

Association-Sponsored Higher Education for Business: Perceptions of First-Year Students

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ABSTRACT

Association-sponsored learning programs comprise a significant but largely unknown sector of higher education. In North America, for example, almost 500 associations are involved in the education/certification process. This paper begins the process of discovering why individuals enroll in such programmes, rejecting the many other vocationally oriented opportunities available to them.

Using data from first-year students enrolled with the Canadian Institute of Management, it was found that the majority were drawn to the Institute through personal/business contacts. As well, although other alternatives were investigated, the Institute's reputation, level of difficulty, the perceived "practical" nature of the courses and programme length attracted most students. As to perceptions of "utility," the Institute's learning programme was ranked just below a university degree in management and somewhat higher than a degree in a "non-management" discipline.

RÉSUMÉ

Les programmes d'enseignement parrainés par des associations dites professionnelles constituent une partie importante mais mal connue de l'enseignement supérieur. En Amérique du Nord, par exemple, près de 500 associations participent à l'octroi de diplômes et de brevets professionnels. Le présent travail cherche à découvrir les raisons pour lesquelles les individus s'inscrivent à ces programmes et rejettent les innombrables autres possibilités de formation disponibles.

L'étude des données concernant les étudiants de première année inscrits à l'Institut canadien de gestion permet de découvrir que la majorité de ces étudiants avaient été attirés à l'Institut par des contacts personnels et professionnels. De plus, après que les étudiants eurent envisagé les autres formations disponibles, c'est la réputation de l'Institut, le niveau de difficulté de l'enseignement offert, l'aspect « pratique » des cours et la durée du programme qui contribuèrent à

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attirer bon nombre d'entre eux. Quant à l'« utilité » du programme, les étudiants l'ont jugée légèrement inférieure à celle d'un diplôme universitaire de gestion et légèrement supérieure à celle d'un autre diplôme obtenu dans une matière non reliée à la gestion.

BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

Throughout North America and parts of Europe, industry-focused higher education and training are delivered by universities, colleges of various types, and para-professional and professional associations, societies and institutes. This latter category, comprised of hundreds of independent, mainly volunteer-driven organizations, represents an enormous, yet largely unknown sector of higher education.

Before describing this widespread activity, it would be useful to define the term, "association." Land (1979) in his preamble to the *Directory of Associations in Canada*, indicates that:

... the term association has been defined as a voluntary non-governmental, non-profit organization composed of personal and/or institutional members, with or without a federal or provincial charter, formed for some particular purpose or to advance a common cause, especially of a public nature. In this context, related terms similar to association include society, institute, federation, alliance, club and union. As used in this ... (paper), the term association is distinct from a government department or public agency on the one hand, and from a private profit-making corporation or commercial company on the other hand. (p. vii)

The basic thrust of this definition is applicable to both the United States and Europe.

As to the scope of association-sponsored education and training, the American Society of Association Executives has indicated that by 1979, over 425 associations were involved in some type of certification process (Galey, 1979). Other major initiatives have been launched by systems professionals, security managers, food service supervisors and restaurant managers (Rae, 1984; Reopke, 1985; Gallery, 1987; Paulson, 1987). In his study of 70 American-based associations, Gilley (1985), found that 50 percent had more than 5,000 members and 35 percent had graduated over 5,000 students. As only 58 percent of his sample pertained to "business associations," Gilley's findings must be used with caution, but his work supports the contention that business-related, association-sponsored learning is a widespread phenomenon in the United States. Indeed, a recent survey that focused solely on hospitality management, found 15 additional association-sponsored training programs, of which only three had been included in Gilley's study (Wright and Palmer, in press).

In Canada too, associations are active in business education. There are at least 62 certificate, diploma and professional designation programs with an enrollment

of approximately 45,000 students in the Province of Ontario alone. As previous research has suggested that roughly 60 percent of this type of training occurs in Ontario, the national enrollment could well approach 67,000 (Wright, 1985).

The European situation is much the same as in North America. Indeed, as the concept of certification through association-sponsored study originated in Europe, the phenomenon appears to be even more entrenched (Pierce, 1985; Hotel and Catering Industry Training Board, 1985; *British Qualifications*, 1986).

The question that must be asked, however, is why has this method of obtaining one's credentials remained so popular? In both North America and Europe, there is a plethora of vocationally-oriented opportunities available through traditional and "open" universities and colleges. As well, the private sector provides ample scope for learning through seminars and conferences. Yet in spite of this competition, associations have managed, not only to survive, but to command a respectable share of the available student population and they may still be growing (Gilley, 1985; Brown, 1985).

The reasons that cause associations to become involved in the education or training process are well documented. In essence, the drive for professional visibility, the need for recognition and the search for prestige appear to coalesce in the establishment of certification processes (Galey, 1979; Westgaard, 1984; Jacobs, 1979).

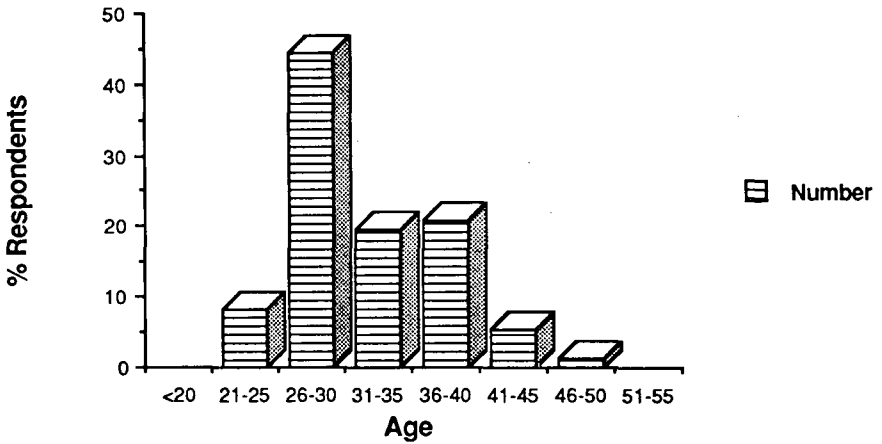
There are no data, however, concerning the learning choices of individuals. Why do thousands of students reject the traditional methods of skills acquisition, while opting for study through accounting, management, travel and insurance associations and hundreds of other similar bodies?

This paper, then, will begin the process of discovering the rationale behind the many individual decisions and perceptions that lead to registration in an association-sponsored learning program. As no published literature directly related to the phenomenon has been found to guide this inquiry, the hypotheses and conclusions are preliminary in nature. The intention is to stimulate interest in this research area so that the reasons for the very existence of association-sponsored programs eventually may be determined.

Research in this field will be of significance to colleges, universities, and associations alike. Should a learner profile be developed, marketing thrusts can be tailored to attract new clientele. As well, the learning needs of those who study through associations may be different from those students who attend day and evening classes at colleges and universities. Potentially, this factor could affect future curriculum design and delivery systems, particularly in continuing education (Wright, 1985).

SURVEY METHODOLOGY

As this research was regarded as an exploratory inquiry into a largely unknown sector of education, it was decided to concentrate on one association. In addition, as most of the general research concerning associations in Canada has been

Figure 1. Age Distribution of Respondents

focused on Ontario (Wright, 1975, 1979, 1982, 1983, 1985), it was decided to restrict the survey to this province.

Accordingly, Canada's largest management association, the Canadian Institute of Management, was targeted. This association has been active in management education since the 1940's. At present, a four-year, eight-course education program in general management is offered through 22 branches, seven of which are located in Ontario.

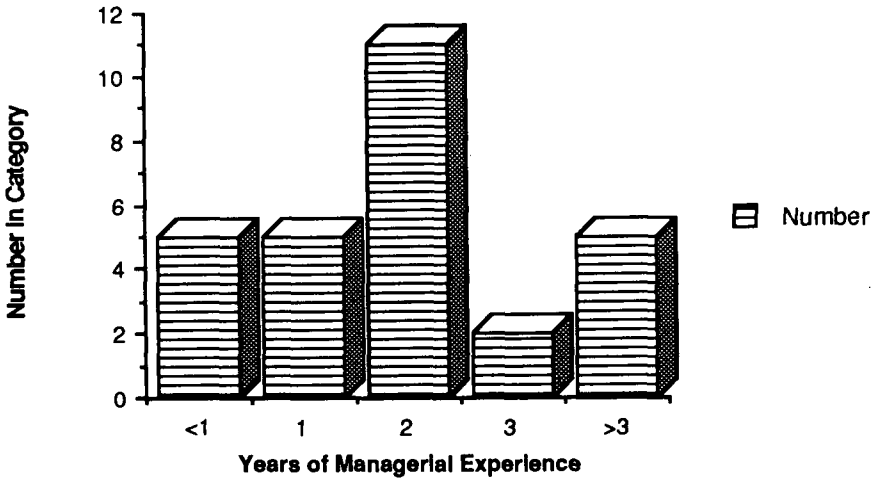
In keeping with the preliminary nature of this inquiry, three branches were selected at random and a questionnaire was administered in class to each student registered in the association's entry-level course. Seventy-two questionnaires were completed, all of which were useable. The survey instrument was developed to test hypotheses derived from ten years of exposure to association-sponsored learning. The pre-test was conducted by administering the questionnaire to three previous students.

THE HYPOTHESES

Eight hypotheses were developed to test what were seen as the most likely reason for registering in the Canadian Institute of Management's (CIM) program. It was hypothesized that:

1. the student knew at least one individual who was either completing or had completed the study program,
2. the student knows, or knows of, at least one "successful" individual who holds the "certification" for which the student is registered,
3. feedback obtained from the individual described in Hypothesis 2 was positive,
4. the student received some promotional literature before enrollment that introduced him/her to this association,

Figure 2. Years of Managerial Experience



5. the student checked and rejected at least one other source of training before enrolling in the association-sponsored education program,
6. the student regards his/her studies as an avenue to a better job,
7. the student sees his/her studies as an avenue to make more money,
8. in terms of utility, the student will tend to rank this course ahead of a four-year university degree.

THE STUDENT PROFILE

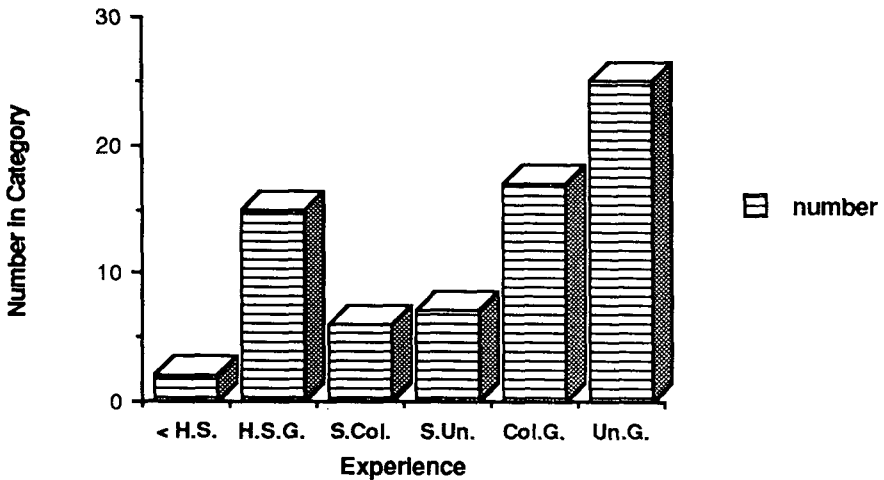
Of the 72 respondents, 79.2 percent ($n = 57$) were male. The largest percentage ($n = 32$) were between 26 and 30 years of age, but other significant age groups included the 31 to 35 and the 36 to 40 ranges ($n = 14$ and 15 respectively) (Figure 1).

Only 39 percent ($n = 28$) stated that they were working as managers. Figure 2 indicates that most have very little experience in the managerial role. Just five (17.8%) have had more than three years in a supervisory capacity.

As to education before enrollment, only two students had not completed high school. Of the remainder, 20.8 percent ($n = 15$) were high school graduates; 23.6 percent ($n = 17$) had earned a community college diploma and 34.7 percent ($n = 25$) were university graduates. In addition, 9.7 percent ($n = 7$) claimed to have completed "some" university. Similarly, 8.3 percent ($n = 6$) indicated they had "some" college education (Figure 3).

In keeping with the general nature of the Institute's course of study, enrollees worked in a variety of industrial, service and government sectors. Although manufacturing was heavily represented (63.7 percent, $n = 44$), representatives were found from government (8.7 percent), health (5.7 percent), and retail (5.7 percent). Other economic sectors were evident, i.e. education, non-profit charity, financial services, construction, insurance.

Figure 3. Previous Academic Experience



<H.S. = Less than high school
H.S.G. = High school graduate
S. Col. = Some college
S. Un. = Some university
Col. G. = College graduate
Un. G. = University graduate

The profile, then, is one of an older, relatively well-educated clientele with little or no management experience; a larger percentage of whom work in manufacturing. This group has been attracted to an association-sponsored learning program, when clearly, many of them had other options. This paper, then, will attempt to determine the rationale behind their choice.

ANALYSIS

The first three hypotheses:

1. that the student knew at least one individual who was either completing or had completed the study program,
2. that the student knows, or knows of, at least one "successful" individual who holds the "certification" for which the student is registered,
3. that feedback obtained from the individual described in Hypothesis 2 was positive

were designed to test the extent to which informal contact, or the "old boy network" was consulted prior to enrollment. Accordingly, four questions were asked:

1. Before enrolling in this course, did you speak with either a graduate of the CIM program, or with a current student about the program? Yes No
2. If you answered "yes," did the individual referred to above: (circle one)
 - a. give a positive response,
 - b. give a negative response,
 - c. give some negative and some positive feedback
3. Before enrolling in this course, did you know anyone that you would regard as "successful" who had completed the CIM program? Yes No
4. If your answer was yes, what position did, or does this individual hold? (state briefly).

The survey indicated that 61 percent ($n = 44$) of the respondents checked with a current or a former student before making the enrollment decision. Of the 44 who inquired, 36 were given a positive response about the program and eight were given some positive and some negative feedback. No one who subsequently enrolled received an entirely negative reply.

The third question, inquiring into the student's previous knowledge about "successful" graduates, suggests that 32 (44 percent) did indeed know a successful graduate of the Institute. It is interesting to note that of the 28 students who did not consult a student or a former student (Question 1), six knew a graduate they regarded as "successful." Some support was found, then, for each of the first three hypotheses.

Of the students who knew a "successful" graduate (Question 4) ($n = 26$), 14 listed various types of "managers", for example: association, materials ($n = 2$), project ($n = 2$), general ($n = 2$), plant, area, industrial relations, marketing, production, manufacturing, and district service delivery. The remainder cited individuals ranging from the president or vice-president of a company ($n = 5$) to purchasing agent, consultant, field representative, director or owner. It appears that many of the students have a "successful" role model to follow.

Although these data cannot be regarded as conclusive, it is suggested that a strong informal network of former and present students exists that provides feedback to prospective enrollees. Also, enough graduates now hold senior positions to provide role models to those contemplating this method of personal upgrading.

What is unknown, and must be determined by further research, is the extent of the network's spatial distribution. If one combines the 61 percent who were able to consult a current student or a graduate with the six additional responses indicating knowledge of a "successful" role model (Question 3), 69.4 percent ($n = 50$) of the present first-year students knew of someone associated with the Institute's program before enrollment. Therefore, only 22 of the present first-year enrollees had no personal knowledge of the Institute before registering.

This high percentage of students who knew about the Institute, coupled with the repetitive nature of the responses to Question 4, suggests that students might be drawn from a relatively small circle of acquaintances and perhaps industrial enterprises. While this conclusion must be confirmed by further research, the

suggestion that peer groups and role models have some effect on the decision to enroll in association-sponsored education is more strongly supported.

The fourth hypothesis, that the student received some promotional literature before enrollment about the association, was tested by asking the questions.

Did you receive any promotional literature or advertising from the CIM before enrolling? Yes; No If no, how did you hear about this program?

Unfortunately, the wording appears to have caused confusion. These questions were meant to determine the student's first point of contact with the Institute. Yet it seems that more than half ($n = 20$) of the 33 respondents who replied positively, already knew a student or a graduate. The remainder ($n = 13$), however, were drawn from the previously mentioned 22 enrollees who did not appear to know anyone connected with the Institute. Perhaps these individuals were swayed by the Institute's promotional literature, but more in depth questioning is needed.

In response to the question – "How did you hear about this program?," 18 of the 35 replies (51.4 percent) indicated a personal contact, either a fellow employee ($n = 8$), another student ($n = 5$), a graduate ($n = 6$) or their superior ($n = 4$). These responses support the previous contention that information gained from personal networking is a significant factor in the decision to enroll in an association-sponsored learning.

Other sources of initial contact included newspaper advertisements ($n = 7$), university/college calendars ($n = 3$) and radio advertising ($n = 1$). The power of the media, then, does not appear to be a major factor in the enrollment process, despite considerable cost and effort expended on this activity.

The fifth hypothesis, that the student checked and rejected at least one other source of training before enrolling in the association-sponsored education program, was only partially supported; 38 respondents (52.7 percent) indicated they had looked elsewhere. Of greater significance, however, were the responses to the secondary questions:

1. What other sources did you investigate?
2. Why didn't you enroll somewhere else instead of taking the CIM (Canadian Institute of Management) program?

Of the 19 university graduates who investigated other upgrading sources, 11 rejected graduate school or other university-level studies in favor of the CIM program, six looked at college-level courses and two had researched the programs of other associations. The 10 college graduates had investigated further college studies ($n = 7$), universities ($n = 2$), and studies through associations. All those with lesser academic qualifications ($n = 9$) considered and rejected community college courses.

Although much more research will have to be conducted in this area, the reasons for the final decision to enroll appear to center around the CIM program's reputation, level of difficulty, and practical focus. Eleven respondents supplied answers to the second question suggesting that reputation was a prime factor in the enrollment decision. What was perceived as a "right," or comfortable level of

difficulty ($n = 8$) and the “practical” nature of the course ($n = 6$) attracted 14 more students. Of the six remaining respondents, four suggested that completing a university degree took too long, one wanted the Institute’s professional designation, and one could not meet graduate school GMAT requirements.

If these responses are found to hold true for a larger sample, it would appear that at least this Institute serves a clientele with special needs. Although the reputation factor as an inducement to enroll might be related to the previously discussed personal networking phenomenon, the other perceptions point to client needs for a different (as yet undetermined) level of rigor and a “practical” approach to management development. These terms may be undefined, but if the sentiments they express are instrumental in causing students to reject colleges and universities in favor of an association-sponsored program, they are real nonetheless. The previous comments about the length of time required to obtain a university degree, once again indicate that a certain type of client might be more comfortable with the relative brevity (eight courses) of this particular program.

Thus far, the study has suggested that personal contacts and networking, along with perceptions concerning appropriate levels of difficulty, practicality and length of program are prime factors affecting the enrollment decision. But what of vocational concerns? Are they of paramount importance? Hypotheses six and seven suggest that students will see the CIM program as an avenue toward earning more money and as a vehicle for upward vocational mobility.

Accordingly, two questions were asked:

Do you think you will make more money as a result of completing this course? Yes; No; Don't Know

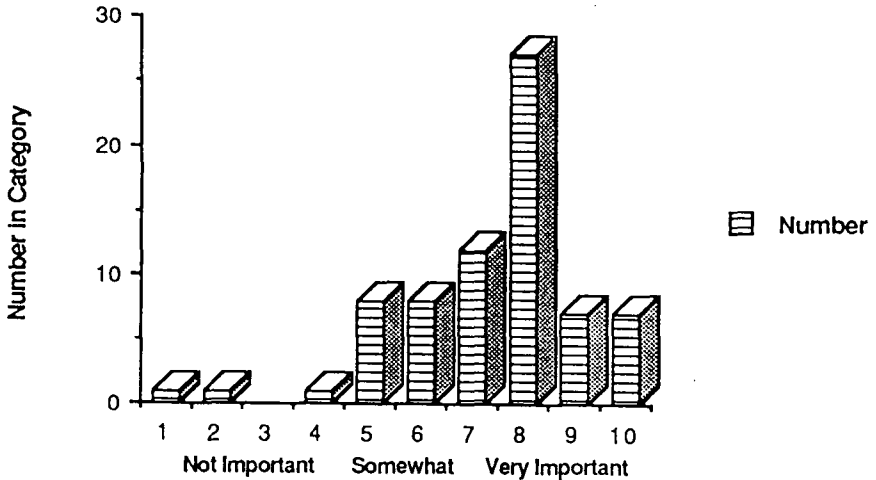
On a scale of 1 to 10 – how important is this course when it comes to getting a better job? (Circle one number)

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
not important somewhat very important

Based on the overtly job-oriented nature of the courses, Hypothesis 6 was not as strongly supported as expected. Only 34 respondents (47 percent) thought they would make more money upon graduation, while 14 (19.4 percent) thought they would not, and a significant percentage (33 percent, $n = 24$) did not know. Conversely, when asked to rank, on a scale of one to ten, the likelihood that the course will lead to a better job the rankings indicated some expectation of upward mobility (Figure 4).

The reasons for this dichotomy could lie in the student profile. It will be remembered that 61 percent of the respondents are not yet managers, while of the remainder, all but five were recent appointees with less than three years of supervisory experience. Perhaps at this point in their careers, the students are more concerned with career progression than monetary reward. This outlook would fit well with their choice of a relatively short course that is perceived to have an acceptable level of difficulty and a practical focus. Should more rigorous investigation find upward mobility, not financial reward, to be the major incentive

Figure 4. Perceived Importance to Getting a Better Job*



***Responses to question: "How important is this course when it comes to getting a better job?"**

for learning program selection, the choice of this association-sponsored course would not be made because of high expectations for increased salaries.

It is thought unlikely that many of these students would have enrolled in this program if they had not perceived it to be of some use to them in terms of career enhancement. Hypothesis 8 reflects this outlook:

in terms of utility, the student will tend to rank this course ahead of a four-year university degree.

The problem was how to measure the concept or perception of "utility."

In order to obtain a rough measure of how the respondents perceived the Canadian Institute of Management's program in comparison to other alternatives, the following exercise was included on the questionnaire:

If you had to hire someone as a manager and you had four candidates, with about equal skill and roughly the same amount of work experience, how would you rate the "usefulness" of each of the qualifications listed below (on a scale of 1 to 5)? - circle one number for each qualification - five is the highest score.

1. a university graduate in management 1 2 3 4 5
2. a CIM graduate 1 2 3 4 5
3. a community college graduate in management 1 2 3 4 5
4. a university graduate from some other course (not management) 1 2 3 4 5

Although Hypothesis 8 was rejected, the CIM program was ranked sufficiently high to merit further discussion. Figure 5 presents a matrix in which all the

RANKING	Univ. Grad. (Mgmt.)	C.I.M. Grad.	College Grad.	Univ. Grad. (Non-Mgmt.)	
	1	R = 5 UF = 5x1 = 5	R = 4 UF = 4x1 = 4	R = 9 UF = 9x1 = 9	R = 17 UF = 17x1 = 17
	2	R = 2 UF = 2x2 = 4	R = 4 UF = 4x2 = 8	R = 20 UF = 20x2 = 40	R = 18 UF = 18x2 = 36
	3	R = 12 UF = 12x3 = 36	R = 10 UF = 10x3 = 30	R = 25 UF = 25x3 = 75	R = 18 UF = 18x3 = 54
	4	R = 26 UF = 26x4 = 104	R = 36 UF = 36x4 = 144	R = 10 UF = 10x4 = 40	R = 11 UF = 11x4 = 44
	5	R = 19 UF = 19x5 = 95	R = 10 UF = 10x5 = 50	R = 1 UF = 1x5 = 5	R = 1 UF = 1x5 = 5
<u>Utility Index</u>	244	236	169	156	

R = # of Responses UF = Utility Factor

Figure 5. Utility Index for all respondents (N = 64)

rankings have been tabulated. In addition, a utility index has been calculated by multiplying the number of responses in each box with the appropriate ranking. For example, if 12 respondents ranked “university graduate in management” as “3” (see Figure 5) a “utility factor” of $3 \times 12 = 36$ would be calculated. The utility factors then were added to create a “utility index” (see Figure 5) designed to portray how each of the four learning alternatives was perceived in terms of their “usefulness” for performing the management function.

As indicated in Figure 5, the Canadian Institute of Management program was ranked just slightly behind the four-year university degree course in management. Significantly, non-management degree-level courses were ranked last, slightly lower than community-college management diploma courses.

The problem with this particular analysis is that many of the respondents have not attended a university and thus may not be in a position to judge the relative

		Univ. Grad. (Mgmt)	C.I.M. Grad.	College Grad.	Univ. Grad. (Non-Mgmt)
RANKING	1	R = 2 UF = 2x1 = 2	R = 3 UF = 3x1 = 3	R = 5 UF = 5x1 = 5	R = 3 UF = 3x1 = 3
	2	-----	-----	R = 6 UF = 6x2 = 12	R = 4 UF = 4x2 = 8
	3	R = 3 UF = 3x3 = 9	R = 5 UF = 5x3 = 15	R = 5 UF = 5x3 = 15	R = 9 UF = 9x3 = 27
	4	R = 11 UF = 11x4 = 44	R = 13 UF = 13x4 = 52	R = 1 UF = 1x4 = 4	R = 7 UF = 7x4 = 28
	5	R = 7 UF = 7x5 = 35	R = 2 UF = 5x2 = 10		
<u>Utility Index</u>		90	80	36	66

R = # of Responses

UF = Utility Factor

Figure 6. Utility Index for university graduates (N = 23)

effectiveness of degree-level studies. Accordingly, two additional utility indices were created, one comprised solely of university graduates (n = 23), the other made up of community college graduates (n = 17).

As far as the relative utility indices of the CIM program were concerned, there was little change. Although the university graduates ranked the association-sponsored program slightly behind the four-year degree course in management, but ahead of both community college diplomas and degrees in non-management disciplines (Figure 6), college graduates ranked the CIM and the management degree program equally (Figure 7). One cannot argue, therefore, that the perception of the CIM program is influenced by lack of exposure to other forms of higher education.

	Univ. Grad. (Mgmt)	C.I.M. Grad.	College Grad.	Univ. Grad. (Non-Mgmt)
RANKING	1	R = 1 UF = 1x1 = 1	R = 1 UF = 1x1 = 1	----- R = 5 UF = 5x1 = 5
	2	R = 2 UF = 2x2 = 4	R = 2 UF = 2x2 = 4	R = 4 UF = 4x2 = 8
	3	R = 2 UF = 2x3 = 6	R = 1 UF = 1x3 = 3	R = 9 UF = 9x3 = 27
	4	R = 7 UF = 7x4 = 28	R = 9 UF = 9x4 = 36	R = 2 UF = 2x4 = 8
	5	R = 4 UF = 4x5 = 20	R = 3 UF = 3x5 = 15	R = 1 UF = 1x5 = 5
<u>Utility Index</u>	59	59	48	38

R = # of responses

UF = Utility Factor

Figure 7. Utility Index for community college graduates (N = 17)

CONCLUSIONS

Most first-year students in at least one association-sponsored business-oriented education program appear to have learned about the courses through a network of business contacts. The decision to enroll also may have been influenced by course length and by the perception that degree-level or close to degree-level education is offered. As well, it appears that upward mobility, not monetary concerns, may be a predominant factor in student enrollment decisions.

The results of this study could have wide-ranging implications for associations that market their program actively. Should subsequent research support these

preliminary conclusions, the focus might be shifted away from the media to more one-on-one contact through alumni.

Universities, too, might be concerned, as a potentially significant group of adult students appear to view an eight-course association program almost as highly as a 20-course university degree in management. Indeed, university administrators would do well to note the non-managerial degree's relatively low ranking. If, as Gilley (1985) suggests, association-sponsored programs are still growing, it might be opportune to integrate vocationally-oriented training opportunities "into an overall liberal/vocational education system, of benefit to the student, the association and the university" (Wright, 1985, p. 66).

IMPLICATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Given the immense size of the association-sponsored learning activity, this study serves as a first step in examining student perceptions toward the learning opportunities afforded by this sector of higher education. Much more research should be conducted, using larger samples, different associations, different regions and/or countries and disciplines. As well, questionnaire methodologies could be supplemented by personal interviews and other techniques. If cooperation from the various associations can be obtained so that inquiries can be conducted as part of classroom activity, research into the phenomenon of association-sponsored learning could be a valuable addition to the awareness of client needs in higher education.

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