

DEAN'S ANNUAL SURVEY STUDIES STUDENT EXPECTATIONS

By Kris Imherr

Chief administrator of Naveen Jindal School of Management's MBA programs and Career Management Center, Associate Dean Monica Powell deals daily with student concerns about their education and careers. In that role, she explores what students want, what the school delivers, where interests intersect, where there is disconnect. Her investigations led her, in 2010, to launch an annual survey about part-time MBA student expectations. Interest in her findings has been such that one survey has now become four, and results are beginning to serve as road maps for educators nationwide on where to take — and not take — business education.



Associate Dean Monica Powell (at left), president of the UT Dallas chapter of the business honorary society Beta Gamma Sigma, has just asked new members to rise in this induction ceremony photo.

Employment is up but career aspirations down nationwide among MBA students, a group that nonetheless expects a degree to lead to at least a 22 percent pay raise once they graduate.

In the classroom, this group wants dazzle — lectures plus case studies plus simulations and more. However, more and more of them expect courses to be delivered online.

And where should faculty and administrators get in touch with them? Not in their social media space, where they don't want their schools to tread. Three-fourths of the students say they prefer email, a response that perplexes program directors who — almost uniformly — say: "But we can't get them to read it."

These contradictory, puzzling and challenging responses are among the results Dean Powell is parsing

following her second annual survey to learn what graduate business administration students expect their education to deliver.

THE PARAMETERS

Collecting data from April to September of last year, Dr. Powell again sought opinions on faculty and classrooms, program design and delivery, communications, networking, career outlook and more.

But for the second survey she broadened her reach, polling double the number of part-time students in professional MBA programs throughout the United States. From 10 public and 12 private programs, she gathered more than 1,200



Monica Powell



responses. In the initial study, 632 responses came from four public and four private schools.

Dr. Powell also added a separate but related study of full-time MBA programs, gaining 806 respondents from seven public and seven private schools.

EMPLOYMENT

The part-timers registered a significant uptick in their full-time employment, up 7 percent. Overall, 84 percent of respondents reported working full time — up from 77 percent in 2010.

But job-market good news did not translate into an optimistic occupational outlook. Respondents tallied declines from the first survey in post-graduate career expectations, with fewer looking forward to promotions, new jobs, an industry change or professional growth.

For students, the deeper meaning of their answers may yet be unfocused, but for Dr. Powell, as an administrator, their impact is clear and immediate: The rise in employment translates into less demand on the career services the school offers MBA candidates.

MORE ONLINE, LESS FACE-TO-FACE INFORMATION

Demand is down, too — not only at JSOM but nationwide — among would-be MBA students to meet recruiters or attend in-person information sessions. In 2010, 68 percent of respondents reported going to a session; in 2011, 59 percent did.

"We are trending way down in terms of face-to-face selling of graduate schools of business," Dr. Powell says.

However, 2011 respondents placed greater value on learning from alumni and current students, making the two groups the second-most-important source of program intelligence, behind the Internet.

Increased reliance on Internet-based information, Dr. Powell says, implies that business schools "better be building websites that convey not only the essentials but also the essence of their programs."

Beyond websites, MBA program shoppers may turn to Facebook and other social media channels to make inquiries. But once applicants

are enrolled, "there is a clear delineation," Dr. Powell says. "We asked them how they wanted us to communicate with them, and overwhelmingly, they did not choose any social media options."

THE 'DAZZLE FACTOR'

Social media may be off-limits for communication, but in their coursework, students have high expectations for high technology. More and more millennials — students born since the early 1980s — are arriving on campuses, and because "technology has been increasingly integrated into the maturation [of this generation]," Dr. Powell says, "they will not tolerate boredom in the classroom."

Results showed an 11-point increase from 2010 to 2011 in the percentage of respondents who wanted what she dubbed "the dazzle factor." Sixty percent of 2011 respondents expected not only a lecture, case study or a combination of the two, but also group activities, business-problem simulations, YouTube videos and more.

Data registering a "dramatic jump" — just under 40 percent in 2010





to just under 47 percent a year later — in the percentage of part-time students who expect online courses coincides with the growing number of students who “want education on their own time, in their own space, and they don’t want to be inordinately inconvenienced,” Dr. Powell says.

“The message is,” she says, “if you’re a school that doesn’t have online options, you may want to explore adding them.”

Such feedback goes to the heart of the survey’s creation. “I wanted to give MBA administrators a tool to gauge how their programs are faring, relative to students’ expectations and needs,” Dr. Powell says.

PUBLIC-SCHOOL VS. PRIVATE-SCHOOL EXPECTATIONS

Besides tracking trends, survey results can reveal sit-up-and-take-notice realities.

In that realm, Dr. Powell was intrigued that in both 2010 and 2011, virtually no difference was recorded in public-school- vs. private-school-student expectations. Given the wide range of MBA

program prices, “why don’t private-school students expect a whole lot more?” she asks.

“Domestically, MBA program-enrollment numbers are trending down,” Dr. Powell says. “It seems to me, this is going to create greater competition for students. As the numbers shrink, differences in student expectations are going to become an important marketing factor.”

Dr. Powell delivered preliminary survey results to fellow educators last October at the annual Part-Time MBA Conference at Temple University.

Since then, she has launched two more expectations surveys, one for undergraduate business or management students and one for business-school master’s degree students in disciplines other than business administration. Results for all four 2012 surveys are due this fall.

For more survey result information, contact Dr. Powell at mpowell@utdallas.edu.



Dean Powell (left) offers her congratulations to a new business honorary society inductee.