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Teaching & Learning

# Think global, act local: a methodology for investigating international business curriculum priorities using stakeholder feedback

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**Abstract**

Business schools are engaged increasingly in the development and improvement of international business programs at both undergraduate and graduate levels. Often, such efforts are based on “how to” recommendations from experts in the field or “best practices” from other institutions. In an effort to better address the specific needs of individual institutions, this article suggests an evidence-based methodology for curricular design and describes one study of local constituency needs used to inform improvement efforts of an existing undergraduate international business program at a small, private college in the Northeast. Based on the findings, the authors describe changes in their school’s approach to internationalization, and discuss the importance of using an evidence-based process that links school mission and stakeholders in curriculum and program design.

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**Keywords:** international business education; curriculum design; evidence-based program design



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**Introduction**

With growing frequency, both large and small schools of business are “internationalizing” their programs in order to best prepare the next generation of professionals for the changing global economy. While receiving increased attention and emphasis in recent years, calls for a greater focus on internationalization or enhanced global perspectives is not a new trend. Over 30 years ago, the AACSB (then simply the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business) required that an international perspective be included in the “common body of knowledge” for all accredited business schools (Tarleton, 1977). In addition, as Ball and McCulloch (1993) note, in 1977 the Nehrt Report to the American Council on Education (Nehrt, 1977) concluded, “every manager should know the basics of international business.”

By the 1980s, business leaders were calling for business schools to “internationalize the entire course of study” (Starr, 1988). Such efforts included an understanding of comparative business practices, enhanced abilities in foreign languages, and the analysis of other countries and cultures with respect to the context of business issues. In their research into the views of multinational CEOs



toward specific aspects of international business education, Ball and McCulloch (1993) found that while most CEOs expected their employees to learn international aspects of business on the job, they noted that “some familiarity with international business practices would be desirable in view of our ever expanding global markets” (Ball and McCulloch, 1993).

More recently, AACSB-International (AACSB-I) Standards speak directly to the importance of addressing the increasingly global business environment. The standards state:

Curricular contents must assure that program graduates are prepared to assume business and management careers as appropriate to the learning goals of the program. Contents of the learning experiences provided by programs should be both current and relevant to needs of business and management positions. This implies, for example, that present day curricula will prepare graduates to operate in a business environment that is global in scope. (AACSB Standards, Rev. July 2009: 70)

While the goal of providing business education within a global context is clear, the process each school must undertake to achieve this goal is not stipulated. As such, a “best practices” or “experts” approach, while useful for generating ideas, does not provide sufficient guidance for specific activities a school should undertake to align “the needs of business and management positions” within their stakeholder group.

Most large-scale surveys on internationalization provide few if any details about the development processes involved in curricular innovations, and most make no distinctions with respect to student population or local business needs. To date, there has been no systematic methodology proposed that would allow for the alignment of a school’s internationalization efforts with their mission or their stakeholder needs. In other words, any school knows relatively little about the perceived benefits of international curriculum enhancements such as study abroad programs or international internships by those external groups most closely associated with the mission of the school, the perspectives of alumni and recruiters. There exists no reliable empirical evidence that links what is possible relative to internationalizing business programs with what is valued by the institution’s stakeholders. Such a link, we argue, is essential to any individual school seeking to enhance the international nature of its curriculum and programs within the context of its stakeholders and its mission.

### Background on internationalization in business schools

Various research studies have examined components of internationalization across the business and management curriculum (cf., Kohers, 1985; Beamish and Calof, 1988; Kwok *et al.*, 1994; Albers-Miller *et al.*, 2000; Fugate and Lassk, 2003; Zettingin and Vincze, 2008). In general, most studies explore the perspectives of broadly based business “experts,” such as individuals at “firms in the southeastern United States,” (Kohers, 1985), members of “Canadian firms,” (Beamish and Calof, 1989), or “CEOs of the Forbes ‘100 Largest Multi-national Firms’ and Fortune’s ‘America’s 50 Biggest Exporters’” (Ball and McCulloch, 1993). Others examine the internal perspective within business schools themselves through faculty or student surveys (Kwok *et al.*, 1994; Manuel *et al.*, 2001; Fugate and Lassk, 2003). While acknowledging that no single approach can be considered most advantageous for all schools (Kwok and Arpan, 1994), research efforts appear focused on recommendations for internationalizing based on broad typologies or categories of approaches to international business education (Shetty and Rudell, 2000). This reflects the generalized sense that internationalization of an undergraduate business program is now a universal imperative for all high quality schools.

Two additional approaches to internationalization exist. One approach is through adoption of “best practices,” such as those represented by the winners of various awards programs, for example, the Andrew Heiskell Awards for Innovation in International Education from the Institute of International Education ([www.iienetwork.org](http://www.iienetwork.org)) or those given by NAFSA: Association of International Educators ([www.nafsa.org](http://www.nafsa.org)). These awards are granted for successful efforts with regard to “removing institutional barriers to international study and broadening the base of participation in the international elements of teaching and learning on campus” ([www.iienetwork.org](http://www.iienetwork.org)). This approach encourages schools to implement successful practices from other schools such as the *Institute for Global Engagement* established at Chaplain College or the *NanoJapan: Summer Nanotechnology Research Program for Undergraduates* established by Rice University, both Heiskell award recipients. A second approach is to follow generic recommendations from experts such as, “Recruit foreign students to your campus,” “Hold international festivals, such as film/slide shows, folk singers, dancers, theater, food

fair, displays,” and “Invite international organizations to recruit volunteers on campus” (Kerrigan, 2005), which is similar to the research on perspectives of experts as noted previously. While clearly useful as a kind of “shopping list” for those interested in internationalization and globalization, the “best practices/awards” approach or the “experts” approach provide inadequate guidance to a specific program with limited resources and particular program context.

On the basis of a strategic and/or marketing perspective, and consistent with the mission-driven orientation of AACSB, the development of any new program initiative should assess the needs of the institution’s stakeholders (i.e., their market) and align those needs with the school’s mission. This suggests a school should explore their employer and student needs, society’s needs, and other similar constituents such as government and local communities, all of whom hold a stake in the content and direction of education (Denton *et al.*, 2005; Gupta *et al.*, 2007). The input and interests of those who are directly impacted by the outcomes of the educational process are clearly relevant to the design and successful delivery of such programs. Poorly executed and supported educational programs can result not only in a misuse of resources, but also in a misalignment between the skills and abilities of graduates and the needs and expectations of the larger community, including businesses. Such a result affects various measures of success including, but not limited to, student placement and institutional reputation. While extensive research exists with respect to internationalizing business school curricula and offerings, there is relatively little research designed to examine specific *market needs* for international education as it relates to a particular school or program.

Over the years, and despite the ongoing discourse concerning the importance of internationalizing for future leaders of organizations, increased attention to globalization has come as broad calls for internationalization and the importance of global knowledge, skills, and abilities for remaining competitive in a global economy. Innovations that receive attention, especially those that provide a particular program with uniqueness as a form of competitive advantage (cf., Burnson, 2003), may be of little use to other schools whose market differs from the innovator. However, as pressures increase for all business programs to address global concerns, the importance of international knowledge and capability becomes a core competence for the

industry of management education as a whole rather than simply an innovative competitive advantage of the few. This is particularly true for smaller programs that lack the institutional resources or funding sources of larger institutions but whose graduates are nonetheless essential to the future competitiveness of global businesses. Thus, a clear understanding of the institutional market is relevant to building a targeted and useful response to internationalization.

### Method

In consultation with the director of international business programs, a survey was developed for a small, private, co-educational institution in the Northeast with an undergraduate student population of approximately 2500 in the spring of 2007 to explore the perceptions of alumni and recruiters with respect to various elements of the institution’s existing international programming. Thirty-two questions, including information about company revenues for recruiters and alumni, levels of international activity, impact of international competition on their organization and competitiveness of candidates with various components of international experience, and education, were included.

The campus Alumni Office provided a list of former business students whose job title or location indicated some aspect of international or global business activity. The Career and Human Resources Office provided a list of recruiters. The exploratory survey was administered via phone interviews to 122 alumni and recruiters. Senior college students, as part of a marketing research class, conducted the interviews after training within the course. Each interview averaged between 15–20 min. Items on the survey were created to investigate general interest in the college’s international business curricula and degrees (both minors and majors in international business) and to gauge interest in the domain of international business in general.

### Results

Results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

Subjects were evenly divided between alumni and recruiters, with slightly more alumni responding to the survey (53%). Slightly more than half of the subjects (56.8%) indicated that sales within their companies had increased within the previous 3 years, and just under half (46%) reported company sales of 5 million or more within the past 12 months. On average, the companies of the subjects employed 6818 full-time and 3949 part-time

**Table 1** Frequency statistics

<i>Item</i>	<i>Response</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Please check which school has the most attractive minors for business majors:	Liberal Arts	27	22.7
	Business	92	77.3
If you selected the business school, which of the three minors are the most attractive for most business students?	Entrepreneurship Minor	25	25.8
	International Business Minor	27	27.8
	Management Program Minor	45	46.4
Are there certain specific international business courses that business college students should take as part of their general business requirements	Yes	36	29.8
	No	85	70.2
Does your company require international business coursework for entry-level positions?	Yes	34	28.1
	No	87	71.9
Does your company spend training dollars to enhance their employees' international business knowledge and or skills?	Yes	63	53.4
	No	55	46.6
Are you aware that Western New England College offers an international business minor?	Yes	59	48.4
	No	63	51.6
Have you ever invested time and/or money (e.g., read books, taken coursework) to learn about issues related to international business in order to further your career or help your company?	Yes	57	46.7
	No	65	53.3
Have you attended any seminars or courses involving international business issues or content?	Yes	57	47.5
	No	63	52.5
Compared to other undergraduates, how informed do you believe Western New England College students are about international issues?	More informed	31	27.2
	About the same	72	63.2
	Less informed	11	9.6
Is a "global perspective" considered an asset in your company?	Yes	67	55.4
	No	54	44.6
Does your company engage in international business through trade?	Yes	62	50.8
	No	60	49.2
Does your company engage in international business through the location of an office or plant outside of the United States?	Yes	52	42.6
	No	70	57.4
Does your company have business relations with a company outside of the United States?	Yes	78	64.5
	No	43	35.5
All else being equal, do you believe an employee with an international business education will contribute more to a firm's efforts than an employee with just a business education?	Yes	63	52.1
	No	58	47.9
All else being equal, do you believe an employee with an international business education or experience should receive better compensation than an employee with just a business education or experience?	Yes	44	36.7
	No	76	63.3
With all else being equal, would you:	Hire a business student with a 3.5 GPA	85	73.3
	Hire a business student with a 3.0 GPA and a minor in international business	31	26.7
With all else being equal, would you:	Hire a business student with a large number of extra-curricular activities in their resume	80	67.8
	Hire a business student with a minor in international business	38	32.2

Table 1 Continued

Item	Response	Frequency	Percentage
With all else being equal, would you:	Hire a business student with a large number of extra-curricular activities in their resume	40	33.6
	Hire a business student with international work experience	79	66.4
With all else being equal, would you:	Hire a business student who is bilingual	93	79.5
	Hire a business student with a minor in international business	24	20.5
Can you indicate through estimation or personal knowledge, which of the following categories best describes the total sales for your business/company in the last 12 months?	\$500,000 or less	15	13.0
	\$500,001–\$1 million	19	16.5
	\$1,000,001–\$5 million	28	24.3
	\$5,000,001 or more	53	46.1
In the past 3 years, has your company's sales:	Increased	67	56.8
	Stayed the same	40	33.9
	Decreased	11	9.3
Subject type	Alumni	65	53.3
	Recruiter	57	46.7

employees; however, the range for both full-time and part-time employees was extremely wide. Full-time employees ranged from 2 to 250,000 and part-time employees ranged from 0 to 150,000. Of all respondents, 62% have fewer than 500 full-time employees, and of those companies who have part-time employees 81% employ fewer than 500.

Overall, over half of the subjects invested time and/or money (e.g. reading books, taking coursework) to learn about issues related to international business in order to further their career or help their company (53.3%). However, more alumni did indicate investing personally in international business learning through seminars or courses ( $P=0.003$ ). The average number of international business-related trips per year taken by subjects was roughly one, and subjects indicated a moderate to low level of impact of international business on their career (see Table 2).

Subjects evaluated the impact of international business on their company. Approximately half of the subjects indicated working for a company that engages in international business through trade (50.8%) and over two-thirds work for an organization that has business relations with a company outside of the United States (64%); however, slightly fewer than half indicated that their company engaged in international business through the location of an office or plant outside of the United States (42.6%). Two-thirds of recruiters considered a "global perspective" to be an asset to their company (66.7%) whereas alumni were less likely to

consider such a perspective an asset ( $P=0.018$ ). Subjects indicated a moderate impact of international business or foreign competition on their company and/or business (see Table 2). While the vast majority of recruiters indicated that international business coursework was not required for entry-level positions (89.5%), alumni were more likely to indicate a necessity for international business coursework ( $P=0.000$ ). Most subjects also indicated that their company spends training dollars to enhance their employees' international business knowledge and/or skills (53.4%).

Overall, subjects perceived the most attractive minor for a business major was a related business discipline minor (77.3%); however, this finding was due to more alumni responses than responses of recruiters ( $P=0.026$ ). Among available business minors at the researched school – Entrepreneurship, International Business, and Management – a minor in Management was considered the best educational enhancement for a business major (46.4%). Recruiters overall perceived that there were no specific international business courses considered imperative as part of a business student's general business requirements (91.2%), while alumni were more likely to indicate a need for requiring international business coursework for business students ( $P=0.000$ ). Within this context, of the 22 subject areas mentioned, those most commonly suggested were International Management, International/Multinational/Global Marketing, International Studies and/or Culture, and International/Global Economics.

**Table 2** Descriptive statistics

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	SD
How many full-time employees does your company employ?	106	2	250,000	6818.01	27,833.114
How many part-time employees does your company employ?	93	0	150,000	3948.56	19,542.082
How much has international business affected your career?	121	1 No impact	7 Significant impact	3.05	1.941
How much has international business affected your company?	122	1 No impact	7 Significant impact	4.05	2.065
Please estimate the impact of foreign competition on your business:	121	1 No impact	7 Significant impact	3.50	2.005
Please indicate the number of times in the past year you have gone on international business-related trips:	121	0	20	1.17	2.797
How much does <i>study abroad or college-sponsored international travel experience</i> enhance the competitiveness of a candidate for an entry-level position?	121	1 Has no impact on decision to hire	7 Significantly improves chances of being hired	3.67	1.791
How much does an <i>international business minor</i> enhance the competitiveness of a candidate for an entry-level position?	121	1 Has no impact on decision to hire	7 Significantly improves chances of being hired	3.50	1.592
How much does an <i>international business major</i> enhance the competitiveness of a candidate for an entry-level position?	121	1 Has no impact on decision to hire	7 Significantly improves chances of being hired	3.57	1.914

In spite of the lack of overall interest in the international business minor or specific international business coursework for business majors, subjects felt that employees with an international business education contribute more to a firm's efforts over employees with only business educations (52.1%), although such contributions did not warrant higher compensation (63.3%). Further, subjects on average indicated moderate to no impact on decisions to hire candidates with study abroad or college-sponsored international travel experience, an international business minor, or an international business major for entry-level positions (see Table 2).

To investigate further the impact of different types of international business preparation on subjects' perceptions of student educational priorities, subjects answered several trade-off questions. Findings indicate that with all else being equal, almost three-quarters of subjects would hire a business student with a *superior* grade point average

(73.3%) over a business student with a *good* grade point average and a minor in international business. Respondents perceived business students with a large number of extra-curricular activities as more attractive (67.8%) than business students who minored in international business (32.2%), but extra-curricular activities were not perceived as more attractive (33.6%) compared to a business student with international work experience (66.4%). Lastly, bilingual business students were perceived as vastly superior (79.5%) to business students who held a minor in international business (20.5%). The top three most commonly mentioned languages were Spanish, French, and German, with two-thirds of those responding to this question indicating Spanish as a desirable "second" language.

In terms of an awareness of majors and minors offered by our school, roughly half of subjects (51.6%) indicated that they were aware of the international business minor offered. Further,

both alumni and recruiters reported that they view our graduates, regardless of major or minor program, as equally or better educated relative to other college graduates on international issues (90.4%), with recruiters being more likely to indicate our graduates being more informed ( $P=0.015$ ).

### Discussion

While not uniform in indicating participation in international business activities, at least half of alumni and recruiters felt that international business was important enough to learn about in order to further their own career or their company's interests. Interestingly, though, most subjects indicated a moderate to low level of impact of international business on their career. One conclusion we draw from the views of our alumni and recruiters is that even though they do not view international business as having a significant impact on *their* career, there is general acknowledgement that international business issues are relevant to the overall conduct of business and thus worthy of study. This finding seems consistent with the growth of internationalization or globalization in business education in general. In fact, international business study may be a precondition for recognition of the impact of global activities on specific businesses or particular careers. Our finding also suggests that the growth of international business as a subject of study in our school is not merely a result of AACSB-I demands.

Our survey explores internationalization as a phenomenon involving one or more elements of a set of specific activities. The simplest of these activities are import/export relationships while the most complex are the global staffing and production/service activities of multinational corporations. A small but noticeable portion of the respondents in this study believes that their company has no international involvements whatsoever. Twenty-nine out of 122 respondents (13 alumni and 16 recruiters), or just fewer than 24% of all respondents indicated that their company engages in no trade, has no plant or office located outside the US, and has no relations with non-US companies. However, of those respondents who indicated some international business involvement at their organization, 34 out of 122 (29%) indicated yes to all three activities (plant, office outside of US, trade) while 17 out of 122 (14%) answered that they were involved through trade and relations outside the US but had no office or

plant location. We view this mix of involvements as indicating different international business realities for various elements of these stakeholder groups that require a program designed to address distinct skill sets and different educational orientations. We also view these results as consistent with a growing level of internationalization among our constituencies. The data suggest that our business community is still in the process of exploring international business opportunities and developing business interests in countries around the world. As such, our expectation is that an increased focus on international business skills in our program will allow our graduates to be well positioned to assist in this growth.

While the perception of the impact of international issues on career or company is moderate among both alumni and recruiters, recruiters perceive a "global perspective" as being more relevant to their company than alumni do (67–45%). One possible explanation for this difference may be the different perspectives on time and company or career demands held by alumni and recruiters. Alumni may not be experiencing a negative effect of "lack of global perspective," however, recruiters may better understand the priorities of future capabilities such as international education and global perspectives (a view consistent with the findings of Ball and McCulloch (1993) as discussed earlier). Another possibility is that recruiters viewed the term more broadly, while alumni required a more specific context or pragmatic framework within which to understand and evaluate the term, "global perspective." One limitation of our study is that we did not more clearly define what was meant by the term, "global perspective." Future research might address the nature of the term, "global perspective," and how various constituency groups define it, so that a clearer understanding of their priorities and interests can be determined.

Interestingly, alumni do report that they engage in seminars and other forms of education about international business issues, but as a group do not view a global perspective as important to their company. This distinction may be a result of the wording of the question, in which "international business" education through seminars or personal training is viewed as a specific set of skills and capabilities while a "global perspective" is a broader and less salient term to alumni. In the case of recruiters, however, a "global perspective" may be viewed as part of the contemporary business



discourse and a desirable quality or characteristic that does not require definition. This explanation would be consistent with the lack of correlation between those who indicated that they spend money to enhance their international business capabilities and those who view a global perspective as an asset to their company.

For our program, we believe it is important that the design of the international curriculum be sensitive to such distinctions in the respondent populations. Stated differently, if alumni view the importance of developing particular skills to be of somewhat greater importance for the program and recruiters view opportunities to develop a global perspective (via exposure rather than skills) as more important, then both qualities must be present in our full curriculum design. In addition, recognizing that the perception of recruiters regarding international business courses runs counter to so many other environmental imperatives and the alumni development activities with respect to international business issues, we believe our program needs to better “frame” international business courses and competencies so that these elements become more salient to recruiters. For example, motivation and communication are two basic characteristics recruiters look for in potential employees. A student who has completed a study abroad experience or speaks a second language could use those experiences to illustrate development of the ability to communicate with diverse populations under a variety of circumstances.

The above findings also indicate that curricular design – particularly as reflected in a minor or major area course of study – is not the most critical focus for our school’s international business program. According to the respondents in this study, other acceptable and in some cases apparently more desirable pathways to gaining a global perspective or international business skills include international business work experience or fluency in a foreign language. This finding is reflected in the trade-offs through which respondents consistently ranked international work experience and language fluency above other elements of student skills and abilities including grade point average, study abroad, international business minor, or extra-curricular activities, and is supported in previous research (Albers-Miller *et al.*, 2000). What these findings suggested for our school’s current program was that an international work experience and/or fluency in a second language are key elements in

developing our students’ international business capabilities. As a result, we are working with our International Business Advisory Board and the College’s study abroad office to develop additional opportunities for international internships. The issue of additional language opportunities remains a challenge as this capability on our campus relies on resources in the Arts and Sciences. We have, however, begun to explore creative ways of expanding the language offerings to our students (for example, various software packages) as a means of enhancing their capabilities and supporting additional work/study abroad opportunities.

One particularly useful element of the survey was the trade-off questions. However, in order to limit the length of the survey to increase response rate, paired comparisons were reduced. For example, this study was not able to determine which was more desirable – international work experience or fluency in a second language. Thus, an area for our future study would involve a greater number of such paired comparisons or trade-off questions in order to gain additional understanding about the salience of individual preferences in terms of particular international business capabilities and skills for our program.

Our study can be generalized with respect to the evidence-based method used to determine design components of an international business curriculum, but not to specific conclusions for any given program. For example, while the results of our study suggested exploring the addition of a second language into our program, this may not be an appropriate or desirable direction for internationalizing another school’s program given their own constituency needs. Other studies of internationalization have considered broad elements or trends in the environment as a means for directing attention to general aspects of international business education. However, individual schools should view this broader literature as only one element in the design of their individual program. Such an approach is consistent with that encouraged for AACSB-accredited schools in which the mission and objectives of the school are expected to reflect the needs of their stakeholders. Without an evidence-based stakeholder approach, programs may find that their particular constituencies are ill-served by the direction of their curriculum and that their resources are poorly directed. We view this approach to internationalization as essential to the development of a coherent and cohesive program design.

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