. (Popular media rankings of MBA programmes, although not [The Economists](#), also take research output into account.)

In 2008 the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), the most important accreditor of business schools, took up the debate, publishing a report on making business research more useful. It suggested that tenure committees become more flexible. A scholar dedicated to popularising management ideas, for example, should be evaluated on book sales and attention from the news media, not on articles in obscure journals. This would allow faculty to reach out to wider audiences, rather than be, as Messrs Bennis and O'Toole put it, "damned as popularisers".

But that might also risk granting tenure on the basis of trendy but ultimately unhelpful ideas. In any case, some argue that the relevance of business research is understated. Jan Williams, dean of the College of Business Administration at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville and vice chair of AACSB, argues that doing research allows faculty members to stay at the forefront of their subject, and that in turn improves their teaching. "We can't teach [students] outdated material," he says. "They'd see through that in a minute."

What is more, a forthcoming paper in [Academy of Management Learning & Education](#) suggests that faculty members' research productivity and their students' earnings after graduation may be positively linked. Certainly, the best-known schools often have strong research reputations to match their brand recognition in the wider world. The management school at the University of Texas at Dallas has created a [ranking of its competitors](#), based on contributions to 24 oft-cited business journals (*HBR* not among them). It places the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School at the top, followed by Duke University's Fuqua School of Business, New York University's Stern School of Business, the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business and Harvard Business School.

So, should a prospective student worry about a faculty's research prowess when applying to a school? If business schools with better researchers produce better-paid graduates, then perhaps they should. But only up to a point: what MBA students most need is skilful teaching and help in developing their critical-assessment skills first; access to cutting-edge research comes afterwards. As Messrs Bennis and O'Toole put it: "Business professors too often forget that executive decision-makers are not fact-collectors; they are fact users and integrators."

Read on: [Berkeley's Haas School of Business is the latest big school to shake up its MBA teaching.](#)

Don't damn the popularisers...but beware trendy but unhelpful ideas

Executives are not fact collectors; they are fact users

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