

Kathleen Westmoreland Mays
DBA – Management
Falls School of Business
Anderson University

ABSTRACT

THE ROLE OF UNDERGRADUATES MANAGEMENT EDUCATION IN BRIDGING THE THEORY-APPLICATION GAP: A QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

“Ultimately, we need a synthesis of theory and practice if we are to prepare thoughtful practitioners” (Raelin, 2007, p. 495). In management education, even at the undergraduate level, business schools are doing the work of preparing practitioners. However, the literature shows a persistent concern regarding the gap between theory and application. A great deal of attention in the literature has been devoted to the seriousness, causes, and solutions to the theory-application gap in management studies. However, most education-related solutions to the gap have been addressed at the graduate education and professional levels. This study builds on that existing literature, as well as the 25-year longitudinal work done by Wren et al. (1980, 1994, 2007) which showed the surprising, simultaneous trends of increased emphasis on theory and increased use of application-oriented techniques.

This study sought to test the existence of the theory-application gap in undergraduate management education based on professor beliefs (about appropriate theory and application emphasis) and behaviors (pedagogical techniques used).

The mixed-methods, sequential, explanatory design consisted of two distinct phases: quantitative followed by qualitative. Professors of undergraduate management courses participated in the study by completing an online survey. The survey results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, t-tests, and canonical correlation. A small number of professors from that group were then interviewed to explore the results and provide possible explanations for those results.

This study produced quantitative and qualitative results. Quantitative results confirmed the existence of the gap by showing a distinct difference between theory and application emphasis, between theory techniques used and application techniques used, and between application emphasis and application techniques used. Canonical correlation results suggested that theory and application are connected significantly in ways that provide the basis for further, meaningful research. The qualitative phase of this research produced several valuable insights regarding the nature of the theory-application gap in undergraduate management education, the constraints that tend to prevent bridging the gap, and the various creative ways professors are bridging the gap between theory and application in their classrooms. Collectively, the quantitative and qualitative results answered many of the “what”, “why”, and “how” questions of theory and application.

This research confirmed that, according to professors of undergraduate management education, the theory-application gap exists. However, it also showed that being “high” on theory and application is both possible and necessary, though not prevalent in practice.