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Business school learning goals: Alignment with evidence-based models and accreditation standards

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Abstract

Programmatic learning goals serve as the foundation for an educational institution's curriculum design and assurance of learning processes. The purpose of our study is to determine the relevance or alignment of undergraduate business school learning goals. We identify the learning goals of US undergraduate business programs accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business-International (AACSB) and determine the extent to which the goals are aligned with (a) evidence-based competencies that are needed for managerial success (including the 'Great Eight' and the 'hyperdimensional taxonomy') and (b) content areas identified in AACSB's *Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation*. We found that learning goals conform to AACSB Standards and evidence-based managerial competencies, but goals are most closely aligned with AACSB Standards, followed by the Great Eight, and the hyperdimensional taxonomy, respectively. We discuss the implications of our findings with respect to business schools' assurance of learning processes and provide recommendations for AACSB, business schools, the broader academy, and future research.

Keywords: business education, learning goals, assurance of learning

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The relevance of business schools has been questioned for decades (e.g., Hall, 1968; Cheit, 1985; Porter & McKibbin, 1988; Pfeffer & Fong, 2002; Bennis & O'Toole, 2005; Brown, Charlier, Rynes, & Hosmanek, 2013; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013). More recently, scholars have opined that it is time to move beyond mere critiques and toward offering empirical evidence (Costigan & Brink, 2015b), prescriptions, and solutions (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2013) in an effort to modernize curricula and programs with knowledge, skills, and abilities required by society. With respect to MBA curriculum, the extant empirical evidence has identified the existence of a gap between important managerial competencies and curricula requirements (Segev, Raveh, & Farjoun, 1999; Navarro, 2008; Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009, 2011; Datar, Garvin, & Cullen, 2010; Rynes & Bartunek, 2013), calling into question the legitimacy and impact of graduate business programs. In addition to curriculum, the

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MBA relevance research has been extended to learning goals that are used for assurance of learning purposes (Costigan & Brink, 2015a).

Although the MBA degree has been the focus of much empirical research, comparable research in the context of undergraduate business education has been largely ignored. This is unfortunate given that there are many more undergraduate business programs and business students, compared with the graduate level. Indeed, there were 367,000 undergraduate business degrees conferred in the 2011–2012 academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Yet, we are not aware of any earlier research systematically scrutinizing the relevance of undergraduate curricula or learning goals. Brink, Palmer, and Costigan (2014) found that undergraduate learning goals were rather homogeneous across business schools, suggesting conformity across programs. However, they did not determine whether goals were relevant or evidence-based, and they indicated that additional research is needed to determine what programs (and their learning goals) may be conforming to. This is an important question because learning goals are supposed to form the foundation for curriculum and the competencies being instilled in students (Thompson, 2004; Rubin & Martell, 2009). However, a host of organizational and institutional pressures may create gaps between learning goals schools espouse as reflected in their assurance of learning frameworks and the competences they enact which are ingrained in their curricula. In following, the purpose of our study is to extend the aforementioned research and determine the relevance or alignment of undergraduate business school learning goals. We identify the learning goals of US undergraduate business programs accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business-International (AACSB) and determine the extent to which the goals are aligned with (a) evidence-based competencies that are needed for managerial success and (b) content areas identified in AACSB's *Eligibility Procedures and Accreditation Standards for Business Accreditation* (hereafter 'Standards'). Ultimately, business school education will be judged by our effectiveness in preparing graduates with knowledge, skills and abilities required by employers and society while at the same time conforming to the expectations of key stakeholders. This requires a better understanding of processes associated with learning goal adoption.

CONFORMITY IN LEARNING GOALS

Business schools face a challenging competitive environment. Enrollments are at risk because of a smaller population of millennial students than previous generations. In addition, a wide array of competitors, both public and private, as well as online offerings from global rivals increasingly threaten markets that have previously been secure. In response to such challenges, schools must build programs to boost their credibility. One vehicle to achieve credibility is to design programs based on relevant learning goals.

How does a business school choose goals for its assurance of learning process? Does it engage in a lengthy discovery process to identify the 'right' goals given the school's unique mission? Although such a perspective may be highly effective, it may not be efficient. Also, it assumes administrators and faculty have extensive expertise in developing learning goals. Another perspective is that schools look to other sources of information for strategic guidance (Orwig & Finney, 2007). This approach could easily describe academic routines that have become habituated and institutionalized. Indeed, schools regularly scan their competitive environment for strategic guidance, seeking readily available insights from other respected institutions. This practice is consistent with institutional theory suggesting that key organizational decisions are frequently made out of habit, convention, convenience or social obligation (Oliver, 1991). Originally intended to explain homogeneity among firms, institutional theorists argue that organizations adhere to the dominant practices in their environment. Historically, this perspective has emphasized the control exerted by institutional environments and direct or symbolic compliance and conformity to environmental demands (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

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More recently, neoinstitutionalists (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991; Scott, 2008) have argued that how much to conform and how much to resist institutional pressures is a strategic choice (Covaleski & Dirsmith, 1988; Oliver, 1991; Goodstein, 1994). Managers do not blindly conform to institutional pressures but rather actively assess the extent to which conformity allows them to enhance their organization's competitive position (Powell, 1991; Scott, 2008). Neoinstitutionalism, therefore, directs scholars' attention away from blind conformity and toward strategic actions that are influenced by institutionalized environments (Hirsch & Lounsbury, 1997). Indeed, such strategic isomorphism (e.g., through benchmarking well respected rivals) has the power to enhance the firm's legitimacy through the eyes of critical stakeholders including regulatory bodies and the public (Deephouse, 1996).

Faculty and administrators have choices to make when selecting appropriate learning goals. They could canvass stakeholders and conduct primary research to discover unique goals providing the best fit for their context. Such a process would indeed be strategic, however it would consume limited resources (e.g., time, expertise) that are not readily available. Alternatively, they could look to other institutional sources for information about learning goals. Institutions include a wide array of sources including regulatory structures and professions (Scott, 1987).

The predominant regulatory structure for a business school would be its accrediting body, such as the AACSB. Faculty could seek information directly from its accreditor about learning goals, but also look to learning goals of peer schools accredited by the same organization. Doing so is a way of positioning a comprehensive curriculum to a host of key stakeholders including the university's top administrators, potential students, and sources of funding such as endowment funds and state support (Lejeune & Vas, 2009). Alternatively, schools could seek to build credibility and legitimize their learning goal decisions by conforming to the guidance of evidence-based empirical research. That is, faculty could look to research about managerial competencies required by jobs their graduates are being prepared for. This source of learning goals is promising because the purpose of a business school is to produce professional managers. In the sections that follow, we discuss these two sources of learning goals, managerial competencies and accrediting bodies, as schools build their assurance of learning programs.

Managerial competencies

One plausible motive for the selection of learning goals across undergraduate business programs is that business schools are adopting learning goals reflecting the most important competencies needed by their graduates. Scholars have recently called for more focus on evidence-based management (e.g., Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006; Rousseau, 2006) and have also highlighted the role that educators should play in developing evidence-based education and promoting evidence-based management (e.g., Rousseau & McCarthy, 2007; Briner, Denyer, & Rousseau, 2009). If educators are going to preach the evidence-based approach to management, it behooves them to also practice an evidence-based approach to education.

The systems approach to training and development (e.g., Wexley & Latham, 1991; Goldstein, 1993; Noe, 2008; Werner & DeSimone, 2012) provides a model for an evidence-based approach to education. Costigan and Brink (2015a) explicated the parallels between training theory and the assurance of learning process in higher education and explained how learning goals are a direct link between stakeholder needs and curricula. The first step in the systems approach to training is needs assessment. Needs assessment serves as the foundation for the training objects (or learning goals), curriculum content and methods, and subsequent implementation and evaluation.

According to Rubin and Dierdorff, 'any determination of MBA relevancy as a training ground for managerial work requires establishing a priori a thorough understanding of the nature of contemporary managerial work and its associated requirements' (2009: 209–210). Therefore, to be relevant, and to have impact on prospective employer and student stakeholders, business education must reflect the competencies that are important to business and instill them in students. These competencies should

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be identified through some form of needs assessment. Further, the competencies resulting from the needs assessment should directly influence learning goals (Costigan & Brink, 2015a) and curriculum (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009).

Fortunately for educators, managerial competencies have been studied for decades. Many criterion-domain taxonomies, typologies, and competency models specific to managerial job performance have been developed through research (e.g., Flanagan, 1951; Stogdill, Wherry, & Jaynes, 1953; Williams, 1956; Hemphill, 1959; Prien, 1963; Katzell, Barrett, Vann, & Hogan, 1968; Tornow & Pinto, 1976; Dowell & Wexley, 1978; Mitchell, 1978; Morse & Wagner, 1978; Luthans & Lockwood, 1984; Yukl, 1987, 1989; Yukl & Lepsinger, 1992; Borman & Brush, 1993; Borman & Motowidlo, 1993; Campbell, McCloy, Oppler, & Sager, 1993; Campbell, 1994; Tett, Guterman, Bleier, & Murphy, 2000; Kurz & Bartram, 2002; Bartram, 2005; Dierdorff, Rubin, & Morgeson, 2009) for the purpose of identifying important managerial competencies (also referred to as knowledge, skills, abilities, other characteristics, duties, responsibilities, behaviors, etc.). These evidence-based taxonomies may serve as general needs assessments for managerial education, and the competencies could be incorporated into the business program's learning goals (Costigan & Brink, 2015a) and curriculum (Rubin & Dierdorff, 2009). This fundamental proposition is supported by training and development theory (e.g., Wexley & Latham, 1991; Goldstein, 1993; Noe, 2008; Werner & DeSimone, 2012) and required by AACSB Standards (see Costigan & Brink, 2015a). If learning goals are evidence-based, as recommended by training and development theory, assurance of learning best practices, and AACSB Standards, then we would expect alignment between the learning goals and the competencies included in empirically derived managerial competency models.

Hypothesis 1: Learning goals of undergraduate business programs are aligned with competencies included in empirically based managerial competency models.

AACSB Standards

Accreditation standards are another force for conformity (McKenna, Yeider, Cotton, & Van Auken, 1991). AACSB is perceived as the most prestigious of business school accreditors (Roller, Andrews, & Bovee, 2003), so attaining and maintaining AACSB accreditation may be an important avenue to legitimacy. As such, another plausible explanation for the conformity of learning goals across undergraduate business programs is that business schools are adopting learning goals that are explicitly or implicitly recommended by AACSB Standards.

Prior to 1991, AACSB Standards outlined specific curriculum requirements and specified a common body of knowledge to be included in the curriculum. However, business schools were criticized for being too similar and standardized (Porter & McKibbin, 1988; Cook, 1993). The AACSB revised its standards in 1991, adopting mission-based or mission-linked standards. The revised standards allowed for less sameness among business schools (McKenna, Cotton, & Van Auken, 1997). In 2003 AACSB revised its standards again, shifting to direct assessment measures (Pringle & Michel, 2007) and focusing more on assurance of learning. Milton Blood, the managing director of the AACSB at that time, said in an interview that the changes in the new standards reflect 'greater heterogeneity in higher education' (Thompson, 2004: 430). The current AACSB Standards, which were revised and adopted in 2013, emphasize engagement, innovation, and impact (Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), 2016; Holmes, Wilkins, & Zhang, 2017).

Since 2003, AACSB Standards no longer prescribe curricula or learning goal content (Ryan, 1999; AACSB Globalization of Management Education Task Force, 2011). In fact, Scherer, Javalgi, Bryant, and Tukel suggest that a primary reason business schools seek AACSB accreditation is 'flexibility in developing the curricula to better meet the needs of the target markets served'

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(2005: 654–655). On the other hand, Lowrie and Willmott (2009) criticized AACSB for allowing schools to determine the content of their curriculum and for having no required body of knowledge. Nevertheless, even though the most recent two versions of the AACSB Standards do not prescribe curricular or learning goal content, AACSB has historically provided examples both in published documents and online and has encouraged schools to give careful attention to these examples. Therefore, it is possible that the conformity of learning goals across programs is due to programs adopting topic areas implicitly encouraged in the AACSB Standards. We, therefore, hypothesize the following:

Hypothesis 2: Learning goals of undergraduate business programs are aligned with content areas identified in the AACSB Standards.

Alignment to evidence-based models versus accreditation standards

Consistent with a neoinstitutional perspective, decisions about learning goal conformity, including how much to conform, is a strategic decision. Conformity of learning goals may result in enhanced legitimacy whether the learning goals are aligned with evidence-based models or accreditation standards. In addition, evidence-based models and accreditation standards are not necessarily mutually exclusive – learning goals may be aligned with both sources. Indeed, to the extent that the contents of these two sources overlap, we would expect goals to be aligned with both sources. However, AACSB Standards do not disclose the basis for the identified content areas, so the extent to which the content areas are evidence-based is unknown.

If the sources do not overlap, it is important to identify whether goals are more aligned with one source versus another. For example, if goals are more closely aligned with evidence-based models, conformity would signify properly unified, evidence-based aspirations among business programs. On the other hand, if goals are more closely aligned with AACSB Standards, conformity may signify more cursory compliance to the Standards. Compliance may very well be done with good intentions (e.g., assuming that the examples provided in AACSB Standards are the 'right' goals) or to preserve resources. Nevertheless, this approach is less evidence-based than (and, perhaps, counter to) the methods recommended by training and development theory and required by the AACSB Standards.

Research Question 1: Are learning goals more closely aligned with competencies included in evidence-based models or the content areas of the AACSB Standards?

METHOD

Sample

All AACSB-accredited programs are required to have learning goals for assurance of learning purposes. We used AACSB's accreditation list to identify accredited US undergraduate business programs. We then visited each school's website and searched for their learning goals; we found publically available learning goals for 116 programs. If the learning goals were not published on the website, we contacted the business program to request their learning goals; this yielded goals from another 91 business schools. Therefore, we obtained learning goals for a total of 207 AACSB-accredited US undergraduate business programs.

Coding business program learning goals

We used an inductive approach to code learning goals (see Miles & Huberman, 1994). The learning goals were independently coded by two reviewers (one was the study's third author and the other was a

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Table 1. Linkage of learning goals to managerial competency models and Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) standards

Learning goal category	*Total frequency*	*Hyperdimensional taxonomy*	*Great Eight*	*AACSB Standards*
Communication	184	X	X	X
Functional knowledge	145	X	X	X
Decision making	106	X	X	X
Team skills	101	X	X	X
Workplace diversity	95	X	X	X
Leadership skills	72	X	X	X
Interpersonal skills	44	X	X	X
Creative thinking	37	X	X	X
Strategic thinking	31	X	X	X
Uncertainty/ambiguity	5	X	X	X
Business ethics	171	–	X	X
Technology skills	134	–	X	X
Analytical skills	121	–	X	X
Integrative thinking	54	–	X	X
Problem solving	144	X	–	X
Global/International business	149	–	–	X
Critical thinking	111	–	–	X
Reflective thinking	13	–	–	X
Sustainability/Environment	10	–	X	–
Entrepreneurship	10	–	X	–
Debate/dialoge	5	–	X	–
Life-long learning	23	–	–	–
Logical reasoning	18	–	–	–
Experiential learning	10	–	–	–
Liberal arts	7	–	–	–

Note. The sample included goals from 207 undergraduate business programs. Total frequency refers to how frequently the goal category appeared in the entire sample of business schools' learning goals. X, learning goal category is present within the designated source; –, learning goal category is not present within the designated source.

trained research assistant). First, we compiled all of the learning goals for all programs in our sample. We then began the coding process. There was no precoding of the learning goals. Rather, we used an iterative process to inductively identify learning goal topics or themes. We reviewed the learning goals of a representative subset of our sample to identify and develop an initial list of learning goal categories (i.e., topic areas or themes). Next, we coded the goals for every program in our sample using the learning goal categories identified from our initial list. If a new topic area was discovered, it was added to our learning goal categories. The coding process resulted in 25 learning goal categories (see Table 1).

The coders reviewed each business program's set of learning goals and, for each of the 25 learning goal categories, assigned a value of '1' if a learning goal category was present in the program's learning goals and a '0' if the category was not present. A third trained rater was used to resolve any discrepancy between the two coders. The total number of goals appearing in each learning goal category is shown in Table 1. We used percent agreement and Cohen's κ to determine intercoder agreement between the first two raters across all learning goal categories. Percent agreement was 0.88 and Cohen's κ was 0.73 ($p < .001$). Therefore, our intercoder agreement was sufficient (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Sun, 2011).

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Linking learning goal categories to content sources

A second set of coding procedures were used to link our 25 empirically derived learning goal categories to content areas included in empirically based managerial competency models and the AACSB Standards. A different pair of raters was used for these coding procedures.

Many managerial competency models have been developed over the last several decades. For the purpose of our research, we chose to focus on two models: The 'hyperdimensional taxonomy' (Tett et al., 2000) and the 'Great Eight' (Kurz & Bartram, 2002; Bartram, 2005). We utilized more than one managerial competency model to increase the robustness and reliability of our findings. We selected the hyperdimensional taxonomy and the Great Eight models because they are more recent and comprehensive models. Another reason for selecting these two models is because they focus on specific competencies (vs. more general dimensions), which are more conducive to training and development (see Tett et al., 2000 for a discussion of the tradeoffs between specific vs. general dimensions). Given that learning goals are typically written at a greater level of specificity (rather than as general dimensions), it is important to use competency models that are at the same level of specificity.

Hyperdimensional taxonomy

Tett et al. (2000) empirically derived and validated a hyperdimensional taxonomy of managerial competencies. The competencies were derived based on 12 previously published taxonomies and were designed to represent diverse managerial jobs across all functions, industries, sectors, and levels. The taxonomy was validated and refined via three studies, and the final taxonomy includes 53 managerial competencies organized into eight general categories. Tett et al. depict how their final competencies map or link to 12 previous performance taxonomies published since 1950 (see Tett et al., 2000: Table 4). In other words, their model is very comprehensive and encapsulates all prior models.

Two coders (the study's first and second authors) independently linked our learning goal categories to the hyperdimensional taxonomy competencies. The coders first reviewed the definitions provided for each of the 53 competencies (see Tett et al., 2000: 247–249). Next, the coders independently determined whether each of our 25 goal categories linked to any of the 53 competencies from the hyperdimensional taxonomy. The results of the linkage are shown in the third column of Table 1. For example, if the 'communication' learning goal category linked to any of the 53 competencies in the hyperdimensional taxonomy the coders considered them linked, as designated by the 'X' in Table 1. If the 'reflective thinking' learning goal category did not link to any of the 53 competencies in the hyperdimensional taxonomy the coders considered them not linked, as designated by the '–' in Table 1. Percent agreement for this linkage process was 0.72 and Cohen's κ was 0.45 ($p = .015$), which is moderately strong agreement (Agresti, 2002; Sun, 2011). If there was any disagreement between coder ratings, we used consensus discussion to make a final determination.

Great Eight

The Great Eight competency model (Kurz & Bartram, 2002; Bartram, 2005) is another comprehensive, empirically derived model that was developed subsequent to Tett et al.'s (2000) hyperdimensional taxonomy. This hierarchical model was developed with the intent of merging more general and parsimonious academic models with more specific, practical, and usable practice-based models (Kurz & Bartram, 2002). The Great Eight competency model groups 112 competency components into 20 more general competency dimensions which are then grouped into eight broad factors (see Bartram, 2005: appendix).

We linked the learning goal categories to the Great Eight competencies using the same methodology that was used for the hyperdimensional taxonomy. The same two coders first reviewed the 20 competencies and the associated 112 competency components. The coders then independently determined

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whether each of our 25 goal categories linked to any of the 20 competencies (as defined by the 112 competency components). The results of the linkage are shown in the fourth column of Table 1. For example, if the 'functional knowledge' learning goal category linked to any of the 20 competencies in the Great Eight model the coders considered them linked, as designated by the 'X' in Table 1. If the 'reflective thinking' learning goal category did not link to any of the 20 competencies in the Great Eight model the coders considered them not linked, as designated by the '–' in Table 1. Percent agreement for this linkage process was 0.84, and Cohen's κ was 0.67 ($p = .001$), which is sufficient (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Sun, 2011). A consensus discussion was used to resolve any discrepancies.

2003 AACSB Standards

Finally, we linked our learning goal categories to the example learning goals and curriculum topic areas that are mentioned in the January 31, 2012 version of the 2003 AACSB Standards[1]. We chose to focus on the 2003 Standards because, having operated under those Standards for over a decade, most of the learning goals of our sampled schools were likely designed under the 2003 Standards. The Standards do not provide a single list of example learning goals or curriculum topic areas. Rather, examples are provided throughout the Standards. However, most examples are concentrated in the section on 'Assurance of Learning Standards' (pp. 62–71 in particular).

The same two coders independently linked our learning goal categories to the examples appearing in the 2003 AACSB Standards. The coders independently reviewed the entire Standards, highlighting or attending to examples provided throughout. Next, the coders independently determined whether each of our 25 goal categories linked to any example goal or curriculum topic areas mentioned anywhere in the Standards. The results of the linkage are shown in the last column of Table 1. For example, if the 'decision making' learning goal category linked to any example goal or curriculum topic areas mentioned anywhere in the Standards the coders considered them linked, as designated by the 'X' in Table 1. If the 'entrepreneurship' learning goal category did not link to any example goal or curriculum topic areas mentioned anywhere in the Standards the coders considered them not linked, as designated by the '–' in Table 1. Percent agreement for this linkage process was 0.88, and Cohen's κ was 0.72 ($p < .001$), which is sufficient (Lombard, Snyder-Duch, & Bracken, 2002; Sun, 2011). If there was any disagreement between coder ratings, we used consensus discussion to make a final determination.

RESULTS

We compared the learning goals identified in our sample of business schools to the competency areas from the hyperdimensional taxonomy and the Great Eight to determine if the schools' goals were present in or absent from these two sources. First, we computed a score, for each school, indicating the total number of learning goals that they had in the learning goal categories that were linked to the hyperdimensional taxonomy. We then computed a separate score, for each school, indicating the total number of learning goals that they had in the learning goal categories that were not linked to the hyperdimensional taxonomy. On average, business schools had 4.7 goals that tapped competencies included in the hyperdimensional taxonomy and 4.0 goals related to categories not included in this taxonomy (see Figure 1). A paired sample *t*-test indicates that the learning goals were more likely to be present in the hyperdimensional taxonomy than not; $t(206) = 4.81$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.37$.

Next, we computed a score, for each school, indicating the total number of learning goals that they had in the learning goal categories that were linked to the Great Eight. We then computed a separate

[1] The 2003 Standards were adopted in 2003 and remained in place until 2013, but some minor edits were made throughout this time period. The Standards changed significantly in 2013, replacing the 2003 Standards.

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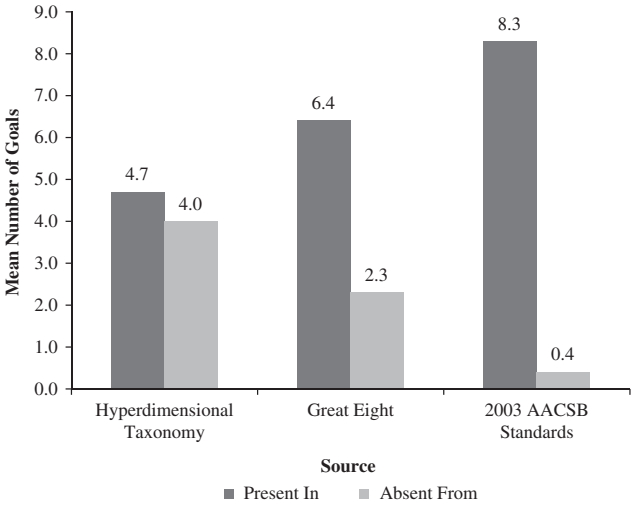

FIGURE 1. MEAN NUMBER OF LEARNING GOALS BY SOURCE. THE SAMPLE INCLUDED GOALS FROM 207 UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS PROGRAMS.

score, for each school, indicating the total number of learning goals that they had in the learning goal categories that were not linked to the Great Eight. Business schools had, on average, 6.4 goals that tapped competencies included in the Great Eight and 2.3 goals related to categories not included in this model (see Figure 1). A paired sample *t*-test indicates that the learning goals were more likely to be present in the Great Eight than not; $t(206) = 24.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 2.26$. Our results with respect to both the hyperdimensional taxonomy and the Great Eight provide robust support for Hypothesis 1.

Next, we compared the learning goals identified in our sample of business schools to the content areas mentioned in the 2003 AACSB Standards to determine if the schools' goals were present in, or absent from, the Standards. We computed a score, for each school, indicating the total number of learning goals that they had in the learning goal categories that were linked to the AACSB Standards. We then computed a separate score, for each school, indicating the total number of learning goals that they had in the learning goal categories that were not linked to the AACSB Standards. On average, business schools had 8.3 goals that tapped content areas mentioned in the AACSB Standards and 0.4 goals related to categories not mentioned in the Standards (see Figure 1). A paired sample *t*-test indicates that the difference is statistically significant, $t(206) = 42.29$, $p < .001$, $d = 4.11$, providing support for Hypothesis 2.

The results of the three paired sample *t*-tests suggest that the learning goals are most closely aligned with the AACSB Standards, followed by the Great Eight, and are least aligned with the hyperdimensional taxonomy. To answer research question 1, we conducted two repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests to determine whether the alignment with the AACSB Standards is significantly greater than the alignment with the hyperdimensional taxonomy and the Great Eight.

The first ANOVA determined whether goals are more closely aligned with the AACSB Standards or the hyperdimensional taxonomy. In this ANOVA, 'source' (AACSB Standards vs. the hyperdimensional taxonomy) was a repeated-measures variable and 'presence in the source' (i.e., present in vs. absent from the respective sources) was a within subjects variable. The results of the ANOVA show that learning goals are more closely aligned with the AACSB Standards than with the hyperdimensional taxonomy as evidenced by a statistically significant interaction; $F(1, 206) = 1376.85$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.87$.

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The second ANOVA determined whether goals are more closely aligned with the AACSB Standards or the Great Eight. In this ANOVA, 'source' (AACSB Standards vs. Great Eight) was a repeated-measures variable and 'presence in the source' (i.e., present in vs. absent from the respective sources) was a within subjects variable. The results of the ANOVA show that learning goals are more closely aligned with the AACSB Standards than with the Great Eight as evidenced by a statistically significant interaction; $F(1, 206) = 765.90$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = 0.79$.

Upon examining the data more closely, we observed a striking resemblance between the learning goal categories that were most frequently used by business schools and the general knowledge and skills areas mentioned in AACSB Standard 15 (i.e., communication abilities, problem-solving abilities, ethical reasoning skills, language abilities, analytic skills, use of information technology, dynamics of the global economy, multicultural and diversity understanding, and reflective thinking skills; see pp. 62 and 71). Six of the seven most frequently used goals categories are related to the content areas listed in Standard 15. All goal categories that were used by 15% or more of the schools are related to content areas explicitly mentioned somewhere in the AACSB Standards related to assurance of learning. Furthermore, 65% of business programs had 100% of their learning goals matching content areas from the AACSB Standards, whereas 3% had 100% of their goals matching the Great Eight competencies, and 2% had 100% of their goals matching competencies from the hyperdimensional taxonomy. It is important to note that our coding of learning goals and the resulting learning goal categories were not biased by prior knowledge of the content areas listed by AACSB. We coded the undergraduate learning goals before reviewing the AACSB Standards, and independent sets of coders were used to (a) code business program learning goals versus (b) link the resulting learning goal categories to the Standards.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of our research was to identify what undergraduate business program learning goals are conforming to. We found that the goals are most closely aligned with AACSB Standards, followed by the Great Eight, and the hyperdimensional taxonomy, respectively. Fortunately, learning goals are more likely than not to be related to management competencies that are substantiated by empirical research. This is an important finding, in its own right, because it demonstrates that the majority of learning goals are evidence based. Although it may be convenient to assume that undergraduate learning goals are related to evidence-based managerial competencies, we are not aware of any prior research systematically examining the relevance of programmatic learning goals in the context of undergraduate business education. The consistency of our findings across two comprehensive taxonomies bolsters the robustness and reliability of our findings.

We must caution that the linkage to evidence-based managerial competencies may be occurring by happenstance because business schools appear to be primarily aligning their learning goals to the content areas of the AACSB Standards. In our comparisons of learning goals to the Great Eight and the hyperdimensional taxonomy, we observed some overlap between the learning goals that we identified in our sample of business schools and the competencies included in these models. However, the overlap is not nearly as striking as the correspondence between business school learning goals and the curricula or goal content areas included in the AACSB Standards. Indeed, most content areas mentioned in the AACSB Standards were included in our sample of schools' goals. Once again, the robustness of our findings is enhanced by comparing the alignment to AACSB Standards with the alignment to two managerial competency taxonomies.

Some of the alignment discrepancies make sense intuitively. For example, it hardly seems controversial to include learning goals related to global/international business or critical thinking (topic areas mentioned in the AACSB Standards) even though they are not explicitly mentioned in the managerial competency models. The more troubling implications of our findings are the managerial

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competencies that are not being assessed. For example, learning goals related to emerging topics such as sustainability and entrepreneurship (competencies recognized in the Great Eight) were utilized by very few schools. Furthermore, many important competencies from the Great Eight (e.g., most of the 18 competency components in the 'organizing and executing' competency) and the hyperdimensional taxonomy (e.g., most of the nine competencies in the 'dependability' and 'emotional control' dimension categories) were nowhere to be found in the learning goals. These vital managerial competencies are not included in the learning goals (and hence not assessed in assurance of learning or as highly emphasized in business school curricula) presumably because they were not included in the examples provided by AACSB Standards. Navarro (2008) and Rubin and Dierdorff (2009) have shown that the required MBA core courses fall short of providing managers with what they need. Our results show that the learning goals, and the subsequent assessment thereof, may also be coming up short in the context of undergraduate business schools.

Our results suggest that AACSB-accredited undergraduate business schools in the United States are utilizing similar goals from the same menu – the AACSB Standards. Critics may say that it is no surprise that goals conform to the AACSB Standards. Nevertheless, our findings are important for two reasons. First, although it is easy to assume that learning goals are aligned with the Standards, we are not aware of any prior research systematically examining this alignment in the context of undergraduate business education, and the Standards do not explicitly mandate such alignment. Second, cursory compliance with AACSB Standards is not an evidence-based approach, and it is counter to methods provided in training and development theory and AACSB Standards. If these findings are not surprising, it is rather disconcerting and may be indicative of how widespread the issue may be.

Adopting learning goals that reflect the topics mentioned in the AACSB Standards would not necessarily be problematic if these were the most important competencies for success as a manager. However, AACSB does not provide evidence revealing where these content areas are derived from or substantiating that they are the most important competencies for managerial success. According to Astin, 'given that any college or university's outcomes will be to some extent idiosyncratic, it would probably not be appropriate for an institution simply to adopt lists of outcomes that were developed elsewhere' (1993: 43). Yet, it appears that undergraduate AACSB-accredited business programs are adopting learning goals from AACSB's lists.

Our results point to an interesting irony. AACSB Standards require that learning goals be evidence based. Yet, it appears that programs may be adopting the example goals provided in the Standards. It is very well possible that programs are assuming that the Standards provide the 'right' goals, or evidence-based goals, but our research results provide indirect evidence that this may not be the case. Hence, adopting the examples provided in the Standards may ultimately be tantamount to failing to comply with the Standards.

Research about managerial cognition has long pointed to the habit among executives to rely on risk averse strategies when confronted with threat (Staw, Sandelands, & Dutton, 1981). Kilpatrick, Dean, and Kilpatrick cautioned that 'strong risk aversion toward not gaining or losing accreditation leads to conservative, documentational interpretation of actions needed' (2008: 201). It is possible that, in an effort to assure the maintenance of their accreditation, schools are using a more cautious or less resource-intensive approach and adopting and assessing the learning goals that AACSB provides as examples.

We struggle with this type of threat–rigid response for two reasons. First, this approach is in direct conflict with the AACSB Standards. The AACSB Standards 'rightfully do not stipulate the specific content, concepts, and techniques that ought to be learned by graduates…To develop and enforce this type of detail in a field that is as fluid and diverse as management would certainly be disastrous' (AACSB Globalization of Management Education Task Force, 2011: 3). AACSB offers important

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guidance that stakeholders should be involved in the development of learning goals as well as the mission on which they are based:

> Because of differences in mission, student population, employer population, and other circumstances, the program learning goals differ from school to school…Few characteristics of the school are as important to stakeholders as knowing the accomplishment levels of the school's students when compared against the school's learning goals. (2012: 59)
>
> …
>
> Even if schools choose similar domains of learning goals, they are likely to develop the goals in different ways. There is no intention in the AACSB accreditation process that schools should have the same definitions of learning goals, or that they should assess accomplishment of learning goals in the same way. (2012: 61)

Business schools' primary customers are the organizations that employ their graduates, and business schools should 'never venture too far in curricular planning without engaging business managers in a reality test of academic ideas' (Cook, 1993: 32). Developing and assessing learning goals that are based on both robust research and input from relevant stakeholders and prospective employers will help ensure that they are relevant to the business program and its student stakeholders.

Our second concern with the cautious practice of adopting goals suggested by other institutions for the sake of bolstering creditability and reputation is that it circumvents an important responsibility of business educators. Is the primary goal of a business school to be credible or is it ultimately to have a positive impact – both on our graduates and on society? As we consider the economic, political, environmental, and social needs of contemporary society, should educators trust that others have defined the 'right' array of learning goals? When choosing learning goals, is it most appropriate to ask, 'What do others suggest?' or is it necessary to first ask, 'What are the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities for our graduates to maximize their impacts, locally, nationally, or globally?' We cannot begin to answer such questions here. However, we believe this is a worthy conversation for business educators to discuss. Threat rigidity results in a narrowing of information considered during group decision making (Gladstein & Reilly, 1985). We would argue the challenges facing today's society merit a broadening of the discovery process, including the consideration of learning goals.

Limitations

Two limitations need to be considered when interpreting our results. First, our sample was comprised of nearly half of US business schools that are accredited by AACSB. We have no reason to believe that schools in our sample are inherently different from other AACSB schools. Nonetheless, we are uncertain of the extent to which our results generalize to the learning goals of other accredited undergraduate programs or graduate or international AACSB-accredited programs. McKenna et al. (1991) argue that forces for conformity within a nation include national accreditation standards, national faculty/administrator job markets, and national rankings of programs, and that forces for differentiation between regions include market niche, characteristics of the local student population, regional job markets for graduates, and the local economy. Given the global education market, and AACSB's increasing global expansion, additional research related to non-US institutions accredited by AACSB and other global accreditors (e.g., Association of MBAs and European Quality Improvement System) is needed. Future research might explore learning goal conformity in other nations and conduct comparative studies across nations and/or global accrediting bodies.

Second, our results may not generalize to non-AACSB-accredited programs. However, we suspect the findings would be similar for business schools accredited by the Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs and the International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education given that

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they both proffer nearly identical 'common professional component' topic areas (see Accreditation Council for Business Schools and Programs, 2011 and International Assembly for Collegiate Business Education, 2011) that must be included in the curricula; the topic areas are similar to AACSB's content areas, if not more restrictive. Although we have no reason to believe our findings would not be corroborated using samples of schools accredited by other institutions, further research in this area is warranted.

Recommendations for moving forward

We have several recommendations for AACSB, business schools, the broader academy, and research. Our results appear to affirm Brink, Palmer, and Costigan's (2014) suggestion that business schools may conform out of fear of losing accreditation. Given that AACSB Standards require differentiated, mission-based learning goals and encourage goals that are current, relevant, and developed with input from external constituencies, we must infer that any suboptimal learning goals are a result of the implementation and enforcement of the Standards. We encourage business school administrators and faculty to make better use of empirical research and input from relevant employer stakeholders or other external constituents when developing their learning goals. We also encourage peer review teams to allow them to do so.

If business schools are, in fact, simply adopting AACSB's readily available and implicitly endorsed content areas in their learning goals, AACSB might consider providing evidence supporting the basis for the content areas and substantiating their importance. Alternatively, AACSB might provide a more comprehensive compilation of learning goal content areas and sample learning objectives and measures. Instead, AACSB appears to have gone in the opposite direction – the 2013 AACSB Standards no longer provide any example or recommended content areas. Future research might examine the effect that the new Standards have on learning goals. For example, with no implicit endorsement of content areas or direction regarding specific content areas to include, schools might become more heterogeneous with respect to their learning goals. Although differentiation appears to be a goal of the new Standards, some guidance might be welcomed and needed by business schools, and there may be a legitimate need to establish and conform to a foundational set of competencies or content areas.

For business schools, adopting learning goals from topics identified in AACSB Standards may increase the ease of assessment as well as the likelihood of maintaining accreditation, and programs might assume that AACSB was recommending the 'right' content areas. However, this approach may result in learning goals that are less aligned with the school's mission, the omission of vital managerial competencies, and a 'go through the motions' assessment process that is of less value to student and prospective employer stakeholders. If learning goals are not content valid, the entire assurance of learning process is futile. Learning goals must be appropriately developed through evidence-based empirical research, and input from prospective employers and other stakeholders is needed before proper education, assessment, and assurance of learning is possible.

Future research should consider the predictive validity and relative importance of the competencies that are frequently included in business school learning goals. More importantly, future research should also identify competencies that are critical to managerial success but not routinely included in learning goals. Although goals should be evidence based, the lag and lack of empirical research presents barriers for doing so. For example, it has been more than a decade since the hyperdimensional taxonomy and the Great Eight have been developed. Indeed, one reason why learning goals might be more aligned with AACSB Standards is that the content areas of the Standards could potentially be more current. Given the paucity of ongoing up-to-date empirical research and the fact that AACSB Standards no longer provide any guidance regarding content areas, who will take ownership of developing and maintaining evidence-based curricular guidelines?

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We encourage researchers to continue to empirically examine the relevance of management and business education, particularly at the undergraduate level. Though some research has accumulated related to curriculum and learning goals, additional research is warranted. For example, although prior research found little differentiation among learning goal content across undergraduate business programs (Brink, Palmer, & Costigan, 2014) and we found that business schools may be conforming to AACSB standards and evidence-based managerial competencies, we are not aware of any research regarding programmatic-level learning objectives or curriculum. Perhaps there is greater differentiation among schools with respect to learning objectives. Furthermore, research at the MBA level suggests that there is a disconnect between learning goals and curriculum (see Costigan & Brink, 2015b). The extent of decoupling between espoused learning goals and enacted curriculum remains unexplored at the undergraduate business program level.

In addition to programmatic research, we also recommend that future research look more closely at specific courses, learning objectives, and learning goals. Course-, objective-, and goal-level research may identify additional issues of relevance and alignment that may not appear at the broader programmatic level. Scholars have examined courses such as organizational behavior (Brown et al., 2013), diversity (Bell, Connerly, & Cocchiara, 2009), ethics (Evans, Trevino, & Weaver, 2006; Rutherford, Parks, Cavazos, & White, 2012; Rasche, Gilbert, & Schedel, 2013), and social entrepreneurship (Miller, Wesley, & Williams, 2012). Likewise, researchers have examined learning goals related to oral communication (Brink & Costigan, 2015) and linear and nonlinear thinking (Costigan & Brink, 2015b). However, these budding areas are ripe for additional research.

Future research might also explore the broader context of learning goals, including accreditation and assurance of learning factors. For example, does duration of accreditation influence learning goal conformity? Are newly accredited programs more likely to conform to AACSB standards? Do programs drift and become more differentiated over time? When are learning goals revised, and what factors trigger revision? How are learning goals revised? Given that business program accreditation and assurance of learning occurs within a broader institutional context, how does it relate to the mission, assurance of learning, learning goals, and accreditation at the institution level?

Finally, one empirically unexplored force for conformity is peer institutions. Comparison theories argue that firms look to salient others when information about them is both available and relevant (Goodman, 1974; Levine & Moreland, 1987; Kulik & Ambrose, 1992). A business school strategizing about accreditation would therefore look for cues about learning goals not only from AACSB and from professionals, but from key peer, competitor, or aspirant schools. Although some comparisons may be the result of subliminal cognitive processes, others are likely to be intentional as a way of boosting their school's credibility. Choices about which schools to emulate versus ignore are of key importance given the impact these comparisons have on curriculum and assurance of learning. Previous scholars have expressed concern that business schools may focus attention on image management at the expense of program improvement (Gioia & Corley, 2001). More research exploring this concern in the context of learning goals is warranted.

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